“It Is Always the OTHER that Creates Ourself”: On Peter Ablinger’s Vocal Automatons

by Matthew Mendez

Matthew Mendez explores Austrian composer Peter Ablinger’s practice of musical phono-realism, in which the piano becomes a replicant of the human voice.

There’s a well-known episode near the opening of La condition humaine, André Malraux’s protoexistential novel of ideas: Kyo Gisors, a communist insurgent at the forefront of Shanghai’s 1920s underground, is inspecting an innocuous-looking shipment of phonograph records. The discs, ostensibly designed for use as foreign language training aids, have just arrived in the workroom of one Hemmelrich, gramophone salesman by day, reluctant co-conspirator by night. Yet these are no ordinary shellac albums – they’re makeshift ciphers for encoding secret messages. Play one record and a colourless litany of cardinal numbers and basic vocabulary words will issue from the horn. Play another and the result will be a cascade of white noise, broken up by the occasional silence. However, use multiple machines to superimpose the two – begin rotating the discs at precisely the same moment – and the static will cancel out all the words save those that coincide with the silences and thus comprise the clandestine memo. But Kyo, who will never live to hear an answering machine or a voicemail message, is disconcerted:

“Didn’t my voice record well?”
“Very well, perfectly.”
Lu expanded in a smile, Hemmelrich seemed indifferent. On the floor above, a child cried out in pain.
Kyo was nonplussed:
“Then why was the recording changed?”
“It wasn’t changed,” said Lu. “It’s your own. One rarely recognises one’s own voice, you see, when one hears it for the first time.”
“The phonograph distorts it?”
“It’s not that, for no one has trouble recognising the voices of others. But one doesn’t have the habit, you see, of hearing oneself…."

This exchange, which Malraux would return to again and again in the course of his work as a theorist of art, memorably illustrates a fundamental yet oft-overlooked axiom of vocal physiology: one listens to the voices of others through the ears, but one can only ever hear one’s own voice through the throat. Outside voices are filtered through the eardrum and are registered by the cochlea as disembodied tone; meanwhile, the “inner” voice is relayed directly to the cochlea by the throat and skull bones (bypassing the ear canal altogether), whose properties as sound wave conductors differ from those of the air. In other words, the medium of vocal production gets in the way, willy-nilly distorting the manner by which we perceive our own speech. We hear ourselves one way, the rest of the world another, so that we’re always already estranged from ourselves as speaking subjects. Well aware of this fact, Malraux proceeds in positing the hypothetical converse: “If one were suddenly to hear the voice of another through one’s own throat, one would be terrified.” Virtually unthinkable, to experience someone else’s voice the way they actually experience it would be the uncanniest of uncanny encounters, a nightmarish brush with communion or fellow-feeling. Nothing less than a total identification with the other.

The Austrian composer Peter Ablinger (1959- ) has to have read his Malraux. At least, that’s what I find myself thinking whenever I tune into his investigations – cuttings-up, distortions, synthesizings, amplifications, re-voicings, replications – of the human voice. Two of Ablinger’s long-ongoing compositional series, Quadraturen III (1996- ) (the word “Quadraturen” is translatable as “squarings” or the more literal “quadratures”) and Voices and Piano (1998- ), are particularly suggestive in this regard. The former’s subtitle, “Wirklichkeit” (“Reality”), is indicative, for Ablinger has always been especially interested in sensuous experience qua individual perception; in the ways that cognition helps to constitute what we ordinarily think of as “sound.” For him there is a certain very true sense in which, if a tree falls in a forest, there is indeed no sound. He avers: “Listening has nothing to do with an outer world that we receive passively. Rather, listening is a creative activity that forms both what we hear and how we hear.”

Consequent hypothesis: there is no such thing as a voice separate from the apparatus that brings it forth into the universe.

If the art world could be described in geopolitical terms, Ablinger’s work would lie on the DMZ, 38th parallel north, the no-man’s land between notated, “classical” music and everything else (installation art, sound art, conceptual art, relational art…). Though the guiding ethos is rather different, Ablinger harks back to the heyday of Fluxus practitioners like George Brecht, Philip Corner, and Nam June Paik. The density of everyday perception is at stake and well-established apothegms are up for grabs – noise is not necessarily noise, a musical work is not perforce a musical work, and the art of performance (music) and performance art (performance art) are, epistemologically speaking, moving targets. Ablinger is at the forefront of a movement – old news in the art world, but only recently emergent in compositional circles, where the term institutional critique still elicits blank stares – characterized by one critic as a “shifting from the how of construction to the why of aesthetic substance.” Unlike their real-life, Korean counterparts, creative practitioners like Ablinger remain committed to reunification, musical composition and
sound-installation art made one. Not that Ablinger isn’t well aware of the unbridgeable ontological distinction separating the two registers. As he has noted, “if we take perception as a starting point […] one has to come to the conclusion that music and perception literally seem to compete with and partly even exclude each other.”

To a large extent, music always resists de-idealization. To listen to the example on YouTube here.

So that when Ablinger characterises Voices and Piano as his “song-cycle,” his “Winterreise,” we would do well to take his words under advisement. No one is singing in these Lieder, with the voice part being given over to taped recordings (often quite lo-fi in quality) of famous historical and cultural personalities. Transmitted through a solitary loudspeaker, these range from leading intellectual and political figures, like Heidegger, Maturana, Prigogine, Mother Teresa, and Walesa, to artists of all stripes: Abramović, Apollinaire, Borges, Duchamp, Pound, etc. (As a nod to the formative years Ablinger spent as an improvisor, jazz musicians such as Jacques Brel, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, and Cecil Taylor also figure prominently.) Using a click-track to keep in sync with the absolutely inflexible recordings – at no point has their playback speed been altered by the composer, nor are they to be manipulated in real-time by the executants – the pianist occupies an altogether ambiguous position. Not exactly an accompaniment to the voices, and certainly not an independent entity in its own right, but far more than a simple facsimile or likeness. In the age of common practice tonality, song composers often doubled portions of the vocal line in the pianist’s right hand as a means of keeping the vocalist in tune. What Ablinger requests of the performer in Voices and Piano is already miles beyond that. At once a mirror and a commentary. Or to riff on another Ablinger title, Der Regen, das Glas, das Lachen (“Rain, Glass, Laughter”).

If anything, Quadraturen III is even harder to pin down. Though there’s still a piano, there’s no longer a “performer.” Here, Ablinger instead fashioned a “hyper”-player piano, a computer-controlled attachable keyboard mechanism with “the ability to play all 88 keys at once, each at a different dynamic, and second, to play such poly-dynamic attacks in rapid successions of at least 16 per second.” The composer then programs this technique-expanding golem to reproduce a voice using only piano tones. A phonograph, guerrilla-style. At first, the sounding product is
chaos of an entirely novel sort, a highly-concentrated barrage of thousands upon thousands of keyboard attacks. Faced with this racket, slowly and only with considerable mental labor does the listener discern that all the sounds are really adding up to something, simulating the contours, cadences, and speech patterns of a speaker with a level of detail and accuracy that a slow-witted pair of human hands could never hope to approach. Like one of those pinhead impression toys, the proliferation of micro-coordinates contributes to an overall macro-topography. Or in G. Douglas Barrett’s apt description, a “kind of perceptual oscillation” arises whereby “one may recognise the voice automatically (especially after repeated exposure), or zone out voluntarily and perceive only extremely loud and fragmented piano music.” Ablinger himself likens the effect to a three-dimensional stereogram poster, in that the viewer can only perceive the “illusion” or the abstract shapes at any one time – never both simultaneously.\(^9\)

Though one is designed for the concert hall, the other as a sequence of installation pieces, *Voices and Piano* and *Quadraturen III* are joined at the hip and share many of the same concerns. The most obvious link comes on the level of content, with *Voices and Piano, No. 25 (Book Two): Arnold Schoenberg and Quadraturen III: A Letter from Schoenberg* being based on the same source recording, an angry dictation given by the originator of the twelve-tone system during the final months of his life.\(^{11}\)

Yet this is the least of the affinities; more substantial are the series’ common pre-compositional principles. Both start by taking a given voice recording and subjecting it to a spectrum analysis (a computer model, with time on the \(x\)-axis, of a sound’s various acoustical properties). The recording having been duly deconstructed along the lines of its frequency, its wavelength, its amplitude, etc., Ablinger then uses the resultant data to resynthesize the voice from the ground up, quantised according to the constraints of the modern-day equal tempered piano: acoustic speech synthesis.\(^{12}\) What a vocoder does instantaneously, using electronic circuits, the composer does empirically, by means of the keyboard’s hammers and strings. (In the technical lexicon of the vocoder, the source recording would be the modulator input and the acoustic piano sound the carrier wave.) To this end, Ablinger applies various temporal “grids,” some of them coarser and relying on a larger basic temporal unit (*Voices and Piano*), some of them finer and relying on a
smaller basic temporal unit (Quadraturen III), to replicate the source material’s real-time unfolding. In the manner of a Chuck Close portrait, the finer the grid – the smaller the pixel size – the higher the “resolution” and the closer the likeness to the actual voice.

The analogy with Close’s pointillism is actually far from arbitrary. Terming his practice phonorealism, Ablinger has equated the procedure with Gerhard Richter’s photorealism technique, as epitomised by the notorious canvas Onkel Rudi (1965) and the series 48 Portraits (1971). While photorealism is typically defined as the imitation of photographs by means of oil paints – that is, the belated admission, after nearly a century of abstraction, that the camera has finally won out over the easel – in Richter’s case it has never been a simple matter of reproduction. For him, the problem is not one of painting’s supposed obsolescence. Nor is it a question of verisimilitude, a mere mimesis of a mimesis. The focal point is rather the “second nature” (current) technological media have imposed on cognition. Richter maintains: “Photography has almost no reality; it is almost a hundred per cent picture. And painting always has reality: you can touch the paint; it has presence.” What the camera produces is utterly ephemeral, physically speaking no more substantial than a spectre or a trace. And yet photography mirrors the world far more effectively – if “effective” is really the appropriate term when considering photography’s “truth claim” or “reality effect” – than any painting can. Another Rubin vase… So that Richter’s work, rather than being reducible to either medium, operates in the dialectical space separating painting and photography. His canvases index a “real world” at the same time as selection both conscious and unconscious (in terms of the canvas size, the chosen colour palette, and indeed, the level of “resolution”) renders them wholly independent of that world, with its anthropocentric ideas of likeness and faithfulness. With Richter, photorealism gives the camera voice, the ability to comment on its own deep-rooted untrustworthiness.

Ablinger’s phonorealism or “acoustic photography” also resides in this preternatural Zwischenwelt. No matter sound art’s recent incursions into the territory of notated composition, he is similarly unconvinced that concert music, as a creative medium, has reached the point of exhaustion. Likewise, in the various pieces comprising the Voices and Piano cycle, “ unmotivated” compositional decisions, such as the choice of the basic temporal unit, the number of rhythmic (topographical) layers employed, and the essential character of the music, have a direct impact on the resulting piano part. A few illustrations apropos of the last of these: the piano part for Voices and Piano, No. 13 (Book One): Pier Paolo Pasolini is marked “dancing, like a neapolitana” while that for No. 21 (Book Two): Jorge Luis Borges is “butterfly-like or [like] a moth’s flittering at the light.” Similarly, if No 33 (Book Two): Alberto Giacometti is intended to be “a portrait of his [Giacometti’s] hands when modelling in clay,” No. 36 (Book Two): Josef Matthias Hauer should be akin to “a 12-Ton-Spiel.” Nor are “intertextual” references excluded – see No. 20 (Book Two): Angela Davis, which purports to be “a little bit like Keith Jarrett when he plays jazz-eighths,” or No. 40 (Book Three): Alvin Lucier, which requests “articulation a bit like Webern Op. 27.” All of which means that the impressionistic approach taken to the accompaniments in Voices and Piano presupposes a relatively traditional theory of subjectivity, with its attendant concepts of identity, personality, and autobiography. After all, without the imposition of the piano part, the listener could still conceivably make the effort to hear Ablinger’s voices shorn of language and signification. So heard, as nothing more than a series of nonrepresentational utterances, they would undoubtedly be free from any cogito. By contrast, in its cascading waterfalls of pummelled
player piano notes, a piece like Quadraturen IIIc: Fidelito/La Revolución y las Mujeres, based on a 1974 speech by Fidel Castro, seems to dissolve the subject in toto. (A fitting historical irony, given the near-total dematerialisation of the international “revolutionary subject” by the seventies.) This, no matter that the sounding product’s likeness to the voice of the “real world” subject is much greater than, say, the freely folksong-inflected piano part for Voices and Piano, No. 11 (Book One): Mao Tse-Tung. Significantly, in Quadraturen IIIc the medium is very much a part of the message (“all of the sounds of the piece result from the direct transfer of the sounds of the record – the needle, the scratches – and it’s [sic] content”).19 There is a decidedly Richterian lesson to be learned here: the phonograph may well capture the voice, but it can never capture inwardness – the “soul” – in the way that the printed sheet music to Schubert’s D. 911 once did for Wilhelm Müller’s Romantic winter wanderer.

Listen to the example on YouTube here

It is a lesson that Friedrich Kittler, the German media discourse theorist, would have found congenial. For Kittler insists that nearly a century and a half on, the historical rupture produced by the invention of the phonograph has yet to be fully appreciated: “The phonograph does not hear as do ears that have been trained immediately to filter voices, words, and sounds out of noise; it registers acoustic events as such. Articulateness becomes a second-order exception in a spectrum of noise.”20 Whence we are made to understand that Western music has always already been one of Ablinger’s phonorealistic grids. All of its parameters – the twelve chromatic pitches, dynamics/volume (pianissimo, piano, mezzo-piano, mezzo-forte, forte, fortissimo), articulation markings (staccatissimo, staccato, marcato, tenuto), etc. – are approximations, “best fit” translations of an unbroken frequency-wavelength-amplitude continuum into evenly-spaced series of discrete vectors. Where musical composition and notation were inferior storage mechanisms, the phonograph finally made it possible to play back the entire unbroken spectrum of sound. Ablinger grasps the essential: “Music becomes the observer of these other sounds. Music is already a kind of historic grammar we have learned and worked with in thousands of years. But we don’t really have a grammar that is about how to deal with the other sounds. It does not exist. We don’t really listen to the things outside of music.”21 From which he can derive his signature credo: “Music analyses reality.”22
Kittler’s (controversial) insight was to draw on Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic register theory, directly associating phonography with the real and music with the symbolic. The compass of frequency as a primordial absence of signification versus the matrices of “organised sound” as making a “cut in the real.” “In contrast to the arts, media do not have to make do with the grid of the symbolic. […] Only the phonograph can record all the noise produced by the larynx prior to any semiotic order and linguistic meaning.”23 Which is precisely why there can be no “grammar that is about how to deal with the other sounds.” Noise, it would appear, can never be fully assimilated by any structuralism. It can be presented (by the gramophone), but never represented (by music). Which Voices and Piano immediately acknowledges, since the very first piece, No. 1 (Book One): Bertolt Brecht, memorably captures all the hesitations, repetitions, and garbled noises produced by Brecht’s voice in his 1947 testimony to the anti-communist House Un-American Activities Committee. The disturbances and “mistakes” of the real are not shoehorned into the symbolic, as was necessarily the case with the songs Kurt Weill penned to Brecht’s leftist lyrics. But in another dialectical reversal, Ablinger’s grid also (necessarily) enacts the impossibility of representing the real. As Otto Friedrich recounts, Brecht outwitted the Committee by deliberately bumbling his English and misleading the allocated German translator.24 Voices and Piano can capture this complex linguistic situation – where does Brecht’s “act” end and his actual, limited command of the language begin? – no less than can the typewritten transcript of Brecht’s sworn statements.25

Once again, Quadraturen III reaches many of the same conclusions, but by opposing means. Quite independently from questions of thematic relevance, this is clearest in Quadraturen III: Audioanalyse/Die Auflösung/Freud in England/Le grain de la voix. Here the point of departure is an excerpt from a 1938 BBC interview given by Freud, where he remarked, “Im Alter von 82 Jahren verließ ich in Folge der deutschen Invasion mein Heim in Wien und kam nach England wo ich mein Leben in Freiheit zu enden hoffe.” (“At the age of 82, following the German invasion, I left my home in Vienna and came to England where I hope to end my life in freedom.”)26 But now Ablinger puts a twist on the established formula, repeating the clip a full ten times. At first, Freud’s voice can barely be made out; it’s saturated with noise (in the conventional sense of the term). However, after the first play-through the noise begins gradually to be filtered out, so that by the sixth repetition, the voice has reached maximum intelligibility. Thereafter, with each restatement the quantising grid gets wider – more and more approximate – until the tenth and final repetition, which sees Freud’s voice reduced to a single monophonic melody. The message begins and ends in noise (in the information theory sense of the term). Articulation is a momentary, accidental occurrence. Which is no more and no less than a verification of Kittler’s maxim that the symbolic order is “a probabilistic law, which is built upon the noise of the real.”27

Students of psychoanalysis will rightly object that the third of Lacan’s registers, the imaginary, has not yet entered into the equation. Cue Kittler on the basic complexion of the recorded voice: “You do not recognise tape recordings of your own voice because only the acoustics of the exterior space remain, while the feedback loop between the larynx, Eustachian tube, and inner ear does not work in front of the microphones.”28 Without even realising it, Kittler has paraphrased La condition humaine’s primal scene. He goes on, systematising the response offered by Lu, Kyo’s interlocutor: “All that not because media are lying but because their trace detection undermines the mirror stage. That is to say: the soul itself, whose technological rechristening is nothing but Lacan’s mirror stage.”29 Insofar as pushing the playback button subverts my illusions of psychic wholeness – my voice is not my voice, and what I perceive as the other’s voice is, for that matter, not the other’s voice – I am profoundly disconcerted whenever I come face to face with my taped self. “Amplifiers put philosophy out of commission” because there is an inaudible remainder that can never be accounted for.30 Or, we may even go further than this: “What passes
by way of the throat is not perceptible, remains unknown to ego, absolutely forgotten in terms of position, has never been and never will be heard, even if one were to record it, because any retransmission would change it ipso facto into the voice of an ego in the world.”

Taking us beyond Kittler, to the extent that audio media’s shattering of the imaginary discloses that same media’s fundamental incapacity.

Listen to the example on YouTube [here](#).

*Voices and Piano, No. 15 (Book One): Jean-Paul Sartre* makes the issue manifest. The piece is based on a 1973 radio interview – at the time, it was the famous public intellectual’s first appearance on the French airwaves in many a year – that inevitably resonated with the thirty-year-old echoes of “La Republique du silence,” a short wartime broadcast that Sartre used as the occasion to sketch out the contours of his conception of the imaginary. Not entirely by chance, he made sure to pay oblique homage to Malraux’s novel in the process.

As with Lacan, for Sartre the subject is always already split; the ego in-itself and the ego in-the-world do not coincide. As Kyo learned after much anguish, the relationship with the other is of necessity one of dependence and discrepancy. Only because the voice is apprehended by the other, is it possible to exist as an autonomous social subject. Yet again, Ablinger has already arrived at the crux of the matter: “It is probably a very Sartre-like thought that it is always the OTHER that creates ourself. Other people – in many respects – are like mirrors to us, and we are projecting our own expectations onto this mirror.”

But as we already know, the heard voice will never be coextensive with the “inner” voice. Which indicates that the imaginary is ultimately the illusion that we can escape this paradox, the real the impossible dream-nightmare of being able “suddenly to hear the voice of another through one’s own throat.”

Commenting on the phonograph scene's verdict that “our throat alone transmits to us our inner voice,” Malraux would contend in later years that “the function of those other voices which are art’s is but to ensure the transmission of this inner voice.” Something Ablinger doesn’t just dismiss as so much imaginary flummery. In both *Voices and Piano* and *Quadraturen III*, anything that can be said must be filtered through the grid of the symbolic. Perception is rightly taken into account, so that, as in *Audioanalyse/Die Auflösung/Freud in England/Le grain de la voix*, the listener
must “construct” a voice from the scraps of the real: an acknowledgement of the precariousness of the imaginary. Notably, Ablinger never presents the source audio without accompaniment, a metonym, with the “real” as media-ted (recorded) by the gramophone standing in for the real-as-such that can never be made present in all its plenitude. The voice as heard through the throat thwarts all communication. But is it not possible after all, in the space separating Voises and Piano and Quadraturen III, in the gap between the real as mediated by the symbolic and the imaginary as mediated by the real, to hear the reverberations, the aural traces, of the “inner voices” of Ablinger’s subjects? A fanciful notion, no doubt, but try listening to the two Schoenberg pieces, the one immediately after the other, and tell me you don’t hear the shiver of some submerged voice. The voice that says that all attempts to give voice to the voice of this remainder must be struck dumb.

Photo credit: Peter Ablinger by Siegrid Ablinger

7 Peter Ablinger, liner note for *Voices and Piano* [performed by Nicolas Hodges], 0013082KAI (Vienna: Kairos Music Production, 2009), 8; Ablinger, quoted in Bill Dietz, “Peter Ablinger Sings Whitney Houston” (2012): http://ablinger.mur.at/docs/dietz_houston.pdf.
11 For the recording and transcription of Schoenberg’s dictation, see http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=983%3Avr01&Itemid=716&lang=en . For a recorded performance of *Voices and Piano*, No. 25 (Book Two): Arnold Schoenberg, see Matthew Shlomowitz/Peter Ablinger [performed Mark Knoop], SR382 (Brussels: Sub Rosa, 2013).
12 Though the conceptual rigour with which Ablinger carries out this technique is unprecedented, it should be noted that the idea of “acoustic speech synthesis” is hardly a new one. Clarence Barlow’s theorisation of “synthrumentation” (“synthesis of speech or indeed any timbral sounds – but usually speech phonemes – through instruments”) predates Ablinger’s researches in this area, while Jonathan Harvey’s 2008 *Speakings*, for orchestra and electronics, represents a more recent and somewhat freer approach to the same basic idea. For more information see Clarence Barlow & Bob Gilmore, “Clarence Barlow: Interview by Bob Gilmore (Amsterdam, August 1, 2007),” *Paris Transatlantic Magazine* (2007): http://www.paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/barlow.html and Gilbert Nouno, et al., “Making an Orchestra Speak,” *SMC 2009: Proceedings of the 6th Sound and Music Computing Conference*, eds. Fabien Gouyon,
Ablinger, “Quadraturen”.

See Peter Ablinger & Trond Olav Reinholt'sen, “The Sounds Do Not Interest Me: An e-mail interview with questions by the composer Trond Olav Reinholt'sen” (2005): http://ablinger.mur.at/docs/trond_reinholt'sen_engl.doc: “I asked myself years ago (when I was still a jazz pianist) what the concept of photographic realism could mean for music.”

Chico Mello’s description of Quadraturen III in these very terms, as “producing the mimesis of a mimesis,” is similarly oversimple; Chico Mello, “Between Representation and Self-reference: Mimesis and Noise in Peter Ablinger” (2007), 3: http://ablinger.mur.at/docs/mello_engl.doc.


As far as the strictly personal associations go, Ablinger has indicated that “all the voices together – in some way – are also something like a self-portrait”, ibid.

Ablinger, “Quadraturen”.


Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, 150.

