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## Reviews and Reports

### JOAN LA BARBARA

#### KAREN JENSEN

This young American is a singer-composer who believes that the act of performing puts body and mind in a state unlike any other in human existence. She therefore combines the two roles at the same time, allowing one to influence the other. This approach is very different from that of the composer who has a performing knowledge of an instrument, and also different from many forms of improvisation where attention is focused upon how known musical materials are combined. For Joan La Barbara improvisation is a means of discovering new sounds and examining her responses to those sounds.

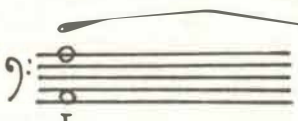
Other than the physical gestures of body language, voice was the original means of expression and until we reach a level of reasonably accurate telepathy it will remain the most intimate and sensitive. My work explores not only rediscovering the primitive part of the brain allowing for non-verbal communication, but also the intense affection we feel for the sound of the voice itself. Voice is the original instrument, the most timbrally flexible and the most universally appealing.<sup>1</sup>


As with many American performers her studies began at university. After earning a teaching degree she studied opera but soon became disenchanted with classical music and turned to jazz, where she found there was more emphasis on enjoyment than criticism. Interest in the avant-garde developed through her ability to alter her vocal timbre, and through the unlikely experience of imitating a Japanese housewife for a radio commercial she attracted the interest of Steve Reich. In Reich's *Drumming* (1971) her voice is used as a percussion instrument, and he demanded a similar imitative approach in *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ* (1973). After working with Philip Glass in much the same way (for example, blending with soprano sax and capturing vocally the brightness of the sound), La Barbara began writing her own music. Her early music was, in the words of the New York critic Tom Johnson, 'presented more in the spirit of investigation than as a work of art'.<sup>2</sup> *Voice Piece: One-Note Internal Resonance Investigation* (1974) is a 20-minute exploration of tone colour on one pitch. The pitch is chosen before each performance, according to the state of the vocal instrument at the time (La Barbara states that it is not otherwise important). She explains that she imagines the pitch 'as a solid object, like a ball which I focus or place, rolling it around into different resonance areas'.<sup>3</sup> In her performance at York during the 1979 SPNM Weekend she demonstrated this technique and achieved some remarkable effects. There were regular, short attacks, each different in quality and dynamic, as well as longer departures


into split-tone octave chant (also called 'Tibetan chant'), and reinforced harmonics. The split-tone technique involves producing two notes with the voice simultaneously, an octave apart (notated as shown in Example 1); although La Barbara chanced upon it in a tape-recorded improvisation, it has been used by Tibetan monks and lamas for centuries. It is also possible to sing an interval of a fifth, a seventh, or a triple octave using this technique. Reinforced harmonics are part of Mongolian chanting tradition, and occur when an individual harmonic from the overtone series is brought into prominence by using the appropriate vowel shape. This is not a type of vocal multiphonics since the vocal chords produce only one fundamental. Stockhausen calls for reinforced harmonics in *Stimmung* (1968).

Another very early work is *Circular Song* (1975) which relates to the idea of circular breathing. Whereas wind instrumentalists achieve constant sound by using the cheeks and tongue to expel air through the mouth while taking in breath through the nose, La Barbara generates continuous sound by singing on the inhalation as well as the exhalation of breath. There is a perceptible change of direction, and this is used to vary the ascending and descending glissandi which cover the entire vocal range and which are the main features of the piece. She begins at the top of the voice, sliding down on the 'exhale' (her own term) and up on the 'inhale', gradually adding more changes of direction of breath with each sweep of the vocal range. At the maximum rate of change of breath direction, she stops to sing multiphonics, usually aiming for the split octave on inhaled and exhaled pitches in a sequential descending perfect fifth pattern. The entire process is then reversed, creating a 'circular' form which is notated as shown in Example 2. This circular singing technique is very difficult at first, according to La Barbara, but she has managed to bring it to a state of refinement where the quality of tone is almost exactly the same on the inhalation and the exhalation. It takes great control to use the technique continuously, and

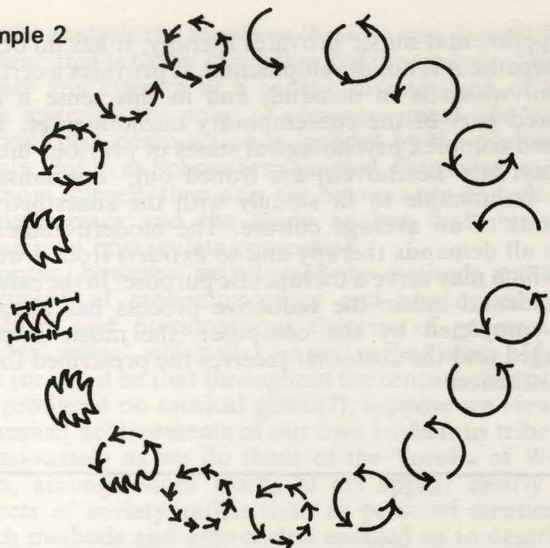
Example 1

chant   
 (phrase mark indicates that the note lasts the length of one breath)

high flutter 

vocal fry   
 (the rate varies as shown)

Example 2



some singers find it very uncomfortable. It has obvious limitations as a means of achieving uniform, continuous sound: it is unavoidably broken by changes of breath direction, and it is difficult to sustain because of dryness (though closing the mouth somewhat can help the throat to retain moisture).

La Barbara has developed other vocal techniques, and concentrates primarily on vocal sounds rather than facial or body sounds. A prominent example is the 'high flutter' (notated as shown in Example 1), which characterises much of her music; producing this sound, a complex oscillation of notes above high C, involves a high degree of air pressure and general tension. Electronic equipment is used to enhance the vocal material in her tape pieces, but she has avoided the use of distortion or any effects which might disguise the original vocal sound source. *Autumn Signal* (1978) uses inhaled 'vocal fry' (notated as shown in Example 1), which is filtered orally by changes of vowel shape: the addition of slight reverberation and sufficient amplitude gives this sound an interesting percussive quality. Other sound sources in this work include a multitrack drone of sub-octaves and fifths, tongue flutters, 'bark multiphonics' and effortless, straight-tone, descending glissandi.<sup>4</sup>

The paucity of written scores of Joan La Barbara's works reflects the nature of her compositional approach. Tape pieces such as *Autumn Signal*, *Klee Alee* (1979), '*uatre petites bêtes*' q- (1979), and *Shadow Song* (1979) are performed and constructed by La Barbara and require no score. Other pieces such as *Voice Piece: One-Note Internal Resonance Investigation*, *Space Testing* (1977), *Responsive Resonance with Feathers* (1979), and *Performance Piece* (1979) are based on the circumstances and subjective reactions which arise in the performance state, and they have very flexible formal outlines. In both tape and performance pieces, the electronic equipment is used as 'something to react to' and La Barbara relates her compositional-performance style to the 'stream-of-consciousness' technique in modern fiction.

*Space Testing* is different at each performance since it is an exploration of the acoustical properties of the room in which the performance takes place. La Barbara uses a variety of sounds including 'glissandos which sweep the entire vocal range, percussive sounds, long and short sounds, to determine the pitch that the room responds to'.<sup>6</sup> *Responsive Resonance with Feathers* is also primarily about the response of one performer to one particular set of circumstances. Sudden emotional changes and the immediate expression of those emotions determine the structure of this piece. Pre-recorded vocal sounds are played through small speakers inside the body of a piano, giving the performer something to respond to and 'eliminating the necessity of a second performer which would work against the solitary feeling of the piece and draw attention away from the main persona'.<sup>7</sup> The performer in this case, plays the piano in response to her own recorded voice.

The use of instinctual, pre-logical response in *Performance Piece* is openly examined in a rational, linguistic way through the quick juxtaposition of spontaneous creativity and verbal

Example 3



descriptions of the impetus that gave rise to the sound, the performer's perception of it, the reasons for changing it, and the influence of the audience. La Barbara states in her programme note that the descriptions derive from the part of the brain which controls logic, although they are delivered in a 'stream-of-consciousness' form.<sup>8</sup>

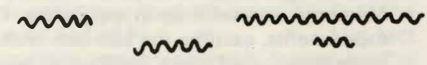
*Twelvesong (Zwölfgesang)* is a multitrack voice piece commissioned by Radio Bremen. Since recording it in 1977 La Barbara has rescored it for five singers (originally the Extended Vocal Techniques Ensemble and the composer herself), so that it can be performed 'live'. This score provides a glimpse into her compositional and vocal techniques, and is called *Twelve for Five in Eight*. The foundation of the piece is a constant drone sung by two singers, centred on the E flat above middle C, and fluctuating within a semitone above and below that pitch. The two voices tune microtonally to create beats, which can be varied in speed. The closer the two voices come to perfect unison, the slower the beats. This provides a kind of rhythmic structure for the piece, and the 'beat rate' is indicated graphically (see Example 3). (This is not strict graphic notation, since the 'waves' do not represent distance in pitch, but the speed of the beats. Thus, the larger the 'waves' the slower the beats. This is somewhat confusing since the two pitches must move closer to a unison to create slower beats, and the two lines almost automatically suggest pitch divergence as they separate.) The drone is maintained by continuous singing on the inbreath as well as on the outbreath, with the two singers overlapping the changes of breath direction. La Barbara states that the drone is really more constant and more effective with three voices, since even with two, the circular singing technique does not create an even sound.<sup>9</sup> However, the use of circular singing permits a true live version: in the original, pre-recorded, version the drone could easily have been generated electronically or by means of a tape-loop (the latter would of course limit the variability of the beats).

To the basic element of the drone are added various vocal techniques, 'all placed on the sound canvas as a painter adds certain colours, gestures, and strokes'.<sup>10</sup> The use of split-tone octave chant on an A below middle C (see Example 1) occasionally adds harmonic material as well as a particular vocal quality. Two voices use chant simultaneously in all instances, except one, where the three voices enter consecutively. Smooth glissandi, all descending, appear frequently, and La Barbara states in the instructions that the 'singer who moves from high flutters to easy, descending glisses should notice that the gliss serves not only a musical but a physical function of relaxing the muscles that tensed to produce flutters'. She adds that 'all glisses . . . are to be done evenly, effortlessly, like breathing or sighing on pitch but not with breathy sound - clear tone, no shake, no vibrato'.<sup>11</sup> The glissandi are indicated by definite pitches joined with a line. Pitches are also indicated in the staccato patterns of descending intervals and accelerating repeated notes. Occasionally two voices use the same sound in overlapping patterns (see Example 4).

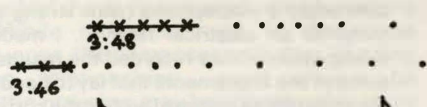
These techniques are scattered throughout the piece, whose form is far too sketchy to be considered essential to the work; more importance is placed on the individual vocal gestures and their sensual qualities. Enjoyment of the music depends on attraction to the sounds themselves, and any attempt to rationalise them leads to the conclusion that La Barbara's music is episodic and lacking in form. Her early works are admittedly technical investigations, and represent a kind of basic research into vocal possibilities. Later works that are not explorations of performance itself represent a development of her discoveries, and most of these pieces are constructed with visual images in mind. *Klee Alee* was inspired by a painting by Paul Klee and its various layers of structural detail. '*uatre petites bêtes*' q- has visual and imagistic connotations within the overall context of movement of sounds'.<sup>12</sup> *Shadow Song* uses 'visual images to create the sonic phrases', and La Barbara's 16-track realisation of Cage's *Solo for Voice 45* uses pitches as 'calligraphic strokes'. Each of these works is a kind of collage of vocal gestures.

Although La Barbara has stated that her work has nothing to do with religion, meditation, or yoga, her concentration during performance resembles a kind of restful alertness similar to meditative states of consciousness. Her purpose in concentrating on visual images and relaxation is to coordinate mind, body, and voice, so that they work together as a unified whole. Her workshops are designed to help others to sensitise both mind and body so that they enhance rather than impede the voice. After a series of stretching and

Example 4


flutters 2 voices 

5:42

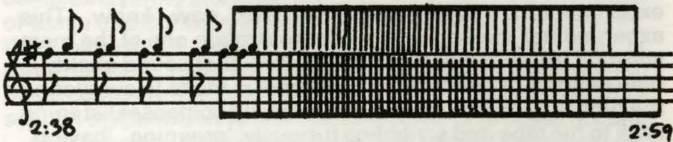
clicks 2 voices 

3:48

3:46

staccati 2 voices 

2:26



2:38 2:59

sibilants

s	→	st (quick sharp cut-off)
sh	→	t
sh	→	t
s	→	ee
s	→	oo
sh	→	t
s	→	t
ch	→	t

loosening exercises (spine, neck, jaw, tongue, etc.), La Barbara suggests visual images to be used with vocal sounds as a freeing and directing force. In this way she hopes to increase general awareness of personal abilities and responses, and it is clear that this is an important facet of her work: it reflects her concern with the act of performing as a means of self-expression which, for her, often becomes an overriding concern. This is especially apparent in those works where the emphasis is on the process of performing (*Performance Piece*, *Space Testing*, *Responsive Resonance with Feathers*), since the musical results are not guaranteed to be as interesting as the processes that gave rise to them. This approach is partly what is meant by Theodor Adorno's phrase 'fetishism of the means',<sup>13</sup> where the instrument takes precedence over the music. Adorno states that modern compositions, rather than expressing absolute musical values, are concerned with those sounds which are most suitable and most effective for a particular instrument. This is certainly true of all of La Barbara's music, both performance pieces and tape pieces, since the vocal techniques are the dominating force in her work.

La Barbara's researches into vocal possibilities have resulted in the following techniques: high flutter, split-tone octave and fifth chant, clicks, circular singing, breath sounds, reinforced harmonics, and bark multiphonics. Apart from the idiosyncratic high flutter, these techniques have become widespread and are basic elements of the extended vocal techniques repertoire. Although La Barbara's researches may have led to her own discovery of these sounds, they were already known by ethnomusicologists, voice scientists, the singers of the Extended Vocal Techniques Ensemble in California, and other composers and performers such as Berio, Peter Maxwell Davies, Roy Hart and Stockhausen. Nor has La Barbara's major contribution been in the field of composition as such, since she has placed such emphasis on performance that her compositions are dominated by the means of production of her vocal sound sources and by the experience of performing.

Formal structures are sketchy and unassertive, and are subservient to the type of personal expression being explored.<sup>14</sup> Her most significant contribution lies in highlighting the act of performance as a creative process and the resulting recognition of the performer's need for artistic fulfilment beyond that afforded by technical achievement. In turning to the creation of new sounds and exploring their expressive qualities La Barbara has found a rewarding outlet for her artistic abilities, one that is more personally satisfying to her than standard repertoire and singing technique. La Barbara has also provided an opportunity for others to understand more about the subtler aspects of performance:

in seeing it as a state of being, apart from normal existence, there is the realisation that it is a kind of heightened experience where sensitivity can be at its peak. Also, in treating performance as an instinctive act to be examined rationally (as in *Performance Piece*), La Barbara has shown that to some extent, performance is a response to a specific situation, and not a pre-planned presentation which could not have been otherwise.

La Barbara has no interest in showmanship, and in choosing an open format for performance she admits that she risks the exposure of her most personal feelings. Using her voice (in live performance and in the studio), she seeks to discover more about its communicative qualities and how it is deeply and personally expressive. In a recent article entitled 'Je suis un objet d'art', La Barbara explains:

L'improvisation était la part essentielle de mon travail... Je voulais que ma voix soit mon professeur. J'ouvrais la bouche et je laissais des sons s'échapper. Je tentais de 'vocaliser' mon émotion.<sup>15</sup>

NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> From the composer's programme note for the Holland Festival, June 19, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Johnson, 'Research and Development', *The Village Voice* (January 27, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> From a lecture by the composer at the 1979 SPNM Weekend in York.

<sup>4</sup> 'Vocal fry' refers to the clicking sound made by gently setting the vocal chords in motion, using less breath pressure than would be necessary to produce a discrete pitch. 'Bark multiphonics' are breathy, forceful ejections of semi-voiced sounds.

<sup>5</sup> Phrase coined by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) to describe the ceaseless, chaotic, multi-levelled flow that characterizes human mental activity. Martin Seymour-Smith, 'Stream of Consciousness', *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, ed. Alan Bullock and Oliver Stallybrass (London: Collins, 1977), p. 605.

<sup>6</sup> From the composer's programme notes for the Festival d'Automne à Paris, October 5-6, 1979 (in the original English).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Information given by La Barbara to the author in an interview at the 1979 SPNM Weekend.

<sup>10</sup> From the composer's programme notes for the 1979 Festival d'Automne à Paris.

<sup>11</sup> From the composer's explanatory notes to *Twelve for Five in Eight*.

<sup>12</sup> From the composer's programme notes for the 1979 Festival d'Automne à Paris.

<sup>13</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Bloomster (London: Sheed & Ward, 1973), p. 172.

<sup>14</sup> In one of her most recent works, *Shadow Song* (1979), it seems that formal structures take a more dominant role. Perhaps this represents a new compositional phase.

<sup>15</sup> Joan La Barbara, 'Je suis un objet d'art', *Le monde de la musique*, no. 16 (October 1979), p. 41.