

Instruments As Voices – Voices As Instruments**Jeremy Montagu**

When anybody is learning to play a musical instrument in our own culture of Western music, what they are told more often than almost anything else is sing – make the instrument sing. I don't know how true this is for other cultures, but it's certainly true for ours, and it is normal instrumental practice, to sing, on practically every instrument. It was true for my main study as a conductor – my first teacher taught me to 'sing down the stick', and this I have tried to teach all my own pupils. This, too, is what we are indicating with the vibrating left hand – we are trying to make the orchestra sing.

Singing **with** an instrument was popular in the seventeenth century; Mersenne illustrates a *flûte eunuque* and examples were made for jazz players in the 1920s. The *mirliton* is a device which is popular with children both home-made and shop-bought as comb-and-paper and kazoo, and the kazoo band was a common sight in our streets in the years of the Great Depression.

The use of the kazoo is not confined to our own culture. Voice changers such as the frame drum when sung into are known in a number of areas and 'voice' changers are used not only with the voice but also with instruments, though nobody has yet, so far as I know, adopted the term 'instrument changers'. Many instruments in Africa have added buzzers. Some African drums have miniature drums, a form of kazoo, added as buzzers, as do all African resonated xylophones, and this is found not only in Africa – the flute in China has a built-in kazoo.

Sometimes the function of the buzzer is to sweeten the sound, but sometimes it is to disguise the instrument (in the case of the European side drum, the snare is there to disguise its pitch which would otherwise be pervasive and upsetting). Disguise can be important – to disguise the instrument – to disguise the voice – even to disguise the personality or the humanity. This is why so many African masks have a buzzer built in or used by the masker.

Curt Sachs suggested that the origin of the conch trumpet was its use as a voice changer – a resonance chamber used to change the voice of the shaman into that of the spirit; only by accident, he claimed, was it discovered that it could be blown as an instrument. A more subtle use of a voice changer is the use of vowel formants with an instrument instead of speaking. The jews harp is widely used for love music and the player can speak through the music. Similarly in Africa the player can speak with the musical bow. Even more simply, the voice,

for example in Mongolia, as Lajos Vargyas first revealed to most of us, and as our friend Trần Quang Hai has taught many of us since, the voice alone can substitute for the jews harp in its substitution for the voice!

The Swingle Singers were not the first to sing instrumental music. There is much evidence for mediæval untexted dance songs, dance music sung with nonsense syllables instead of played. Most languages have ‘nonsense’ songs – fal-lal-la is only one example. Music was taught this way, too. Most of the renaissance wind instrument tutors use syllabics to teach tonguing – *tirra lirra* was not just poetic licence, this is how players learned to double tongue. In England drummers play a flam or a drag. In India tabla players similarly use syllabics – they learn to speak a rhythm before they play it. Our orchestral conductors use syllabics to demonstrate phrasing, for instance what we call ‘two in & two out’, two slurred, two with separate bows.

To return to the conch, Raymond Clausen taught me some of the Maki signal code used on Malekula though I must confess to having forgotten what grade of pig each call signified. The use of hand-stopping on Malekula marks a significant difference from the New Guinea rhythmic code reported by Beaver and Chinnery in *MAN*, just as African drum language, which can be ‘spoken’ on any instrument capable of two or three notes, differs from Morse. The drum, and the mouthbow, are not the only African instruments that speak. The double bell is used to ‘shout’ the Emir’s praises among the Hausa and so is the long trumpet *kakaki*.

Not all voices carry verbal meaning – sometimes a voice just indicates a presence. A well-known and often-reported example from New Guinea is the use of the bull roarer as the ‘voice of the ancestors’. The bull roarer is not alone as a voice; its small cousin, the *snörra* or buzzing disc is also found, in some cultures still, as a spirit voice. The bull roarer is used not only Papua New Guinea; it is or was used almost all over the world. In Ancient Greece it was the *rhombos*, the voice of Zeus, the god of thunder.

Instrumental voices are not only imitative. They are also symbolic. We are approaching the Jewish *yamim noraim*, the Days of Awe. Next Tuesday is Rosh haShanah when in every synagogue the shofar will be blown. According to Moses Maimonides, the Rambam, what the calls of shofar say, is: “Awake you sleepers from your sleep, you slumberers from your slumber. Search your deeds and return in repentance. Remember your Creator ... Look to your souls and better your ways and your actions. Let everyone abandon his evil way and his wicked thoughts.”

For most Instrumental Voices there is always a reason. What the voice says is often a secret, one that is only fully understood by the initiate, by those within the cultural group. It is only they who know what the voice is saying. Words are too overt, too open. An instrument can be the true voice.

A paper given somewhere not recorded in the autumn of 2005.

© Jeremy Montagu, 2017