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## WOMEN'S VOICES IN ALTERNATIVE MUSIC – LISA GERRARD AND ELIZABETH FRASER

**Abstract:** This paper deals with the analysis of Lisa Gerrard's and Elizabeth Fraser's vocal styles that promoted a new way of singing on the alternative music scene. Instead of the traditional usage of lyrics in the English language as their mother tongue, they use so called 'glossolalia', meaning wordless, or substituting language with a melodic, exploratory rapture by their vocal range alone in a couple of octaves. The main points of analysis are the relationships between the vocal interpretation and instruments, music form, main melodic themes, rhythm, accomplished with iconography in the relationship between vocal interpretations and stage performances.

**Key words:** alternative music, Lisa Gerrard, Elizabeth Fraser, vocal analysis, glossolalia

### Introduction

The period of the 1980s brought more diverse and at the same time powerful and expressive female vocals with a wide vocal range as band or solo singers in the area of pop, rock and alternative music such as: Kate Bush, Lisa Gerrard, Elizabeth Fraser, Siouxsie, Tracy Chapman, Enya and Sinead O'Connor. The main aim of this paper is to analyze the vocal interpretation of two singers, members of two important bands as marked in published music encyclopedias and monographs in the domain of alternative or indie music: Lisa Gerrard as the vocalist of Dead Can Dance and Elizabeth Fraser as the vocalist of Cocteau Twins. The basic methods and materials for analysis are: induction, deduction, comparison, audio and video materials, interviews, music magazines, monographs and encyclopedias.

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Elizabeth Fraser was a member and singer of the alternative band Cocteau Twins, founded in 1981 by Robin Guthrie, Will Heggie and Elizabeth Fraser. In 1983, Will Heggie left the band and in 1984, Simon Raymonde joined Guthrie and Fraser. The band was active until 1998. The Cocteau Twins published eight studio albums: *Garlands* (4AD, 1982), *Head over Heels* (4AD, 1983), *Treasure* (4AD, 1984), *Victorialand* (4AD, 1986), *Blue Bell Knoll* (4AD, 1988), *Heaven or Las Vegas* (4AD, 1990), *Four-Calendar Café* (Fontana, 1993), *Milk & Kisses* (Fontana, 1996).

After the breakup of the Cocteau Twins, Fraser continued with her solo career and has collaborated with a number of bands or performers including: The Future Sound of London, Elliot Goldenthal, Craig Armstrong, Peter Gabriel, and Yann Tiersen. Probably the most famous collaboration for Fraser was with Massive Attack and their hit single *Teardrop*. More precisely Fraser recorded three songs for the Massive Attack album *Mezzanine* from 1998 and toured with the band during 2006. Fraser also recorded several soundtracks: *In Dreams*, *Cruel Intentions*, *The Winter Guest*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*.

Lisa Gerrard was a member of the Dead Can Dance band, formed in 1981 by her and Brendan Perry. After a break of 16 years, they renewed the band, and in 2012 released their latest album entitled *Anastasis* (PIAS, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Music journalists and writers define their style as alternative, world music, dark wave, dream pop or ambient. The self-titled debut album *Dead Can Dance* was published by 4AD in 1984, described by Thompson as a “scintillating voyage of discovery”<sup>2</sup>. In the period between 1981–1996, they recorded eight albums: *Dead Can Dance* (4AD, 1984), *Spleen and Ideal* (4AD, 1985), *Within the Realm of a Dying Sun* (4AD, 1987), *Serpent's Egg* (4AD, 1988), *Aion* (4AD, 1990), *Into the Labyrinth* (4AD, 1993), *Toward the Within, Live* (4AD, 1994), and *Spirit Chaser* (4AD, 1996).<sup>3</sup> As previously mentioned, after a break of 16 years they renewed the band and in 2012, released their latest album *Anastasis*.

### **Vocal Analysis**

Several vocal techniques such as belting, speech level singing, various types of guttural singing and the classical *bel canto* have been used throughout the history of pop or rock music.<sup>4</sup> More rarely, could we read about the vocal technique

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<sup>1</sup> Aston, Martin: “Biography”, June 2012, in: [www.deadcandance.com/main/bio](http://www.deadcandance.com/main/bio). (accessed 29 March, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Dave Thompson, *Alternative Rock*. San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 2000, 317

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 317, 318.

<sup>4</sup> Tomaček, Samuel. “The pop (rock) singer-a self-taught or a skilled artist?” in: *Book of abstracts-KISMIF International conference*, Porto: University of Porto, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Porto, 2015, 263.

called glossolalia. In the Dictionary of Psychology it is written that glossolalia means a fluid vocalizing of speech like utterances with an impoverished range of syllabic and no systematic grammatical structure often believed by the speaker to be a real but unknown language. Also, glossolalia is called the gift of tongues or speaking in tongues.<sup>5</sup> Glossolalia is constructed from the Greek word glossa-tongue, or language and laleō-to speak, to talk, or to make music sound.<sup>6</sup> So far, we have been able to conclude that glossolalia is based at the phonemic level as opposed to the word level in some concrete language.

This paper deals with the analysis of Lisa Gerrard's and Elizabeth Fraser's vocal styles that promoted an 'innovative way' of singing on the alternative music scene. Instead of the traditional usage of lyrics in English as their mother tongue, they have used the previously mentioned vocal style glossolalia, meaning wordless or substitutive language with a melodic, exploratory rapture by their vocal range alone in several octaves.

Some glossolalia lyrics have words originating from a novel language: thus, the songwriter first invents the syntax and semantics of the new language, and then writes a song in that particular new language.<sup>7</sup> But, most of glossolalia lyrics are at the phonemic level, free of the semantic level. In an interview for 1FM Radio, Elizabeth Fraser said that the lyrics in her songs ranged from straightforward English to semi-comprehensible sentences (glossolalia) and abstract mouth music.<sup>8</sup>

In general, the entire analysis is based on a number of items:

- the analysis of vocals;
- the analysis of the relationship between the vocal and instrumental sections;
- the visualization of Lisa Gerrard and Elizabeth Fraser singing as part of their live performances within two case studies: the live concert of Dead Can Dance in Thessaloniki, held on 21 September, 2012 and the live concert of Massive Attack with their guest Elizabeth Fraser, held on 11 June, 2006 in Skopje.

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew M. Colman. *A Dictionary of Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 316

<sup>6</sup> Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1940, in: Digital edition from Perseus Digital Library, [www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/perseus/reference/lsg.html](http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/perseus/reference/lsg.html), (accessed, 12 April, 2013)

<sup>7</sup> *Vocals*, in: [www.music209projects](http://www.music209projects) (accessed 15 March, 2013)

<sup>8</sup> 1 FM Radio, *Elizabeth Fraser Talks About Her Lyrics*. Interview with Elizabeth Fraser, June, 2009, in: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTx8VnZBvDc> (accessed 16 March 2013)

For more detailed analysis, the selected albums in this paper are: the last album of Gerrard made with Dead Can Dance, and Anastasis, and the last album of Fraser made with Cocteau Twins, and Milk & Kisses.

The concept of Anastasis leads us through Turkish, North African and Greek traditional melodies, and cultures, within the vocal imaginary creation of Gerrard based on glossolalia. On the Anastasis album, Gerrard sings four songs. Three of them: Anabasis, Agape and Kiko are interpreted with only one vocal leading melody or solo vocal melody, and the fourth one, Return of the She-King, has back vocals based on women's choir and also a Gerrard and Perry duet section. Very often, during some vocal phrases which go from the lower to the higher register, Gerrard holds the last note from that particular vocal phrase longer. Moreover, she inserts ornaments on some notes (for example, during the singing of the song Agape). The independent vocal treatment is very obvious in the song Kiko, through the clear changing of the vocal section with the instrumental section. Return of the She-King is in  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter and the drums and daire play ostinato with the accent on the first beat during the entire song, despite the changing of three different music sections. The last section is interesting because Gerrard sings solo based on a glossolalia melody, afterwards Perry has a solo with the repetition of the following syllables 'hee, yaa, maa', and at the end they sing together or they join their glossolalia interpretations.

Milk & Kisses contains ten songs. Fraser does not pronounce the words clearly and if we did not have the written version of the lyrics we could barely understand the content of the lyrics. Fraser drags out the words, divides them into syllables, and combines this with vocables; she repeats 'la,la,la,la' very often. For example, this can be heard in the fifth song Calfskin Snack. Another important element of Fraser's vocal interpretation is that in almost all the songs, she sings the main melody and she also sings the back vocals. Fraser usually combines this dialogue between the main vocal melody and accompanying vocal melody, with the change of the vocal register: if the leading melody is in the high register (second octave), then the accompanying melody is in the lower register (in the small octave or first octave), and vice versa. For example, in the opening song, Violaine, the main vocal melody in the verse section is in the lower register, the back vocal section is in the higher register, and in the choir, the main vocal melody is in the higher register and the back vocal in the lower. In addition, during this song in the choir, Fraser reaches a2 note during the singing and a repetition of vocalized a. Or, in the song Ups the main vocal movement is in the higher register and the back vocal in the lower register. And finally, the last song of the album Seekers Who Are Lovers is a good example of this duality or the narrative/independent vocal treatment and the changing of the low/high vocal registers. The narrative treatment goes within the middle register (lyrics

treasure hiding) and the glossolalia goes within the higher register. Sometimes, when the glossolalia singing is based on a melody which goes gradually from the lower to the higher register, then Fraser interprets the last note of the phrase with an accent (for example, in the song *Rilkean Heart*).

Fraser's vocal treatment can be divided into two categories: narrative and independent or the vocal is at the same level as the other instruments. Gerrard's vocal treatment can be placed in one category or as independent treatment of the vocal, or the vocal is placed at the same level as the other instruments in particular songs. The *Serpent Skirt* from *Milk & Kisses* has a combination of Fraser's vocal treatment. First, we hear the narrative story where, at some moments, we can understand part of the lyrics like: 'once upon a time'. After that the song develops in a new direction, or Fraser uses glossolalia where she splits the syllables and we come to the second division, the independent treatment of the vocal. This combination can be heard in the last song from *Milk & Kisses*, dedicated to a love story which is circled with the high register and a gentle interpretation of vocables. In two songs, Fraser combines the lyrics with the following vocables: uuuu, lalalala (*Calfskin Smack* and *Ups*)

We may conclude that the glossolalia vocal singing style has some advantages:

- glossolalia allows the voice to join the instrumental group of synths, strings, drums more spontaneously and for a longer time, without a disruption that could come from the use of traditional lyrics;
- glossolalia has a practical side, meaning the listeners don't need to understand a particular language so they can enjoy or experience the song in a more relaxing, spontaneous way;
- glossolalia puts the vocal at the same level as the instrumental section of the songs;
- glossolalia can be based on wordless or substitutive language;
- glossolalia can be based on combined vocal styles between glossolalia, meaning wordless, and narrative treatment, meaning the use of lyrics written in English or another language.

### **Instrumentation**

The published definitions about alternative music, where we can also include the music of *Dead Can Dance* or *Cocteau Twins*, are very suitable and helpful in the analysis of *Dead Can Dance* or *Cocteau Twins* music. According to *Hermes*, the ability to create alternative music is through innovation and extreme pas-

sion.<sup>9</sup> The innovation elements in the music of Dead Can Dance can be presented through the combination of the really unique vocal capability of Gerrard and the warm baritone of Perry, together with the recreation of traditional music that comes from different parts of the world, supplemented with modern electronic instruments. In other words, Dead Can Dance perform familiar sounds, for example: oriental melodies, Mediterranean, African, with unusual or unconventional intensity presented through the previous elements of the vocal timeless expression of Gerrard, meaning that we cannot place her in any particular category of vocal style, then local traditional music and modern technical opportunities (recording studios, samplers etc).

On their last album, apart from the dominant use of traditional instruments like the yang ch'in, or the bouzouki, they also use electric piano, electric guitar and drum section. For music critics, what makes the music of Dead Can Dance attractive is the creative exploration of ancient instruments, like the yang ch'in and the bodhrán, and the collision with the new recording or technological possibilities.<sup>10</sup>

The song Anabasis has a binary form: the instrumental section and the vocal instrumental section. Gerrard's singing is based on glossolalia, which opens a treatment on her vocal as an instrument equal to the others, the strings or drums sections. During the changing of the instrumental sections in Anabasis, we can hear different types of instruments' strings, and an electric keyboard, and at the last instrumental section, the song conveys more lively rhythmical movement with the leading Hang drum. Like Anabis, Agape, meaning unconditional love, has a binary form: one instrumental and one vocal instrumental section, interpreted by Gerrard. The musical phrases are symmetrical. The scheme is: a-b-a1-b1-a2. The last a2 section is longer than the previous a sections. This type of creation is also presented in the songs Children of the Sun and Kiko. Return of the She-King is a song which is a continuation of the old story of Dead Can Dance inspired by their first albums. It is the only song in  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter and also the only song where Perry and Gerrard sing together. It has three sections: a instrumental, b vocal instrumental with Gerrard as the soloist, and c section with the Perry Gerrard vocal duo.

The instrument yang ch'in meaning 'foreign zither' is played by Lisa Gerrard. This instrument is similar to the dulcimer family originating from the Near East. In Iran and Iraq there is an instrument called the santir, a variant of the

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<sup>9</sup> Will Hermes: "So what's this "alternative" music, you ask?", in: *SPIN, 20 Years of Alternative music*. (Will Hermes and Sia Michel eds.). New York: Three Rivers Press 2005, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ned Raggett, "Dead Can Dance Anastasis", in: *Pitchfork*, August, 10, 2012; <http://www.pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/16906-anastasis> (accessed 30 April, 2013).

Greek psalterion. In the construction of this instrument, below the strings, there may be bridges that can be positioned to provide special tone effects.<sup>11</sup> The sound of this instrument within the combination of the vocal style of Gerrard is the core of the definition of the Dead Can Dance music style.

All of the songs on *Milk & Kisses* have a short instrumental introduction, and most of them are performed with a solo, on the electric guitar: *Violaine*, *Serpentskirt*, *Calfskin Smack*, *Rilkean Heart*, *Treasure Hiding* and *Seekers Who are Lovers*. The introduction of the song *Ups* involves the drums section, and the introduction of the song *Tiskbite* involves the guitar and electric piano duet. The rhythm patterns are mostly based on the repetition of quarter or eighth notes in the 4/4 or 2/4/ meter, but the song *Half Gifts* is interesting because it includes polyrhythms. The instrumental part is based on two triolas and two eights, while the Fraser vocal movement is based on regular rhythmical movement.

As mentioned before, most of the songs have an introduction based on a guitar solo. In the song *Eperdu*, first we can hear the solo guitar's short musical phrase and this is enriched with Fraser's glossolalia interpretation as accompaniment. Also, in the previous song *Ups*, the guitar solo is accompanied with Fraser's glossolalia singing. In the context of vocal instrumental relationships in *Milk & Kisses*, the vocal is dominant and the instrumental section is at a secondary level. The exceptions are the introduction sections where the instrumental section is dominant.

### **Visualization**

During the world tour in 2012, dedicated to the last album, *Anastasis*, Dead Can Dance included the Balkans with concerts in Istanbul, Thessaloniki and Athens. The main musical and textual content of the album *Anastasis*, was a very good upgrade within the atmosphere of the ancient space of the Theatro Gis (Theatre of the Earth) in Thessaloniki, visited by audiences not only from Greece but also from neighboring states. The strong wind during the Thessaloniki concert in September was unusual for that time of the year, but during the concert it created a natural decoration, swaying or dancing through the greenery behind the scene. The concert lasted nearly two hours. I must point out the excellent vocal interpretation of Lisa Gerrard, particularly during the singing of *Sanvean*, *The Host of Seraphim*, *Anabasis*, *Rising of the Moon*, filled with a wide range of vocal complexity in melody shaping, simultaneously delicate and powerful. Lisa Gerrard's vocal capacity was improved with her stage performance of the yang

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<sup>11</sup> Bert Oling and Heinz Wallisch, *The Complete Encyclopedia of Musical Instruments*. Rebo Publishers, 2004, 144

ch'in instrument and her visual image created by her wearing a long dress with a golden collar, probably inspired by the Oriental fashion styles. At the end, we heard a solo by Gerrard, performing the song *Rising of the Moon* that heralded the end of the concert, and it may symbolize the following musical experiences and expectations within *Dead Can Dance*.<sup>12</sup>

During the 2006 tour of *Massive Attack*, Fraser was their special guest. At the concert in Skopje, held in the Skopje Fair Hall, Fraser performed three songs with *Massive Attack*: *Teardrop*, *Black Melt* and *Group Four*. *Teardrop* was a huge hit worldwide. Fraser was dressed up in a casual grey shirt. She did not move her body too much, the microphone was static and she stayed in front of it, all the time. Fraser's performance was more modest, subtle, and even shy. On the other hand, Gerrard's stage performance was more theatrical with the selection of the Oriental or exotic dress, enriched with the use of the yang ch'in instrument. Despite these different stage images, both singers were singing perfectly, almost like when we hear them on their studio records or albums. Both of them are totally dedicated to the performances and they transfer to the audience emotions, spirituality and subtle energy.

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<sup>12</sup> Julijana Zhabeva Papazova: "Concert of *Dead Can Dance*-Thessaloniki, Theatre Gis, 21 September", 25.09.2012, in: [www.okno.mk/node/22274](http://www.okno.mk/node/22274) (accessed 1 May, 2013)