





The problem starts in how to make sounds out of words. My attention shifted strongly about thirty years ago to a barely recognized resolve to get words into music in a way that pleased me.

The musical fact was that I liked all kinds of new music that was just instrumental, but when I heard the use of words in my own work or other work I didn't like it much.

This way of saying it makes the feeling sound more hostile than it was. I am just trying to explain how I discovered this need in myself, why the sudden shift was "strong" and the resolve "barely recognized" at the same time, and why I have not been able since to let go.

I haven't written very many purely instrumental works in the past twenty years, some instrumental works have been recorded that were intended to be heard in the presence of voices, but were not. (They were composed to be able to stand alone, as a kind of code, but that is hard to explain.)

The technical problem, as every composer knows, is that as a result of electronic amplification the sound of speech has gotten much faster.

That is, we are able to get to the point of a sound/word much quicker than in the past and we are increasingly impatient with the tempo of meaning that was designed to be heard in huge or small acoustical chambers.

The good side is that the sound of speech lends itself to an enormous range of speeds and, even better, almost everybody speaks (as opposed to playing the flute, for instance), so we are definitely deeply into the vernacular.

I am trying to not make a distinction yet between "speech" and "singing."

The practical result is that now, increasingly, we are able to "teach" ourselves and other people to make sounds out of words that are very exciting musically and that we don't have a way of writing down on paper.

I read about thirty years ago in the newspaper that Bell Labs had officially given up on the possibility of speech synthesis. Research was being discontinued for the time being.

Even if this news was a military-intelligence ploy (lie), one's first reaction was: well, it's about time (note that this is spoken sotto voce). Who needs talking machines, when there's so much to be said among humans and there is so little time.

So, let's just think of speech, for the moment, as very fast singing. Or, more generally, very fast

music. Let us appreciate the sound of the flute for its natural speed, the sound of the piano for its natural speed, the sound of the synthesizer, etcetera. And the sound of speech for its natural speed.

And imagine hearing that sound just-as-sound, divorceable from meaning, but more agreeable and thrilling when not divorced from meaning. Forgive for a moment whether that sound can reach the heights of late Beethoven or Bud Powell.

Be generous. Just think of the sound of "speech" in its abundant manifestations and be content that the pleasure of hearing those sounds has been given to you.

Then examine the "speech" carefully with your ears — as though you were a composer of music — and notice the great similarities to every one of the formal aspects of music that we so cherish: its variety of pitch, inflection, dynamic range, information rate and everything else.

Note, too, that in speech you think in the language of music (e.g., you are conscious of, for instance, "dialect", or how the sounds differ from what you expected.) There are so many examples that every choice is a truism: The kid on the street corner with the box is listening to something that he obviously really appreciates (he dances, smiles and sings along — every sign of a real and deep musical experience) and you can't understand a word. But the music is nice.

You talk to somebody from another dialect and you can't keep your mind away from the pure musicality. A madman on the street rants to himself and you experience music.

Finally, you start hearing yourself. Like the person who must figure out what he/she looks like in motion in order to become a dancer, you have become a musician.

Sorry, I have really gotten into explaining too much of this idea.

The transformation of attention that I spoke of before can come from any direction, of course. It can occur to humorists, crackpots, very serious composers. It cannot occur to people who have a tin-ear.

At the risk of boring even myself and not being able to finish I have to tell an anecdote in order to give credit where credit is due.

The transformation occurred to me because I found myself for a period of about twelve years in the presence of an amazing group of people who

could really talk: the infamous and now legendary ONCE Group.

It might have happened to me anyway, but histo-rically it didn't. Between the years of 1957 and 1969 — the concentrated period — we talked every day and every night in various combinations for many, many hours.

Gordon Mumma, Jackie Mumma, Mary Ashley, Anne Wehrer, George Manupelli, Betty Johnson, Harold Borkin, Milton Cohen, Joseph Wehrer, Cynthia Liddell, Nick Bertoni, "Blue" Gene Tyranny and a bunch of other people who either had less stamina or just had something better to do.

And I should mention, among the great ones who didn't live nearby but who were cherished as guests, Alvin Lucier and Mary Lucier in particular.

I could hardly exaggerate the obsession with talking and what developed as a virtuosity that everybody in the group became conscious of. I didn't cause it. It just happened in front of my ears and I was there.

Luckily, unlike many bands that break up after the first successful concert (or rehearsal) because everybody in the band thinks that he/she alone got the key and something has to be done about it quick, nobody in this group was particularly interested in exploiting the mutual musical experience, because everybody had something else more important to do.

So, it was pure fun. And, as one result of the pure fun, the on-going of it became extremely sophisticated.

The ONCE Group could do solos of any length, the most amazing dialogues, and finally, preferably, all at the same time.

Because few of them were affected by musicalism as a profession, there were incredibly few affectations of style. (Joe Wehrer, for a while, tried a kind of stuttering, but everybody made so much fun of that bad idea that he stopped.)

The emphasis was on ensemble sound and, ultimately, on speed. The whole thing sounds sort of sentimental now to think of it, but in truth I have found very few people since (Bill Farley, Sam Ashley, Jacqueline Humbert come to mind) who have thrilled me so much with the sound they make when they talk. It sounds like singing to me. (And, of course, Jacquie and Sam sing, too.)

A transitional anecdote is that one day I talked to Anne Wehrer for fourteen hours straight. Mostly she talked and I listened.

I noticed that at around the seventh hour she repeated verbatim a very long idea that she had said hours earlier. This is a transition in that what developed in the ONCE Group technique could easily reproduce what might be called "ranting," but without any of the fear that comes when you suspect that the person you are listening to is out of control.

The legendary ONCE Group learned to make the sound of "ranting" simply as one part of a huge vocabulary of sounds (and, a huge repertory of performance pieces.)

Eventually, we broke up. I'm not sure what the other people in the group took from that experience (except the joy). But for me as a musician I was permanently changed. I had finally found what music is for me.

I rested for a few years; I really needed it. And then I realized that I was a new man.

And like the new man in the old joke about the man who stopped drinking and became a new man only to discover that the new man wanted a drink, I picked it up right from where they had left it off. I didn't have the ONCE Group anymore, but I had the idea.

Jump ahead in time to what's been going on in the last few years: the "real" operas. With a plot ("such as it is": thank you, Mr. Rockwell, and bless you, too.)

Two hours a year for the last twenty-two years on average (22?), and I'm just beginning to get the hang of it. I age, but I don't grow up. Too bad.

I got to the technique of these pieces through a fascination with involuntary speech. I mean, specifically, the speech of people who are, for worldly purposes, out of control and doing it only for themselves.

It happens to all of us (I think) some of the time and to some of us all of the time. It is associated with sickness and real suffering, and I don't mean to romanticize those parts of the pheno-menon, but musically it can transcend sickness and suffering, and formally it is astounding.

I watched the tendency in myself. I studied. I watched it in other people. I thought about it as music, thanks to what I learned from the ONCE Group. It is the one thing that the ONCE Group did not do, because it is impossible to fake. The ear is so untrickable in certain things.

There is an area in human behavior whose boundaries are clearer than I would have

imagined. In this area speech and singing are inextricable.

You exit the area in one direction toward the simple goal of making sense. You exit in the other direction toward making music. In the academic study of music this area is acknowledged, but treated gingerly.

In the mythology of music as a sublime human activity the mysterious "area" is more highly and honestly regarded. Its importance is fully understood even if the mapping is not complete.

In involuntary speech the speaker is solely concerned with how effectively what is intended as meaning comes out as sound. This involves not only moving words around in their order, as in literature, but also moving sounds around, as in music.

In its tamest form we rehearse the "tone" of how the conversation is to begin, even as the telephone is ringing. In a more complicated form we rehearse a joke or an anecdote without any scheduled intention of sharing it with another person, as if simply to come to understand it better.

The plot thickens when we start explaining our motives to ourselves with an honesty that can never be shared with another person. In the extreme, we stop hiding this amazing urgency to make sounds. Then the sounds take you away.

A structural analysis of involuntary speech would produce a thick book that with a slight change of jargon could be mistaken for a book on music theory.

To take a simple example, in involuntary speech there are no rules about efficiency, no rules about wasting other people's time in repeating yourself. Repeating yourself is of the essence of the activity: to do it (often enough) until the effect has been accomplished. As in music.

Another part of involuntary speech, very important, is that the action and its motives are simultaneous. It is entirely unpremeditated. It cannot be rehearsed. It is without caution or discretion.

In involuntary speech we can all experience one of the deepest mysteries of music (and of great athletic achievements, coincidentally): the action that can be accomplished only at full speed, the action that is prepared in trying and trying again, but never realized except in execution, the action that can be understood only in retrospect, because total involvement of being is required and there is nothing left of us to stand aside and observe.

