

A MUSICAL NOTE

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La Chambre claire is not simply the «note» on photography suggested by its subtitle. Appearing less than a month before Barthes's death in March 1980, the book is less a critical study («on» photography) than a set of fragments freely mixing random speculation on the photographic image with a more personal narrative concerning the death of his mother in the fall of 1977. Shortly thereafter, Barthes found some old photographs and the basis for his extended meditation on the appeal of certain photographs which create an illusion of stasis and seemingly remove a single moment from the movement of a uniform and linear temporality. Behind (or within) the mood of love and grieving that animates the photographic inquiry, Barthes encounters a photo of his mother, taken in a Winter Garden in 1898 when she was 5 years old. He writes:

Furthermore (because I seek to state this truth), the photograph of the Winter Garden was for me like the last music Schumann wrote before dying, which corresponds both to the being of my mother and to the sorrow I feel at her death; this feeling I can state only by an infinite sequence of adjectives, which I reduce, persuaded that the photograph brings together all the possible predicates which made up my mother's being and, inversely, whose suppression or partial alteration had sent me to photos, which phenomenology would term «non-descript» objects, were only analogues, calling forth only her identity, not her truth; but the photo in the Winter Garden was essential, accomplishing for me, ideally [*utopiquement*] the impossible science of the unique being.¹

While he refuses for obvious reasons to reduce his mother to an object or function formulated within a critical project indifferent to her singularity, Barthes is nonetheless drawn to the photo as he is to the Schumann piece for the affective responses which they elicit from him. As they appear in the above passage, photography and music are not merely artistic languages to be approached within a semiology such as that outlined by Saussure in the *Cours de linguistique générale*. And although Barthes is often cast as a practitioner and supporter of structural analysis, the final stages in his critical evolution—from the 1973 *Plaisir du texte* through *La Chambre claire*—recast (or «reinscribe») any theoretical concerns within a more introspective meditation on the personal values on which critical activity is predicated.

Rather than pursue his revised project as a straightforward critical discourse, Barthes has tended increasingly to collapse standard distinctions between theory and practice in favor of a fragmentary writing which dramatizes theory by an active process of figuration. When, for example, he mixes critical and narrative elements to sketch the *plaisir/jouissance* binary in *Le Plaisir du texte*, the various gaps or breaks between individual fragments are set off by a more substantive discontinuity of expression and utterance. And while it is certainly possible to classify and analyze such breaks as instances of anacoluthon, asyndeton, or tmesis, to do so is to neglect the value of figuration and its textual function beyond concerns of theory. When, in *La Chambre claire*, Barthes invokes Schumann's *Chant de l'aube*, he does so less to posit an analogous similarity than in terms of a process of expressivity which he links to voice and body. In the notes which follow, I want to explore the nature and function of voice and musicality as they appear in texts written since 1970.

For an issue of *La Musique en jeu* dealing with psychoanalysis, Barthes contended with the problem of how to analyze music via linguistic categories which seemingly limit responses to the adjective as emotive predicate, thereby implying that music is either predicable or ineffable. As part of an ongoing inquiry into the function of the imaginary in music, Barthes's comments try to overcome the bind of the predicable/ineffable binary in the hopes of specifying the applications and limits of categories drawn from linguistics in the study of other signifying systems. He thus proposes an alternative model involving musical text and voice in a dual production of meaning which he sees within a more general

symbolic process:

Something is there, manifest and stubborn (one hears only *that*), beyond (or before) the meaning of the words, their form (litany), the melisma, and even the style of execution: something which is directly the cantor's body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages, from deep down in the Slavonic language, as though a single skin lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings. The voice is not personal; it expresses nothing of the cantor, of his soul; it is not original (all Russian cantors have roughly the same voice), and at the same time it is individual; it has us hear a body which has no civil identity, no personality, but which is nevertheless a separate body.²

Beyond the various codes of semantic, logical, and rhetorical functions, the irreducible presence referred to is that of the body and what Barthes terms «le grain de la voix.» This «grain» is not synonymous with vocal tone or timbre; instead, it designates the materiality of the wider process of corporeal «speaking» or movement which Barthes associates with figuration. Borrowing from the vocabulary of Julia Kristeva, Barthes coins the expressions *pheno-song* and *geno-song* in order to mark the differences in vocal artistry between Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Charles Panzera, lamenting in the former the absence of corporeal diction which produces the quality of grain he admires in Panzera's singing: «With FD, I seem only to hear the lungs, never the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose» («Grain,» p. 183).

The grain of the voice is not, however, fully accessible by listening, not unless it forces the listener into the more active role of an operator who makes what Barthes refers to in another text as *musica practica*. Transposing this time from his own critical vocabulary in *S/Z*, Barthes reinvokes the differences between readerly and writerly texts (*texte lisible* and *texte scriptible*, respectively) in order to describe a musicality akin to the figuration of body images he had noted in *S/Z* as the symbolic code and subsequently integrated within his own writings in *Le Plaisir du texte*, *Roland Barthes*, and *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Going beyond vocal music, Barthes cites compositions for the piano by Beethoven and Schumann and posits the specificity of two

musics—one of listening, the other of playing—each with its own history, erotics, sociology, and aesthetics. He argues that the standard histories of music have imposed a definitive image of «the Romantic Beethoven» as a composer of complex structural features. As a result, they have neglected the physicality of playing which, for Barthes, persists only in the isolated *amateur* who holds no claim to the technical competence presumably required to interpret and execute the music correctly. Against this doctrine of mastery and the illusion of plenitude which it confers on the expert, Barthes pits the *amateur* who plays lovingly and whose lack of expertise heightens the physicality of performance.

The *amateur* who sits with a Beethoven score does not simply read it or receive it passively, but structures, displaces, assembles, and combines its parts in what amounts to a process of rewriting such as that imposed by modern («writerly») texts in *Le Plaisir du texte*: «Just as the reading of the modern text (such as it may be postulated) consists not in receiving, in knowing or in feeling that text, but in writing it anew, in crossing its writing with a fresh inscription, so too this reading Beethoven is to operate his music, to draw it (it is willing to be drawn) into an unknown *praxis*.»³

The concept of *musica practica* is descriptive rather than analytic; Barthes makes no claims to serious musicology, but uses the concept instead to set the individual *amateur* against the expert on the basis of a more active and involved performance in which the reassuring corporeal totality animated by idealist values of «soul» or «heart» is distinguished from an open and unprivileged interplay between tongue, hands, lips, nose, and legs. The «grain» of the voice is thus not at all the condensation via synecdoche of a unified whole, but the movements of various parts of the body toward figuration and utterance, what Emile Benveniste terms *signifiance*. The convergence of the «grain» of the voice and *musica practica* specifies the differences between conventional voice and a wider production of meaning which Barthes brings to the reading of music as *musica practica* in view of figuration and its derived corporeal imagery.⁴ As a result, voice is overdetermined, both irreducible presence of the body and figure of the process of *signifiance* whose function is evoked for Barthes in the curious musical notation of *quasi parlando*. Which brings us back—almost full circle—to *La Chambre claire*, the photo of the Winter Garden, and Schumann's final compositions: «*Quasi parlando* (I take the indication from a *Bagatelle* by Beethoven): it is the movement of

the body *which is going to speak*. This *quasi parlando* rules an enormous share of Schumann's work: it extends far beyond vocal works (which can, ironically, have nothing at all to do with it); the instrument (the piano) speaks without meaning [*«parle sans rien dire»*] in the manner of a mute who has his face express all the inarticulable power of the word.»⁵

The expression *quasi parlando* begs pointedly the question of metaphoric equivalence which is stated less openly in the «grain» of the voice and *musica practica*. The piece is to be played *as if* spoken, with the phenomenon of voice not at all limited to vocality, less a discrete object linked to a reduced or condensed «self» than a singing quality—«*Comme cela chante!*» This singing quality also transcends the convention of vocal 'families' in which bass, tenor, alto, and soprano designate the respective figures of father, son, mother, and daughter. Noting the break-up of this oedipalized voice in romantic song, Barthes proposes a figure of singing with multiple functions and identities, a figure which he links to romantic (passionate) love and the corporeal expressivity illustrated in the narrating subject of his subsequent *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*: «It is precisely these four 'familial' voices which Romantic song, in a sense, *forgets*: it does not consider the sexual marks of the voice, for the same song can be sung as well by a man as by a woman; no vocal 'family,» nothing but a human subject, *unisex*, it might be said, to the degree that it is in love: for love—passionate love, romantic love—accepts neither sexual difference nor social roles.»⁶

The implied body of romantic song—«body of romantic singing» evokes more directly the active process of *signifiante* beyond the historical phenomenon—is described by Barthes is that of a loss. Whether as singer or listener, the common space of romantic song posits an operator—beneath, above, or beyond the text or melodic line—who sings the loss of totality brought on by the absence symbolized in an image of the other which, for Barthes, is asocial and internalized: «I address myself inwardly to an Image: image of the loved one in which I lose myself and which sends back to me my own image, abandoned. The song presupposes a rigorous interlocation, but this interlocation is imaginary, enclosed within my deepest intimacy» («*Le Chant romantique,*» p. 167). What *speaks* in this interlocation—and what illustrates the diction beyond vocality which Barthes also finds in Schumann's *Kreisleriana*—is the declaration of irreparable loss and absence

whose concomitant images of a broken and incomplete self serve as the uncanny double of a former whole. Something akin to Lacan's mirror stage enters here, although Barthes appears less concerned with a decisive misapprehension than with an irreparable loss and its recurrent invocation in the phantasm—the German term for these compositions is *Phantasieren*—described as the incandescent kernel of the *lieder* by Schubert and Schumann.

Not merely the expressions of feelings which posit a central and complete source or origin, the *lieder* by Schubert and Schumann point to a corporeal expressivity of loss whose presence in the song cycles («singing cycles» is again a felicitous alternative) Barthes locates outside musicology and closer to the «grain» and *signifiante* noted earlier: «Even the song cycles recount no kind of love story, but only a trip whose every moment is turned back on itself, blind, closed to all general meaning, to any idea of destiny or spiritual transcendence: in sum, a pure wandering, a becoming without end: time to the degree that, but singly and infinitely, it recommences («Le Chant romantique,» p. 168).

To return to the opening passage quoted from *La Chambre claire*, the truth sought in the photograph of the mother in the Winter Garden—present, heard, perhaps even visible in the values of brilliance which link the diffuse light of the Winter Garden to the dawn in the Schumann piece—is that of a death to come. The affective impact of the photo is akin to [*s'accorde à*] that of the *Chant de l'aube* in the sense that both evoke a dramatic perspective which Barthes terms catastrophic and which appears to be a variant of what is commonly referred to as dramatic irony. When Barthes sees the image of his mother or «operates» the Schumann piece as player or listener, he asserts a temporal advantage over the fate of what will have occurred—he goes so far as to specify the dramatic dimension of the *futur antérieur*—in the wake of the illusory stasis of the image. Knowing that his mother has died or that *Chant de l'aube* was composed shortly before Schumann's death, Barthes cannot stop himself from seeking the signs of future catastrophe, knowing well that this particular pursuit of signs can only serve to heighten his emotional involvement with the figures concerned. Several fragments later, Barthes writes that the Greeks believed that one entered death backwards, with the past somehow ahead. The truth which Barthes seeks in the photograph—and which sings in Schumann's *Chant de l'aube*—is the recognition of loss and its irreversibility.

That Barthes's own death should follow so closely that of his mother is a final irony which his notes on photography and figures of musicality only sharpen. Once involved in a personal inquiry into the force of loss on what Barthes describes as the materialist subject, it is now the cruel truth of *La Chambre claire*, that, like the first-person narrator of Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, each of us nurtures the seeds of our own death to come. Barthes never wrote the «true» novel he sought to write in the manner of Proust's *Recherche*. But, as Susan Sontag notes in a recent tribute, his most successful books—*Roland Barthes* and *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*—follow the tradition of *Malte Laurids Brigge* by crossbreeding fiction, essay, and autobiography.⁷ The same holds true for *La Chambre claire*, with Rilke again the pertinent point of departure. As Maurice Blanchot writes, Rilke affirms that death alone is the authentic yea-sayer for those who accept life as a trial to be lived through toward its outcome: «But this only happens to those who are able to say, even though saying is saying, and the essential word only in this absolute Yes in which the word lets the intimacy of death speak. Thus, there is a secret identity between dying and singing, between the transmutation of the invisible by the invisible which is death and the song within which that transmutation occurs.»⁸ The «singing» of loss in *La Chambre claire* projects finally onto the reader, as a final musical note in the movement of figuration which remains the primal message of Barthes's last writings.

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil «Cahiers du cinéma,» 1980), p. 110.
2. Barthes, «The Grain of the Voice,» *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 181-82.
3. «Musica Practica,» *Image, Music, Text*, p. 153.
4. Although there is no evidence of a polemic attitude on the part of Barthes, the function of voice and its relation to writing are in marked contrast to positions taken by Derrida in *De la grammatologie*. A position somewhat closer to that of Barthes can be found in Guy Rosolato's «La Voix,» in his *Essais sur le symbolique* (Paris:

Gallimard, 1969), pp. 287-306.

5. «Rasch,» in *Langue, discours, société: Hommage à Emile Benveniste*, ed. Julia Kristeva, Jacques—Alain Miller, and Nicolas Ruwet (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 223. The *quasi parlando* notation makes for a curious contrast with the eccentricities of attempts by the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould to achieve a dry and detached sound seemingly removed from the «juicier» *rubato* quality referred to by Barthes. That Gould is notorious for humming or singing along with his playing only adds to the intricacies of the comparison.

6. «Le Chant romantique,» *Gramma*, No. 5 (1976), p. 165.

7. Susan Sontag, «Remembering Barthes,» *Under The Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980), p. 175. Barthes includes the French translation of Sontag's *On Photography* in the list of sources at the end of *La Chambre claire*.

8. Maurice Blanchot, «Transmutation de la mort,» *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard «Idées,» 1968), pp. 194-95.