

Vocalise

for solo male voice, live electronics and text

José del Avellanal Carreño

2021-22

Composer's Note

This work holds great importance for me, given that it was the first piece I ever wrote for myself to perform and is one of the most personal and emotionally charged projects I have ever tackled. Autobiographical to a great extent, creating this work involved uncovering deeply rooted trauma and insecurities of the past, aiming to examine themes of masculinity, self-discovery, isolation, anxiety and acceptance. A look back into the past as a catalyst for closure, with the voice at its musical, conceptual and emotional core.

The vocal performance in the piece is abstract and wordless, put into context through the inclusion of text, 5 excerpts of a poem I wrote which are to be projected behind the vocalist at specific points in the performance. The poem is as follows:

Section 1: in distant echoes of sepia-coloured memories
and almighty idols
dreamy and clueless
your galvanistic young boy

a polished façade for the world to see
a natural smile exhaustively practised in the mirror

a try-hard in the mean team
failed to hide that he cared

how cute

how foolish

Section 2: what the fuck was that
man up and stay quiet

so much attention on my thin shaky voice
so little on my shaking hands and legs

failed to hide that I cared
and started building walls
in the name of masculinity

bite your tongue until it's numb
turn your heart into stone
you can only sing so loud with a lump in your throat

Section 3: become the asshole you never knew you wanted to be
it gets easier every time
boys will be boys

intermittent daydreaming of a different life
a different place
a different voice

music no longer a refuge
but a gamble for a way out
a new start
somewhere you don't hide that you care

Section 4: but walls take long to break down

healing bruises always stings at first

we find an ally in the stage
masking our truths as performance
fooling no one but ourselves
claiming distance to approach what's painful
to give it a new voice
to let it heal

wondering how what's so far behind can still hurt
realising how deep the roots lie
of what we tried to silence within us

Section 5: maybe your approval is all I ever wanted.

The electronic part of the piece also includes references to preexisting works which hold great personal relevance. After the opening explorative section, a series of vocoders manipulate the frozen voice of the singer into Tomás Luis de Victoria's motet *Quam pulchri sunt*, one of my most beloved choral works and a loving reminder my choral upbringing as a young teenager. The piece also includes several distorted samples from Jorge Drexler's 'Al otro lado del río', a song with complex and dark personal undertones which I struggled to face and tackle for a long time. The resolution of the piece, which presents a longer sample of the song, ends with an overlap of myself singing it, representing healing and closure from the emotional baggage of the past.

Performance Notes

The piece is to be performed by a vocalist, with their voice taken as input for the Max patch of the piece. They control the electronics themselves through a MIDI device connected to the laptop running the Max patch. This MIDI device should have at least 8 pads and 8 knobs, the use of which is indicated in the score as numbers inside a square (pad) or circle (knob). Further instructions regarding the electronics can be found inside the patch.

The electronics have been created for a quadraphonic setup, with two speakers at the front of the stage (to the sides of the vocalist) and two speakers at the back of the stage, with larger separation in between. A stereo version of the work is also a possibility, contact the composer for this.

The piece is in great measure performative and improvised, the score acting as a timeline of scenes in which the general material and attitude for the improvisation is indicated, as well as the way to interact with the electronics. The piece should be approached freely, taking as much time as needed in each specific scene to make the overall performance as organic as possible.

In general, the work asks for 3 different approaches to vocal performance, broadly defined as follows:

- The repressed voice: physically held back, throaty and not projected, erratic and rough
- The choral voice: gentle and melodic, supported yet contained
- The emotional voice: far-reaching and expressive

An important element of the piece is the use of projected text behind the vocalist. For the projection of the text, a Processing patch has been created by the composer from which the different sections of the poem can be triggered, although other alternatives for the text may be possible (please discuss this with the composer). The text should be triggered by an assistant or additional performer from a different laptop than the one running the Max patch at the points indicated at the score.

Written in 2021-22

Premiered by José del Avellanal Carreño (voice, electronics) and Tianyu Zou (video assistance) at the 'à suivre' festival of the Hochschule der Künste Bern

Duration: 10-15'

Vocalise

José del Avellanal Carreño

bocca chiusa, low register
 experiment with repressed voice, slowly gaining expressiveness -----

Voice

Electronics

Counter: 1

③: play freely with vocal reverb / dynamic changes -----

mm → vowels
 building momentum, increase projection, explore more register -----

V.

E.

①: freeze vowel → ②: release → ③: release + gliss.

③: set reverb to a light level

④: freeze vowel

*always release electronics at the same time as voice stops!

exact pitch only if possible
(f)
mm → *o*

V.

E.

chorale (Victoria)
 (back → front)

⑥/⑦/⑧: distort audio (slightly) → ②: cut! ⑤: new settings

Text 1

mm/mm / vowels, choral voice
 melodic lines using chorale as a starting point, expressive with moments of interruption --

V.

E.

⑥: trigger audio
 (back → front) 'rema'

⑦ → ⑧: new settings + change counter

Counter: 2

include more consonants

 more interruptions and tension, get further away from choral lines -----

V.

E.

①: freeze vowel → ③: release + gliss.
 → ④: release + gliss. + 'rema'

⑤: swells of chorale -----

