Singing beyond Hearing

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In recent years, music scholars have called for a holistic approach to vocality that accounts for singing as a physical, psychosensory, political, sociocultural, and relational experience, resisting the tendency in Western musical traditions and psychoanalytic thought to treat the voice as an abstraction. Disability can augment this discourse on vocality by exposing certain “aesthetic presuppositions” (Tobin Siebers) and “conformational standards” (Blake Howe and Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, above) relating to the singing voice that often invalidate bodily difference. In particular, the physical experiences of deafness in conjunction with the linguistic customs of American Deaf culture offer a unique perspective on singing: deafness can unsettle the precondition of vocalized sound in sung vocal production, the physical origins and contours of the singing voice, and the expressive divisions between nonverbal vocal utterance, speech, and song. Ultimately, deafness can en-gender new and unexpected types of singing within a disability aesthetics that questions the very sonic basis for music. To illustrate this I examine Deaf sound artist Christine Sun Kim’s Face Opera II (2013), a multi-act performance art piece written for nine prelingually deaf performers. Kim and her collaborators defy the customary coupling of singing with audibility, and temporarily sever the related associations between the voice and vocal cords in order to “sing” using silent facial expressions belonging to the American Sign Language (ASL) lexicon. Kim’s opera further interrogates the legacy of voice in American Deaf culture by highlighting the slippage between aestheticized and pathologized vocal sounds.

Whether in her whimsical mixed-media creations, her austere sound installations, or her interactive performance art pieces, Kim engages her Deaf identity ultimately to reclaim “ownership” of sound from the hearing world, often unsettling her hearing audiences by integrating obscure insider cues from Deaf culture. Like many in the Deaf community, Kim communicates primarily in ASL, deliberately refraining from “voicing,” an act that risks affirming oralist paternalism and the enduring associations between vocal

44. Eidsheim, “Sensing Voice” and Sensing Sound; Meizel, “Powerful Voice.” I am forever indebted to Christine Sun Kim for engaging with me in a fruitful dialogue about Face Opera II. Our exchange culminated in a cowritten set of performance notes containing Kim’s reflections on the conception and performance of Face Opera II, to which I refer throughout this essay.

45. Siebers, Disability Aesthetics, 20.

46. In keeping with written convention I use the term “Deaf” with an uppercase “D” to signal a person’s identification with the linguistic customs and minority politics of Deaf culture—a diverse community of people united by the use of sign languages—and the term “deaf” with a lowercase “d” when referring to the audiological condition of hearing loss and/or people who do not identify with Deaf culture.

47. Kim, in Selby, “Todd Selby.”
utterance and selfhood in Western metaphysical thought, discourses that have historically undermined the legitimacy of sign language.48 In ASL the voice manifests across a visual-spatial plane rather than an acoustical one: it is a language executed through a simultaneity of manual signs (i.e., hand shapes) and specific facial expressions, mouth shapes, and precise head, shoulder, and body movements called “non-manual signals” (NMS). The “voice” is thus a central theme of Kim’s practice: she explores its many complex linguistic, symbolic, and musical constructions, only to rewrite drastically the able-bodied norms on which they are commonly founded.

From a Deaf perspective, the singing voice is a uniquely complex form of expression, hinging on the fraught status of music within this community as well as on the ambiguous relationship between “voicing” and song. To be sure, there exists a long and rich tradition of music making within the American Deaf community, and the recent scholarship of Anabel Maler, Joseph Straus, and Jeannette Jones has begun to reverse the assumption that deafness necessarily precludes musical engagement and expression. Many d/Deaf people engage with music through visual, tactile, and kinesthetic means as an alternative to “normal” hearing.49 Yet there are also many d/Deaf people for whom music is unenjoyable, irrelevant, or fundamentally at odds with the primacy of vision in Deaf culture.50 The singing voice also embodies a unique expressive paradox as it relates to the political dimensions of voice in Deaf culture: in its distinctness from speech it escapes some of the aforementioned problems associated with “voicing,” yet as a form of vocalized utterance it arguably aligns with oralist ideals, whether as texted or nonverbal singing. Finally, there are certain musical conventions, or “conformational standards,” that might seem incongruous with d/Deaf singing—especially intonation. Although certain popular and avant-garde musics welcome and even cultivate out-of-tune singing as part of a larger aesthetic tradition of vocal affect, “correct” intonation is a basic technical requirement and aesthetic tenet of classical singing.51 Profoundly deaf professional opera singer Janine Roebuck recounts that as her hearing loss progressed she encountered increasing discrimination within the music industry to this effect; she was “petrified of singing out of tune,” especially following her music professor’s grim prognosis “Sing while you can . . . because you’ll never have a career in

48. Padden and Humphries, Inside Deaf Culture; Bauman, “Introduction” and “Listening to Phonocentrism.”
50. Simpson, “Music for People”; Friedner and Helmreich, “Sound Studies.” Friedner and Helmreich note further that the long-standing visual imperative of both Deaf culture and Deaf studies often constructs hearing/sound and seeing/sight as discrete, opposing modalities, a view that sometimes undermines the validity of d/Deaf sonic and musical experiences.
music.” The critical reception of deaf American jazz singer Mandy Harvey likewise evinces a preoccupation with pitch accuracy. One headline in the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed, “Colorado Jazz Singer Hits the Right Notes, Even Though She Can’t Hear Them.”

These foregoing contradictions take center stage in *Face Opera II*. The titular reference to opera is misleading, since the piece does not have characters, a narrative, or conventional vocalized singing. Instead Kim adopts the “opera format to show the visual and grammatical aspects of American Sign Language (ASL) and how most of its content is conveyed through the face. It is a way for me to examine non signers’ language preferences and to encourage [the audience] to ‘hear’ by looking at those choir singers’ moving faces.” Throughout acts 1–4 Kim and her eight collaborators alternate between director, conductor, and chorus roles, deploying a series of ASL facial expressions—without their accompanying manual hand shapes—as a mode of singing. Kim’s motivation for isolating and aestheticizing the facial dimensions of ASL stems from their distinct expressive function in sign language: facial expressions (or NMS) are indispensable to linguistic nuance because they contextualize hand shapes, elucidate ASL grammar, and color the individual signer’s personal voice. The first act, “Open Eights,” stages facial expressions that might be used to elucidate a series of unrelated concepts that could hypothetically be signed using the “open eight” hand shape, hence the act’s title. Reading from an English transcription (or gloss) of the ASL concepts, the conductor leads with her unique facial interpretations. The chorus members then respond with coordinated and precisely timed facial gestures, keeping their hands stuffed firmly into their pockets. (See Figure 1.) The gloss contains successions of closely related sentiments, such as the consecutive sequencing of “early,” “obsessed,” and “sick,” as well as many striking and often humorous juxtapositions, including the direct progression from “depressed” to “masturbate.”

Overall, the singers’ facial expressions are more animated than those typical of ASL. Kim notes that one of her Deaf friends suggested that such dramatic overemphasis was insulting to Deaf signers, as it potentially reinforces misconceptions about the ostensibly “primitive” nature of sign language. She clarifies her motivations: “this [facial exaggeration] is one of the ways expression is communicated in opera,” and “I didn’t trust the hearing audience enough to be able to properly read our ‘normal’ faces.” Though her reasoning stems in part from a place of mistrust, it also evinces a desire to

52. Roebuck, “I Am a Deaf Opera Singer.” To mitigate this discrimination and to supplement her own accommodations, Roebuck eventually opted to wear hearing aids.
53. Deam, “Colorado Jazz Singer.”
54. Kim, in Roffino, “Emerging.”
56. Kim, in Kim and Holmes, “Performance Notes.”
57. Ibid.
establish common ground with her hearing audience; she reveals for the viewer that facial expression and bodily movement together coincide in phonetic, visual-spatial, and musical-linguistic systems, helping to articulate and stabilize meaning. Moreover, in likening the heightened emotional display in her piece to that characteristic of opera, Kim distinguishes it from regular poetic utterance and also highlights the fact that facial expressions already serve a crucial expressive function in conventional vocalized singing.

If singing is customarily understood as a heightened, musicalized utterance beginning at and emanating from the vocal folds (eventually incorporating bodily gesture to service its expression), the silent, gestural singing that Kim proposes in *Face Opera II* seems implausible. Maler’s scholarship on song signing demonstrates that the alteration of certain components of ASL, when signed alongside a preexisting song, can convey specific musical qualities such as rhythm, pitch, and register. She provocatively asks whether gestures can “in fact communicate musical concepts independently of sound?” Kim’s assertion is even more radical: she suggests that stylized, performative gesture informed by but divorced from its manual linguistic complement can communicate a sense of musicality that is actually independent of any preexisting

A sonic referent; Kim’s is a musicality that exists along an embodied visual-spatial plane rather than an aural one. As Nina Eidsheim beautifully contends, “the ontology of singing is masked by our fetishization of sound. . . . The singing body extends beyond that which we conventionally recognize as the vocal instrument.” Eidsheim thus explores what she dubs the “internal corporeal choreography” of voice, a host of often overlooked inner micro-physiological activities that anticipate, engender, and constitute the singing voice before it is filtered through the vocal cords (the heartbeat, the breath, the movements of the stomach, etc.). Similarly, Kim enriches dominant ideologies of voice, but through an attention to external corporeal choreographies with the ultimate goal of releasing the singing voice from its interdependence with sound and the vocal cords. By subverting the customary associations between hearing and music, the singers displace the singing voice from its assumed origin in the vocal tract (or even simply inside the body) to initiate and locate vocal expressivity elsewhere on the body, suggesting that singing does not require vocalized sound as a fundamental precondition for its existence. Kim thus not only draws attention to the expressive function of bodily gesture in conventional singing, but also implores her audience to consider the underlying musicality of ASL facial expressions by listening through visual-spatial attentiveness; this is an exquisite realization of a disability aesthetics in which disability at once underlines and transcends aesthetic presuppositions.

The opera’s style of execution changes dramatically in act 5, when the foregoing “silence” gives way to a moment of deliberate sonic rupture in which the singers use their audible voices for the first and only time in the performance: the conductor signs purposefully without facial expressions, leading the chorus in a story from Deaf folklore (see Figure 2). In the absence of NMS to contextualize the meaning of the conductor’s signs, an intermediary supplements the signing with his own improvised facial expressions and vocalizations, projecting his voice through a microphone. The singers assemble in a line facing the intermediary, laying their right hands on one another’s backs to gauge the volume of their neighbor’s voice as it vibrates along the spine, while simultaneously observing the intermediary’s mouth shapes. They integrate this information to establish their own individual voices in a chain of sonic transmission. Their nonverbal vocalizations occur in fits and starts, ranging from abrupt, guttural, intoned noises to sustained howls and yells. These sounds straddle the boundaries between speech and song, recalling the practice of extended vocal techniques.

In her analysis of Trevor Wishart’s Red Bird in this colloquy, Jennifer Iverson asserts that such seemingly abject vocal sounds unsettle listeners’ subject positions, inviting them to contemplate unfamiliar embodiments.

59. Eidsheim, Sensing Sound, 111.
60. Ibid.
Kim’s vocalizations are also transgressive, albeit to a different end: here she upends the sonic contours of normative vocal beauty as well as the persistent pathologization of deaf vocal utterance. This passage of Kim’s opera at once recalls and inverts the performative dimensions of a speech therapy session—but, crucially, without the dramatic overstatement of previous acts. Speech-language pathology is a type of standardized clinical therapy that uses oral methods to treat many different types of speech disfluencies and disorders, a discipline with which many prelingually deaf people (including Kim herself) are intimately familiar, particularly if they were born to hearing parents.61 The arduous repetition and phonation exercises that speech therapy entails can prove demoralizing and alienating for certain deaf patients.62 Indeed, two of the performers in Face Opera II refused to use their voices on account of the complexities of “voicing” in Deaf culture. “They weren’t comfortable with the idea of uttering or vocalizing something that would automatically get away from their bodies and be heard by the [hearing] audience,” notes Kim.63 But for those performers willing to sing using vocal utterance, the experience offered a special opportunity to define and reclaim an audible singing voice for themselves. Kim elaborates: “Performing this act was an

61. Fava, Clinical Linguistics. Speech pathology is often integrated into oralist school curricula.
62. Neisser, Other Side of Silence.
63. Kim, in Kim and Holmes, “Performance Notes.” See also Bauman, “Introduction” and “Listening to Phonocentrism.”
amazing experience because we felt it went against what we had been taught but [was] liberating at the same time.”64 In this sense Kim and her willing collaborators defy Deaf custom, while also resisting oralist control, effectively “reclaiming ownership over sound” by foregrounding vocalizations otherwise disqualified from aesthetic signification. Siebers’s provocations regarding the aesthetic value of sickness in modern art (“What would it mean to call an artwork sick without it being a disqualification?”)65 are here firmly in place: although such “extraneous,” “abject” vocalizations perhaps aurally signal disability within the context of speech therapy, here they sound as valid forms of musical expression constituting singing.

Ultimately, the intersections of singing and deafness index a range of deaf musical experiences, the complex legacy of voice in contemporary American Deaf culture, as well as specific musical anxieties that work against deaf singing. Face Opera II negotiates these dimensions of voice, achieving a progressive disability aesthetics of (post)modernist music in which silent (semantic) facial gesture intervenes in, informs, and even wholly constitutes the expressive dimensions of the singing voice; in which vocalized sounds customarily signaling bodily excess translate into aesthetic beauty; and in which listening to the voice engages and integrates a host of sensory modalities beyond mere hearing. Kim shows that singing already anticipates and encompasses the many slippages between speech and song, sound and silence, utterance and gesture, hearing and deafness, ability and disability. As disability continues to play a pivotal role in shaping the emerging interdisciplinary discourse on vocality, it is my hope that such radical performances will embolden us to listen and sing anew.

Music, Autism, and Disability Aesthetics

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In Disability Aesthetics, Tobin Siebers calls for “a radical rethinking of the relationship between aesthetics, disqualification, and oppression, one in which the systemic oppression of disabled people would fail, and fail precisely because it could no longer be based on human appearances, features, and conditions deemed inferior.”66 In this essay I consider the “conditions” dimension of Siebers’s proposition, focusing specifically on autism spectrum conditions, or ASCs (a preferred designation to autism spectrum disorders—ASDs). My point of departure is the following definition of my

65. Siebers, Disability Aesthetics, 56.
66. Ibid.