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WHAT DOES THE HUMMING AVATAR REMEMBER? COMPOSER'S VOICE AND MEMORY IN ANA GNJATOVIĆ'S *PHONATIONS*[1]

Abstract: Written as a two-fold dissertation on Ph.D. studies of composition at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, which consists of the piece and the autopoetic text, Ana Gnjatović's *Phonations* for voice and electronics (2016), raises, among others, questions of performance of music for voice and electronics, as well as issues of the composer's/performer's voice, and the topic of (musical) memory. Focusing on these problem points, this paper deals with Ana Gnjatović's 'vocal identity', represented and performed in the layering sounds of voice and electronics, with Edward T. Cone's notion of 'composer's voice' in mind.

Key words: *Phonations*, Ana Gnjatović, composer's voice, electrovocal music, performance

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[1] This paper originated from one written under the mentorship of Prof. Dr. Vesna Mikić, as the final paper for the *Electroacoustic Music* Course (2016/2017) on Ph.D. studies of musicology at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade.

> In sitting and composing music that should be experienced like a sound diary, like something *secretive*, I envision myself, as the one who performs the same music *publicly*. The possibility of performance influences the decisions in every phase of composing. I adapt not only what I speak, but also the way I say it.
> If the performer is not a character, (maybe) it could be said that he is an avatar.[2]

Phonations for voice and electronics (2016) by Ana Gnjatović[3] was written as the final, doctoral artistic project of the author's Ph.D. studies in composition at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, under the mentorship of Srđan Hofman, professor emeritus at the same faculty. The duration of the piece is 28 minutes, and it is described in Gnjatović's autopoetic text as a list[4] of 16 compositions for female voice and electronics, composed out of diverse sound materials. The idea behind this piece is performing memories built from composing, vocal, and literary practices and events, which refer to the music the author used to play/sing, but are not the sole imitation of some performance from the past – and that is carefully pointed out.[5]

This, very personal, list of significant materials consists of the pieces composed by Gnjatović for this occasion or the ones composed earlier (*Balance-lost*, *Fashion Victim II*, *Fashion Victim III*, *Phillody. Quiescense*), pieces which are of great importance for the composer (Josquin des Prez's *Mille Regretz*, Schumann's *Kinderszennen*, Satie's *La Diva de l'Empire*, Berio's *Sequen-*

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[2] "Седећи и компонујући музику која треба да се доживи на нивоу звучног дневника, нечега тајног, претпостављам себе која исту музику изводим јавно. Могућност извођења утиче на одлуке у свакој фази компоновања. Прилагођавам не само оно што говорим, него и начин на који то саопштавам. Ако извођач није лик, могло би се (можда) рећи да је аватар". Ана Гњатовић, *Phonation*, *за глас и електронику: теоријска студија*, manuscript, Belgrade, 2016, 63. Translations of Gnjatović's study given in this text are done by Bojana Radovanović.

[3] Ana Gnjatović (1984) is a composer of acoustic and electro-acoustic music, collecting and combining found items, works, concepts, and ideas that lend themselves to generalisation, translation, interpretation, and sonorisation. Ana Gnjatović has attended various composition master classes and workshops in composition and improvisation, working with composers Chaya Czernowin, Julia Wolfe, Louis Andriessen, Luca Francesconi, Georg Friedrich Haas, Ivan Fedele, Trevor Wishart, and Mark André, among others. A more detailed biography on composer's website: https://www.anagnjatovic.com/bioresume.html

[4] "Термин списак користим јер одговара и композицији и начину на који о њој говорим. Подложан је вишеструким тумачењима, и, како се ретко користи у музици – мање је ограничавајући." Ана Гњатовић, op. cit., 7.

[5] Ibid., 51.

za III, Monteverdi's *Lamento della Nimfa*, Kurt Weill's *Speak Low*), archival recordings of important (for the composer, as well as the history of literature) poetry and prose pieces (Kurt Schwitters and Marcell Duchamp's poems, James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and *Chamber Music*, Gertrude Stein's *Idem the Same: A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson*, Tristan Tzara's *L'amiral cherche une maison à louer*), manifestos (Marinetti's *Manifesto del Futursmo*), conceptual and experimental works (Kenneth Goldsmith's *73 Songs*, *Gertrude Stein's Punctuation from Gertrude Stein on Punctuation*, *No. 109 2. 7. 93–12. 15 .93* and Diana Deutsch's *Speech to Song Illusion, Phantom Words*). The list goes on...

Probably the most important and the most accentuated, multi-layered references point towards the *philosophy of music*, composing, and performance set up by John Cage. The inspiration is obvious (and indicated in the text) starting from the notion of a list as a formal concept of *Phonations*, emulating, among others, Cage's *Song Books (Solos for Voice 3–92)* (1970). The form is built with a Cageian recipe in mind: the parts/movements are named *Mix 1*, *Mix 2*, and *Mix 3*; the authors, artists, concepts, and sources used in this piece are often similar to the ones Cage was inspired by in his own artistic processes. Finally, all materials, including dada and experimental poetry, prose, manifestos, and listings of various kinds, are understood and treated as music: "All that is read (like prose), recited (like poetry), declaimed and proclaimed (like manifestos), listed (like colours), is no less vocal, and, in my opinion – no less music".[6] The materials contained on the tape underwent the different processes of technological manipulation of dynamics, duration, reverberation, *cut up* and layering techniques.

The necessary requisites for a performance of *Phonations*, as listed by the composer, are: one table, one chair, one computer that supports *Logic Pro X* (possibly also *Cubase Pro 8* or *Studio One 3*), a mini MIDI keyboard, a USB audio interface, one "sensitive" vocal microphone, and one, "also sensitive" vocal performer. The performer has the task of sitting on the stage at the computer, controlling the sequence, and "humming" the voice part.

The analysis of *Phonations* can be done on the basis of the recording made by the composer herself, and, with the aforementioned autopoetic text, the explication, which accompanies the piece. This text, intriguing and poetic, seemingly wandering and secretive like the music itself, but still highly informative, complex, and conceptually in line with the piece, is to be acknowledged as a key to comprehending *the list* that is before us. Admittedly, the autopoetic text is my guide, but I am cautious with its 'objectivity' and 'truthfulness' – this text

[6] "Све оно што је читано (попут прозе), рецитовано (попут поезије), декламовано и прокламовано (попут манифеста), набрајано (попут боја) није ништа мање вокално, и по мом схватању – ништа мање музика." Ibid., 6.

is rather a con-text, which can be, but does not have to be, related to the piece or performance in many ways.[7] Nevertheless, given the nature of electronic music and its existence only on tape, Gnjatović's text gives the necessary guidelines for understanding "the cluster of links" that is the author, which, with her own work, refers to many other texts, cultural objects, and practices.[8]

Performing: Electrovocal Music and Memory

Phonations can be viewed as a fine example of what Hannah Bosma called *electrovocal music*. Namely, it is the type of electro-acoustic music that is based on recorded, manipulated, synthesised, and *live* human voices.[9] The piece in question indeed meets the criteria – Gnjatović works with pre-recorded sounds of her own voice, and various recorded materials that accentuate numerous voices that come across as crucial in (re)constructing the world of musical memory.

Bearing in mind the history of live electronic practices in 20th century Europe, as well as the USA, as well as the well-known debate on women composers in the field of electroacoustic music transgressing the traditional roles of male composers v. female performers (male view v. female body, technology v. nature), one should briefly consider the moment and the context in the Serbian history of music in which *Phonations* has emerged. Whether with the intentions of problematising the position of the female composer or not,[10] the rising number of female composers in the sphere of electroacoustic music in Serbia from the start of the new millennium is evident. It is worth noticing that, following the generation of composers led by Vladan Radovanović, Srđan Hofman, Zoran Erić etc., electroacoustic music in Serbia today is mostly composed by female composers of the younger generation.[11] Live electronic practices are also popular, of which *Phonations* are the paradigmatic example. By performing her own composition in this field of music, Gnjatović unites the poles of the previously

[7] Hannah Bosma, *The electronic cry: Voice and gender in electroacoustic music*, Amsterdam, UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository), 168.

[8] Ibid.

[9] This concept is closely tied with the idea of artificial vocality by Bruno Bossis, which is derived from a perceptual analogy with the voice, as well as the idea that there is "no strict division between recorded, manipulated, transformed, synthesised and simulated voice sounds, both from a perceptual and a technical point of view". Ibid., 7.

[10] For more on this subject, find: Adriana Sabo, *Međunarodna tribina kompozitorki*? *Mogući pogled na položaj kompozitorki u okviru domaće muzičke scene*, master thesis, manuscript, 2012.

[11] Including Svetlana Savić, Tatjana Milošević, Svetlana Maraš, Jasna Veličković, Ana Gnjatović and others.

mentioned debate. The question that will raised further on in the text is how she sees herself while performing/composing on stage?

If we go along with one of the most influential contemporary theory thoughts on performance set by Jon McKenzie[12] – that in the present moment the demand for performance has become a fairly usual social phenomenon – we may as well assume that it is possible (preferable, even) to perform memories. "Today", McKenzie writes, "as we navigate the crack of millennia, work, play, sex, and even resistance – it's all performance to us".[13] The act of performing is, of course, crucial for music and other performing arts (dance, theater, opera, ballet, film...). McKenzie's idea of performance as a societal norm is based on Richard Schechner's performance studies, which are, even today, very influential thanks to his thought that the notion of performance exceeds the art itself, and can also be related to different practices in art, culture, and society. Hence, a memory *can* be performed, but, in what way?

> What is quoted and paraphrased in *Phonations* is not very clear to me. For some thing I claim to have quoted it only because it *resembled* something afterwards. Some thing is not on the list, because the series of distant associations and lateral flows of consciousness would have demanded Freudian explanations, and they did not seem useful. Certain things I can't remember, but they must be stored in some corner of my consciousness...[14]

The electronic part of the piece reveals an abundance of voices – voices of Ana Gnjatović, voices of Joan La Barbara, Tommaso Marinetti, Gertrude Stein, Ogdon Nash, and every one of them carries a certain recognisable (even to the listener) sound artefact. While listening to the recording, Gnjatović's pre-recorded voices are, practically, indiscernible from the ones actually produced by the performer. Sometimes vaguely and sometimes very clearly, all these voices reveal what the points of reference of the author's memory are, how they are intertwined and often indiscernible from each other. In short, they evoke the notion of everyday noise in our minds.

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[12] For more on the subject, Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, London, Routledge, 2001.

[13] Ibid., 3.

[14] "Шта је све у Фонацијама цитирано и парафразирано, није ми баш сасвим докучиво. Нешто тврдим да сам цитирала само зато што ми је накнадно заличило. Нешто није на списку, јер би низ удаљених асоцијација и бочних токова свести захтевали фројдијанска објашњења, а ни она се не би чинила корисним. Појединих ствари не могу да се сетим, а сигурно су похрањене у неком кутку моје свести..." Ана Гњатовић, op. cit., 22.

The modes of treatment of the material have already been mentioned, and, as such, can also be associated with some, more or less, specified recollections of the author. Namely, techniques such as *cut-up* or layering directly allude to avant-garde dada practices of simultaneous poetry, and aleatoric techniques of cutting up a literary text and its reorganisation into a new one. Simultaneity and layering are noticeable from the first number in *Mix 1*, *LalaBarbara 1* (see Table 1), when multiple voices of Joan La Barbara encounter the voice of Gnjatović reciting the poem *a* by Vladimir Đurišić. This procedure leads, as was intended by Tristan Tzara in the first simultaneous poem, to the concurrent appearance of different languages (Serbian and English, and, later on in the piece, English in retrograde motion**,** Italian), different voices, and different artworks. Manipulations with the materials on tape also include dynamical, durational, and "spacial" modulations.

As a "list of vocal techniques", a list of possible non-traditional relations between the music and the text, a list of techniques of "composing for voice (and from voice)", *Phonations* employs various extended vocal techniques combined with singing: humming, crooning, mumbling, reciting, whispering, percussive sounds, chanting.[15] However, extreme vocal expression (screams or growls) is not used in any of the sound layers, which is the fact that coincides with the idea that 'the performance of *Phonations* is designed as a private, intentional and accentuated non-communicative act'.[16]

Performing: The Composer's Voice

Phonations *is the attempt of defining my vocal identity*.[17]

In his book, *The Composer's Voice* (1974), Edward T. Cone considers the possible relations of the 'composer's voices' in vocal and vocal-instrumental music, making certain references to electro-acoustic music that can, to an extent, be applied to unraveling Ana Gnjatović's *voices* in *Phonations*. According to Cone, this "composer's voice" is not the author's real/literal voice, but rather the voice that is implied and evoked through the music itself. The composer is thus represented as a "complete musical persona" of the given piece, which is unique even in relation to his other works.[18] In contrast to that, in vocal music, the "vocal

[15] Sound example is available online at the official New Sound YouTube channel. Please find the playlist here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgbJ7s-f8i4&feature=youtu.be

[16] "Извођење Фонација осмислила сам као приватан, намерно и наглашено некомуникативан чин". Ibid., 61.

[17] "*Фонације* су покушај дефинисања мог вокалног идентитета". Ibid., 25.

[18] Cf. Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1974, 18.

persona", i.e. the performer's voice joins the composer's as an embodied representative of the piece's character or personality. This may create a field of friction and tension between the voice of the "complete musical persona" and the voice of the performer that, according to Cone, has "natural supremacy" and demands to be heard.[19] The third, "instrumental virtual persona", can be understood as the most direct component of the musical persona – the virtual narrator manifested in the instrumental accompaniment.[20]

Apparently, given that the composer and the performer *are* actually the same *persona*, the differentiation of the composer's and the performer's voices in *Phonations* would not produce much of a result, however, Gnjatović (the 'complete musical persona'), writes:

> The dynamics of the relations between the natural and the artificial, the original and the arrangement, is reversed, because, in actuality, the originals are stored in memories, *on tape*, and what the singer brings are reactions, comments.[21]

As a composer, she posits (or recapitulates afterwards) the notion of self on stage (composer- and performer-wise) as an avatar. Parallels can be drawn between this situation, where the "musical avatar" imitates the "closed and private" act of composing and performing on stage and, the situation of one having an avatar, a representative, in a virtual world of computer games. That way, Ana Gnjatović composes/designs and theoretically explains the unique kind of her virtual reality, performed in front of an audience.

The specificity of this 'division of labour' can, in this case, be explained by the three-layered set of the composer-performer persona. In relation to Cone's setting, I propose the following interpretation. The composer's voice, that is, the musical persona of this composition is contained in its ontological totality – in the performance, in the recorded form on tape, and in the autopoetic text that accompanies and clarifies it. The remaining two layers create a virtual reality of memory, created by the composer/performer, which is representing/performing her own avatar on the scene. Pre-recorded and manipulated sounds on tape convey the original memories through the instrumental persona, the virtual narrative, and the singer/performer is the vocal persona – the one manipulating the performance itself, either by working with the materials on tape directly or

[19] Cf. Hannah Bosma, op. cit., 91.

[20] Edward T. Cone, op. cit., 12, 35; Cf. ibid.

[21] "Динамика односа природног и артифицијелног, оригинала и обраде, обрнута је, јер се оригинали, заправо, налазе у сећањима, на траци, а оно што доноси певачица су реакције, коментари". Ана Гњатовић, op. cit., 66.

through commenting on the sound events/memories from the tape with her own voice. The assumed tension and contention between the virtual narrative and vocal persona, therefore, come as no shock. Indeed, it is even expected by the composer herself: "The feedback between me that writes and me that sings is not an indispensable condition for the consistent interpretation of the piece. (…) Additionally, my ability to quite faithfully present my own instructions need not be a foregone conclusion."[22]

Hence, I differentiate (1) the musical persona, represented by the **total composer's voice**, (2) the instrumental virtual persona, i.e. the **composer's voice recorded on tape whose role is to remember**, and (3) the vocal persona, the **avatar** that represents the author, imitates the process of composing and *performs the* comments on the recollections on tape.

If, for a moment, we put the musical persona aside, we can again focus our attention on the relation between the virtual narrative and the avatar, the tape and the voice. In accordance with the "antitheatrical" idea of shyness, reticence, and the intimate atmosphere required in performing/composing on stage, the vocal part does not predict any type of action that could lead to over-amplifying any specifically extreme state of emotions. The performer does not scream, neither does she cry or "bray"… she *croons* and hums. When needed, the extreme psychological charges are entrusted to the electronic part. That way, those states are depicted truthfully and 'originally' in their mildness or extremity, in their intertextuality and every possible connection with all the existing and vaporising memories. While the avatar reacts to the sounds that surround her, her voice is also processed and treated with technological aids. The performer's voice is reverberated in order to achieve "spatialisation" and a more compact density with the electronic part.[23]

This need for coordinating the voice performed live with the electronic layers indicates a tendency of *improvement* of (shy, not good enough, "inappropriate"?) the human body by means of technology. The voice of avatar in performance strives for acceptance of the real world, while the real world is carefully stored in technologically mediated electronic part.[24] What ties the pre-recorded voice and other materials used in the electronic part, such as manifestos, poems, music performed by other voices together, are Ana Gnjatović's memories im-

[22] "Повратна спрега између мене која пише и мене која пева није неопходан услов за доследну интерпретацију дела. (...) Додатно, не мора се претпоставити ни моја способност сасвим верног представљања сопствених инструкција". Ibid., 64.

[23] Ibid., 65.

[24] Vesna Mikić, *Muzika u tehnokulturi*, Beograd, Univerzitet umetnosti u Beogradu, 2004, 174.

mersed in, and inseparable from, the sounds that we hear. It can, therefore, be said that *the real* is hereby represented as *the virtual real*, as the one towards which the *ordinary* human body gravitates.

Still, the unpredictability of the avatar's reactions on stage, as well as the necessity for *real* phonations (products or utterances generated in human speech or in singing/humming), maintains a relationship with what is human, irrespective of the demand for modulations through technological devices. Ana Gnjatović's vocal musical identity balances on the thin wire between extended vocal techniques and her own, personal, electronically mediated memory. But again, if the psychologically or even physically burdensome utterances occur in the layer of the instrumental instead of the vocal persona, is that not the sign of estrangement from one's own emotions with the help of technology? In the end, I pose a question for future debates: in *Phonations*, who performs the memory, who comments, and who is the person who observes and manages the whole event?

What does the humming avatar *really* remember?

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Table 1: *Phonations*, list of numbers and the most important material used in each of them[25]

	Number	**Material**
Mix 1	*LalaBarbara 1*	*73 Poems* (Goldsmith, La Barbara)
	Balance – lost 1	*Balance – lost* (Gnjatović), *Mille Regretz* (trad. Josquen des Prez)
	Balance – lost 2	Balance – lost 1
	Balance – lost 3	Balance – lost 1
	LalaBarbara 2	*LalaBarbara 1*
Mix 2	*Speak low 2* and *Chamber Music 2*	*Speak Low* (Weill, Nash) *Chamber Music* (Joyce)
	Chamber Music 1	*Chamber Music* (Joyce)
	Fremden	*Kinderszennen* (Schumann)
	Oh Hermione	*La pioggia nel pineto* (D'Annunzio)
	Speak Low 1	*Speak Low* (Weill, Nash)
Mix 3	*Diva 2*, *Berio*	*La Diva de l'Empire* (Satie), *Sequenza III* (Berio)
	Diva 1	*La Diva de l'Empire* (Satie), colours
	FV2	*Fashion Victim 2* (Gnjatović)
	della Nimfa	*Lamento della Nimfa* (Monteverdi, Rinuccini)
	Radio Dada	archival recordings: *Definizione di Futurismo* (Marinetti, 1923), Finnegans Wake (Joyce, 1929), Idem the Same: A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson (Stein, 1922)
	Dlačica	*Одприрођена поезија* (Schwitters), counting

[25] The table is taken from Gnjatović's text and translated. Cf. Ана Гњатовић, op. cit., 8.

Summary

Written as a two-fold dissertation on Ph.D. studies of composition at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, which consists of the piece and the autopoetic text, Ana Gnjatović's *Phonations* for voice and electronics (2016), raise, among others, questions of the performance of music for voice and electronics, as well as the issues of the composer's/performer's voice, and the topic of (musical) memory. Focusing on these problem points, this paper deals with Ana Gnjatović's "vocal identity", represented and performed in the layering sounds of voice and electronics, with Edward T. Cone's notion of the "composer's voice" in mind.

The analysis of *Phonations* can be done on the basis of the recording made by the composer herself, and, with an afore-mentioned autopoetic text, an explication, that accompanies the piece. The idea behind this piece is performing memories built from composing, vocal, and literary practices and events, which refer to the music the author used to play/sing. This, very personal, list of significant materials consists of the pieces composed by Gnjatović for this occasion or the ones composed earlier, pieces which are of great importance for the composer, archival recordings of important (for the composer, as well as the history of literature) poetry and prose pieces, manifestos, conceptual and experimental works.

Following Cone's notion, in *Phonations* I differentiate (1) the musical persona, represented by the total composer's voice, (2) the instrumental virtual persona, i.e. the composer's voice recorded on tape, whose role is to remember, and (3) the vocal persona, the avatar that represents the author, imitates the process of composing and *performs* the comments on recollections on tape. Here, Ana Gnjatović's vocal musical identity balances on the thin wire between extended vocal techniques and her own, personal, electronically mediated memory.