BARTHES’S “THE GRAIN OF THE VOICE” REVISITED

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Introduction

Roland Barthes’s “Le grain de la voix” (The Grain of the Voice), originally published in 1972, has retained its viability, highlighting topics such as corporeality, sexuality, and desire, and affecting studies of performance, opera, and contemporary and popular music (see Dame 1998; Frith 1998; Välimäki 2005, 301–27; Szekely 2006). Dunsby (2009) engaged “The Grain of the Voice” with Schenkerian terminology to illustrate structurally significant melodic descents in Charles Panzéra’s and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau’s interpretations of a Schumann Lied. Since its inception, “the grain of the voice” has indeed acquired malleable meanings, some of them not clearly aligned with Barthes’s original conception. Most often “the grain of the voice” is misunderstood as a vocal quality of a non-homogenous voice, or simply as the physical body producing a voice. The purpose of this essay, however, is neither to redress imprecise usages of the term nor to apply it to some vocal material; instead, it is to explore “the grain of the voice” as a concept, in the context of Barthes’s semiology to clarify where it comes from and to what kind of networks of semiotic terms it is irrevocably bound. Beacons guiding this voyage are several of Barthes’s paired terms, particularly “geno-song” and “pheno-song,” denotation and connotation, signification and significance, pleasure (plaisir) and enjoyment/bliss (jouissance), as well as what he calls the “the third meaning.” Barthes’s concepts and aesthetic preferences are also shown to be deeply rooted in his personal character and biographic circumstances.

In the early 1940s Barthes took singing lessons from Charles Panzéra (1896–1976), which were abandoned due to Barthes’s relapse of tuberculosis. The persistent lung problems also cut short his second attempt to study voice with Panzéra in 1956. It was during this second short-lived period of vocal study that Barthes published the above-mentioned essay on bourgeois vocal art, in the February (1956) issue of *Les lettres nouvelles*, in which he essentially dismisses Gérard Souzay’s singing style by presenting his current singing teacher, Panzéra, as an idealized counterexample (Barthes [1957] 2013, 192).

**Bourgeois pheno-song in the service of signification and denotation**

According to Barthes, Gérard Souzay (1918–2004) was an exemplar of bourgeois vocal art because he stressed the semantic content of the words to the extent that it bordered on extravagance:

To underline the word by the abusive contour of phonetics, to make the guttural of the word *creuse* (hollow) into the spade digging a grave, and the dental of the word *sein* (breast) into a penetrating sweetness, is to practice a literality of intention, not of description, it is to establish abusive correspondences … This kind of phonetic pointillism, which gives each letter an incongruent importance, sometimes touches on the absurd.

*(Barthes [1957] 2013, 191)*

In Barthes’s later “The Grain of the Voice” ([1972] 1991, 267–77), however, the aesthetically devalued party is no longer Souzay—his name is not mentioned in the essay—but the German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (1925–2012). Like Souzay, Fischer-Dieskau is contrasted to Panzéra, to the latter’s advantage. Barthes downplays a singing style that tries to communicate and express the content of the words. What is new is the term Barthes introduces to encompass this kind of vocal expression: pheno-song ([1972] 1991, 270–71). Pheno-song is characterized by clear text delivery in employing articulatory means that dramatize the words to draw attention to the semantic and lyric content of the poem (Barthes [1972] 1991, 271; see also [1957] 2013, 190–91). All of this contributes to articulation, which, according to Barthes:

in effect, functions abusively as a *pretense of meaning*: claiming to serve meaning, it basically misreads it … to *articulate* is to encumber meaning with a parasitical clarity, useless without being, for all that, sumptuous. And such clarity is not innocent; it involves the singer in a highly ideological art of expressivity—or, to be even more precise, of *dramatization*.


The binary opposition of pheno-song and geno-song, which only appears in “The Grain of the Voice,” is Barthes’s re-working of Kristeva’s terms “phenotext” and “genotext” (Kristeva [1969] 1986, 220–28; [1974] 1984, 86–89). For Kristeva, a phenotext is a linguistic structure that contains not only grammatical rules but also the kind of textual practices that guarantee communication (Kristeva [1974] 1984, 86–89; 91); hence, it conveys signs and contributes to an effortless understanding of the message. Kristeva delineated between the two terms in her first published work, *Semiotiké* ([1969] 1986), which greatly impressed Barthes, writing in his “Kristeva’s *Semiotiké*”: “this discourse transforms us, displaces us, gives
us words, meanings, sentences which permit us to work and to release in ourselves the creative moment itself: permutation” (Barthes [1970] 1989, 170).

Whereas Kristeva developed her terms for the analysis of literary texts, Barthes applied the terminology to a non-literary discourse: singing. In his influential Elements of Semiology, he defines signification, following Saussure, as a process wherein the signifier and the signified are united as a sign (Barthes 1967, 113). Denotation enhances literal meanings, the interpretation of which is readily at hand in a given culture. In two essays, “The Photographic Message” (1961) and “The Rhetoric of the Image” (1964), Barthes details how a photograph is an example of denotation. An un-manipulated photograph denotes analogically what it represents, without any requirement of an interpretative code; a photograph communicates or, rather, denotes what it has captured so clearly that it might be uninteresting for a semiotician (Barthes [1961] 1982, 194–210; see also the translation in [1961] 1977, 32–51). In his 1970 essay “The Third Meaning,” he discusses symbolic messages embedded in photographs, which require decoding on the basis of a culturally shared code: for example, a photograph depicting a “rain of gold,” as in the coronation scene of Eisenstein’s film Ivan the Terrible, does not denote only rain but is also a sign of wealth (Barthes [1970] 1982, 317–33). This kind of “obvious meaning” (le sens obvie) is “taken from a kind of common, general lexicon of symbols based on culturally shared signification” ([1970] 1982, 319).

Signification and denotation are crucial to a subject’s (re)constitution: a subject that applies the adjectives (signified) to describe music (signifier) always becomes strengthened and constituted. As Barthes observes,

> the predicate is always the rampart by which the subject’s image-repertoire ([l’imaginaire du sujet]) protects itself against the loss that threatens it: the man who furnishes himself or is furnished with an adjective is sometimes wounded, sometimes pleased, but always constituted; music has an image-repertoire ([l’imaginaire de la musique]) whose function is to reassure, to constitute the subject, who hears it … and this image-repertoire immediately comes to language by the adjective.


As part of the subject’s interpretation of the object, denotation, communication, and signification are central features in bourgeois vocal art, which aims at being understandable, producing pleasure (plaisir) and which is expressible in words ([1973a] 1975, 21). In order to be able to posit denotations and significations when hearing a song, it is essential that the enunciation of the singer is comprehensible. In a bourgeois singing style, it is recognizable signs of emotional states that are brought to the forefront. Barthes argues that this is exactly what Souzay does:

having to sing, for instance, the words tristesse affreuse [horrible sadness], he [Souzay] is not content with the simple semantic content of these words or with the musical line which supports them: he must further dramatize the phonetics of the affreuse [horrific] must suspend and then explode the double fricative, releasing misery in the very density of the letters; no one can ignore the fact that it is a question of particularly terrible pangs. Unfortunately, this pleonasm of intentions muffles both word and music, and chiefly their junction, which is the very object of the vocal art.

(Barthes [1957] 2013, 190)
A phoneme, or a group of phonemes belonging to a word, simultaneously contributes to the semantic drama, producing a recognizable emotional content (for example, “terrible sadness”). Consonants, “the armature of the language,” would be separated and emphasized to achieve a clarity of voiced text and its meanings (Barthes [1972] 1991, 272). For Barthes, this is not a virtue, because dramatic-expressive articulation disturbs the legato, and “the melodic line is broken into fragments of meaning, into semantic sighs, into effects of hysteria” (Barthes [1977] 1991, 283). Panzéra makes a similar point: articulation is the enemy of legato. In articulation, according to Panzéra, all the syllables—and therein all of the consonants—receive the same sonorous intensity, which is not only mechanic and insensible, but also destroys all the poetic and musical charm (Panzéra 1945, 73–76; cf. also, Panzéra 1967, 23).

Fischer-Dieskau’s art is, for Barthes, “expressive, dramatic, emotionally clear.” In this regard, Fischer-Dieskau’s vocal delivery is articulation subsumed by the “tyranny of signification”: it “corresponds perfectly to requirements of an average culture” (Barthes [1972] 1991, 273), a charge he also levels against Souzay (Barthes 2013, 190). Richard Middleton (1983, 263–64) points out that both Barthes and Kristeva continue a romantic-modernistic tradition where predictability and standardization, typical for mass culture (pleasure), are deemed less valuable than the dismantling of generally agreed-upon codes, which leads to innovations (jouissance). Indeed, Barthes, in his “Kristeva’s Semeiotiké,” openly proclaims that “communication is merchandise” ([1970] 1989, 170). In the 1971 interview for Tel Quel Barthes mentions how the indiscreet Fischer-Dieskau has abusively filled the recording market with his numerous LP-recordings while Panzéra had to abandon recording just before the arrival of the “microsillon” (Barthes [1971] 1998, 251).

**Geno-song: a special case of signification and jouissance**

It is possible, at least to some extent, to describe what pheno-song is, but the definition process becomes considerably more difficult when faced with the geno-song, signification and jouissance. Geno-song is a term that appears only in Barthes’s “The Grain of the Voice,” whereas Barthes’s texts after 1970 are saturated by references to both jouissance and signification. It becomes evident that geno-song is a special case of jouissance and signification, which can, however, be achieved by other means. Although connected to “the grain of the voice,” they are not synonyms.

I will first liberate geno-song from the web of the interrelated concepts to highlight its particularities, and thereafter I will proceed via signification and jouissance to the main issue of this chapter, “the grain of the voice.” In the process, pheno-song, denotation and signification must be resurrected for contrast and difference.

For Kristeva ([1974] 1984, 86), a genotext is a process that “tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral (unstable, threatened by drive charges, ‘quanta’ rather than ‘marks’) and nonsignifying (devices that do not have a double articulation).” She gives several detailed examples of the genotext as well as of phenotext (see Kristeva [1974] 1985, 217–310). As Kristeva ([1974] 1984, 86) points out, genotext can be seen in language, although it is not necessarily linguistic by nature. In a genotextual space, the phonemes rise above their function as particles of a well-formed linguistic syntax (i.e., their phenotextual organization):

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in the text the sounds [sons] of language are more than phonemes. While the phonemes retain the phonematic function in order to guarantee the symbolic—commutative—function of the language, [in genotext] they recuperate [reprennent] what they have lost in becoming sounds of a given language; they recover topography of the body which produces them; likewise, what they prolong beyond the limits supported by the normative usage of the language and beyond the “normal” memory are the virtually limitless possibilities of the linguistic constituents (here: phonemic) applicable in generating ensembles (here: morpho-phonemics).

(Kristeva [1974] 1985, 222, translation mine)

In genotext, the sonorous dimension of phonemes becomes revitalized, and they regain their ability to be regrouped in unexpected ways that are pulsational and not grammatical. In “the topography of the body,” oral cavities form a particular zone wherein language becomes sonorous. Kristeva describes how the liquids (/l/ and /r/), nasal /m/, and closed front vowels possess oral pulsation, whereas the open back vowels are connected by Kristeva to anal pulsation and the apical /r/ to erectile-phallic pulsation ([1974] 1985, 222–25).

In adapting the concept of genotext, Barthes retains its attachment to the oral topography of language. But unlike Kristeva’s genotext, geno-song is not textual, but audible, and it works with the sounds of language. Reading is not enough; one must listen. Geno-song, according to Barthes, “is the volume of the speaking and singing voice, the space in which the significations germinate, ‘from within the language and its very materiality’” (Barthes [1972] 1991, 270; Barthes most likely was citing an unmentioned Kristeva source). Under “Voice,” the last entry of his Pleasure of the Text, Barthes elaborates the materiality of the language with another term, writing aloud [which] is not phonological but phonetic; its aim is not the clarity of messages, the theater of emotions [i.e., as in pheno-song and the bourgeois vocal art]; what it searches for (in a perspective of bliss) are the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning [sens] of language.

(Barthes [1973a] 1975, 66–67)

In geno-song, therefore, language is liberated from serving cultural meanings, and the materiality of the (French) language becomes vocally nourished (Barthes [1972] 1991, 270–71). French mélodie is an ideal breeding ground for geno-song, which Barthes regards as “a very special space [genre] in which a language encounters a voice” (Barthes [1972] 1991, 269). Undoubtedly, in his singing lessons with Panzéra Barthes has gained a perspective from within how the voice may become a sensual site for language. In his L’art de chanter, Panzéra (1945, 73–78) dedicates a chapter to pronunciation (dismissing articulation), ideas later echoed in Barthes’s conception of geno-song (Barthes [1972] 1991, 271–73). In pronunciation, a consonant is not consistently the same each time it is produced; instead, its quality and color depend on context. Similarly, a syllable or groups of syllables are subordinated to their atmospheric ambiance. Occasionally, a consonant may be slightly more accentuated than the others, which brightens not only the spot where this takes place, but has a longer lasting influence: un long moment (Panzéra 1945, 76).

Barthes describes how Panzéra’s vocal delivery retains the musical logic in the phrase without letting the dramatization of literary meanings to intervene and disrupt (as in
Fischer-Dieskau’s and Souzay’s singing); Panzéra pronounces, whereas Fischer-Dieskau and Souzay articulate. According to Barthes, Panzéra recommends that consonants are to be skated over, and occasionally some consonants become “patinated;” in other words, they are more likely to become landed (“atterreis”) than fallen, more “induced” (amenées) than marked (marquées) (Barthes [1977] 1991, 282; see also Barthes [1977] 1992a, 250).

For Panzéra, /r/ is the most beautiful and most indispensable of all the consonants in French. He describes how to produce /r/ inside the mouth by “a rapid repetition of the strokes where the tip of the tongue hits the palate,” and he explains how “the air is put to vibrate twice, at first by the glottis and the second time by the movement of the tongue” (Panzéra 1945, 77–78). There are, however, bad pronunciations of /r/; most often they are too heavy because the back of the tongue (not its tip) touches the velum (not the palate). Barthes admired Panzéra’s rolled /r/ as particularly elegant: without any heavy peasant-likeness or Canadian; instead the rolling could be so short—but still pure—that it would just give an idea of rolled /r/, which “was an artificial roll, the paradoxical state of a letter sound [lettre-son] at once quite abstract (by its metallic brevity of the vibration) and quite material (by its obvious implantation in the moving throat)” (Barthes [1972] 1991, 272; see also [1977] 1991, 282).

The notion of geno-song opens a door to Barthes’s concepts of signification and jouissance. In signification, application of the adjective and the (re-)constitution of the subject become impossible; instead, the subject gets lost, as it misses the previously constituted significations and pleasures, and possesses no language to capture the sense produced in the signification, which affords jouissance. Under the entry “clivage” (split), Barthes characterizes the difference between pleasure and jouissance in the context of textual practices:

Text of pleasure [plaisir]: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading.

Text of bliss [jouissance]: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.

… he enjoys the consistency of his selfhood [moi] (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss [jouissance]). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse.

(Barthes [1973a] 1975, 14)

Although signification is situated beyond the grammatical use of language, it does not equate to meaninglessness or nonsense. For Barthes, signification “is meaning [sens] insofar as it is sensually produced” ([1973a] 1975, 61). Barthes further hones this kind of practice when he speaks of the “third” or “obtuse” meaning: “the obtuse meaning [le sens obtus] is a signifier without signified, hence the difficulty in naming it” ([1970] 1982, 326)—therefore, no signification takes place. By way of an example, Barthes uses a still shot cut from Sergey Eisenstein’s film Ivan the Terrible. It depicts a woman’s face, and although the face is clearly visible, it is impossible for Barthes to decipher what the face expresses; hence, there is a signifier (the face) but no signified (its namable emotional content), and the disparity is evidence not of signification, but of signification. Like geno-song, the “obtuse” (third) meaning cannot be deciphered; it can only be located and sensed. This meaning does not validate a system of obvious denotations, but rather it subverts the entire practice of making sense (sens) (Barthes [1970] 1982, 328–30).
The friction between voice and language, or “the grain of the voice”

In “The Grain of the Voice,” voice is always “ languaged.” It is situated in a language, it bears it and belongs to it. In fact, for Barthes there is “no place without language … or more precisely, everything is language” (Barthes [1981] 1985, 162). Hence, “the grain of the voice” cannot be situated in the voice alone, nor is it a vocal quality or a seducing body of a singer, as some of the most common misreadings of the concept hold. Instead, “the grain of the voice” is located in the uneven, granular borderline between language and music: “The ‘grain’ of the voice is not—or not only—its timbre; the signifying [signification] it affords cannot be better defined than by the friction between music and something else, which is the language (and not the message at all)” (Barthes [1972] 1991, 273). In another essay Barthes intertwines the relationships of language, voice, and music as follows: “Then what is music? Panzéra’s art answers: a quality of language” (Barthes [1977] 1991: 284).

Listening to the exemplary voices identified by Barthes helps to get a sense of what he meant by “the grain of the voice.” Both Panzéra and Souzay recorded a host of Fauré’s Mélodies, which allow their vocal differences to be identified and interpreted. In “Aprés un rêve” Panzéra (geno-song) and Souzay (pheno-song) certainly sound divergent because they differ in both their voices and their interpretations. But the object of listening à la Barthes is not by way of vocal timbre or projection of musical structure, but in how the language is voiced.

Indeed, the French language is articulated differently in their performances. Panzéra’s long vowels are a continuous nuanced movement. For instance, in “Aprés un rêve,” Panzéra sings on the last word, “mysterieuse,” a miniature timbral slide within its long / ø/ that reaches beyond its phonetic value. Souzay’s vowels in that song, on the other hand, are more straightforward, and he remains, on the same long /ø/, within a correct phonetic execution of the French language. Often Souzay lets his voice grow on a vowel without, however, producing any micro-variations within its phonetic value (for instance on the word rayonnais). Souzay softens certain words (or parts thereof), picking them out of the phrase (for instance Je rêvais; ardent), producing, in Barthes’s sense, the bourgeois vocal art. Panzéra makes no such semantically motivated accentuations but lets the language glide in music, and indeed, after hearing Panzéra and Souzay sing this song, one may understand why Barthes considers that Panzéra trusts in his singing “in music’s immediately definitive substance” (Barthes [1957] 2013, 192). Obviously, there are more nuanced differences between Souzay and Panzéra, but the point here is the examination of “the grain of the voice” as a concept. “The grain of the voice” may indeed work as an analytic tool in deciphering the vocal art of a singer. Such understanding would not, however, focus on the execution of tonal structures of a composition or on the timbre of the voice, but on how language is sung (see Gouiffès 2008; see also Klein 2009). This concept elevates aural appreciation of the double position of language and the enhanced voice: “That is what the ‘grain’ would be: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue: perhaps the letter; [lettre]; almost certainly … signifying [signification]” (Barthes [1972] 1991, 270).

While according to Kristeva ([1974] 1984, 86–89) genotext and phenotext (as well as semiotic and symbolic) work together in a textual praxis, Barthes separates geno-song from pheno-song (Dame 1998, 240). Barthes assesses Souzay’s (bourgeois) way of singing in a similar fashion as Fischer-Dieskau’s, whereas the vocal art of Panzéra is characterized by seductive demarcations between voice and language, its granular surface where “the grain of the voice” is produced and language rustles. If Barthes does not hear in the singing voice
anything except the impeccable articulation in a given language succumbing to its phonetic and phonological rules, no friction, no “grain of the voice” is realized. Likewise, there is no passage to signification and jouissance when a singer stops at the level of signification.

Language, therefore, in “the grain of the voice,” rustles in the cavities of vocal tract, in vocal chords, and in the soft tissues of the mouth while the tongue is agilely changing positions, its tension and shape. In this rustling (bruissante), according to Barthes,

... language would not thereby abandon a horizon of meaning [sens]: meaning, undivided, impenetrable, unnamable, would however be posited in the distance like a mirage, making the vocal exercise into a double landscape, furnished with “background” [fond]; but instead of the music of the phonemes being the “background” of our messages (as happens in our poetry), meaning would now be the vanishing point of jouissance.


### Desire, voice, and lung

Besides “The Grain of the Voice,” S/Z ([1970] 1974), an elaborate analysis of Honoré Balzac’s Sarrasine (1830), is another renowned study on voice by Barthes. Here and also elsewhere in Barthes’s writings voice, desire and erotic attunement are inextricably present and intertwined, but what has been ignored, is Barthes’s homoerotic sensibility. Samoyault, for instance, proposes that S/Z “is a plea for homosexuality and the utopia it makes possible, that of a reunion without opposition” (2017, 339). The events begin to unwind when Sarrasine, a promising sculptor, loses his senses after hearing the voice of the beautiful leading soprano, “La Zambinella” (actually a castrato) sing on the stage of Teatro Argentina in Rome:

> When La Zambinella sang, the effect was delirium. The artist [Sarrasine] felt cold; then he felt a heat … He did not applaud, he said nothing, he experienced an impulse of madness, a kind of frenzy which overcomes us only when we are at the age when desire has something frightening and infernal about it … Last, this agile voice … attacked his soul so vividly that several times he gave vent to involuntary cries torn from him by convulsive feeling of pleasure [délice] which are all too rarely vouchsafed by human passions.

(Balzac’s Sarrasine, quoted in Barthes [1970] 1974, 238–39; its analysis in 115–18)

Balzac’s description on the power of voice is also shared by Barthes: “[t]he voice is a diffusion, an insinuation, it passes over the entire surface of the body, the skin; being a passage, an abolition of limitations, classes, names … it possesses a special hallucinatory power” ([1970] 1974, 110). Furthermore, S/Z offers an explanation for why Barthes strongly prefers a continuous musical line (Panzéra) to a discontinuous one (Souzay and Fischer-Dieskau). At issue is what Barthes calls “lubrication” and its opposite:

> This music’s erotic quality (attached to its vocal nature) is here defined: it is the power of lubrication; connection is a specific characteristic of the voice; the model of the lubricated is the organic, the “living,” in short, seminal fluid … singing
(a characteristic generally ignored in aesthetics) has something coenesthetic about it, it is connected less to an “impression” than to an internal, muscular, humoral sensuality …

The antonym of the lubricated … is discontinuous, divided, creaking, composite, bizarre: everything that is excluded from the liquid plenitude of pleasure, everything that is unable to unite with the phrased, a preciously ambiguous value, since it is both linguistic and musical, unites in the one plenitude both meaning [sens] and sex.


Panzéra’s art of pronunciation with continuous musical lines obviously enhances lubrication and seminal fluid, whereas Souzay and Fischer-Dieskau, with their art of articulation, can be considered as representing its opposite, with discontinuous musical lines.

As for Sarrassine, also for Barthes, voice was a particular love-object. In fact, Barthes openly admits that he had “a lover’s relation to Panzéra’s voice: not to his raw, physical voice, but to his voice as it passes over language, our French language, like desire …” (Barthes [1977] 1991, 280; emphasis mine). Barthes uses phallic metaphors in describing Panzéra’s voice, which “was always secured, animated by a quasi-metallic strength of desire: it is a ‘raised’ voice—aufgeregt (a Schumannian word)—or even better: an erected voice—a voice which gets an erection” (Barthes [1977] 1991, 283). Despite these erotically loaded designations, as a person, Panzéra was for Barthes one of his father figures (Bertolt Brecht being the other); a creative kind of figure, an artist (Barthes 1976; Gil 2012, 119–20).

But since his late teens, Barthes indeed was involved in homosexual love affairs, and later in his adult life his homosexuality was an open secret among his friends and even among his students. Biographies (for instance Gil 2012; Samoyault 2017) based on Barthes’s unpublished personal papers and letters reveal Barthes’s sexual orientation and habits without a doubt. During his lifetime, Barthes hid his sexual orientation from the public and, especially, from his mother (Gil 2012, 147; Samoyault 2017, 90–95). When Barthes wrote about his singing lessons with Panzéra, he left unmentioned that he had “a close friend,” Michel Delacroix, to share his passion for voice and singing (Barthes [1977] 1991; see Gil 2012, 122); however, in a radio interview Barthes disclosed Delacroix’s name and characterized him as a very dear friend (Barthes 1976, 23–24). Due to this omission from his published texts, the homoerotic dimension of Barthes’s vocal passion has remained concealed and unaccounted for. Barthes and Delacroix particularly admired two singers: Charles Panzéra and Pierre Bernac (1899–1979); they were seduced by their way of singing French mélodies to the extent that they wanted to learn to sing themselves. They wrote to Panzéra in 1940, asking his recommendations for a vocal coach. Panzéra was for Barthes one of his father figures (Bertolt Brecht being the other); a creative kind of figure, an artist (Barthes 1976; Gil 2012, 119–20).

Unfortunately, in early 1941 the singing lessons took a dramatic turn when Delacroix was hospitalized after contracting tuberculosis. Barthes continued his lessons for about two years, until he, too, was hospitalized to cure his tuberculosis in January 1942. Barthes survived, but his friend did not. Delacroix’s death in October 1942 devastated Barthes, who at that time was still hospitalized elsewhere (Calvet 1995, 42–44, 53; Gil 2012, 122–23, 148; Samoyault 2017, 104, 112–14). A love affair with singing turned into a horrible loss, not only of Barthes’s personal relationship, but also of his health.

Barthes’s second attempt to have singing lessons in 1956 was still clouded by his lung problems, and he was concerned about how his insufficient respiration might have affected his voice (Barthes 2015, 119). After only four months of tuition he had to abandon singing.
In both cases, the culprit was the lungs. In this context, it becomes understandable that Barthes mistrusts breathing—which takes place in the lungs—as the foundation of vocal art (Barthes [1972] 1991, 271). Here, Barthes clearly differs from Panzéra’s authority because his singing manual begins with a chapter on breathing. Like many of his colleagues, Panzéra (1945, 15–24) considers air as a singers’ prime material, and breathing as essential not only to singing but to human existence and welfare in general. But for Barthes, lungs and breathing have no access to the topography of the body that affords jouissance, the genus-song, and consequently they are excluded from “the grain of the voice.” Symptomatically, Barthes deploys an erotic metaphor in his dismissal: “[t]he lung, a stupid organ (limpness of cats [le mou des chats]!), swells but does not become erect …” ([1972] 1991, 271 modified with [1972] 1992a, 240).

In his “Listening,” written a couple of years later with Roland Havas, Barthes explicitly excludes respiration from “the grain of the voice”:

The singing voice, that very specific space in which a tongue encounters a voice and permits those who know how to listen to it to hear… its “grain”—the singing voice is not the breath but indeed that materiality of the body emerging from the throat, a site where the phonic material hardens and decouples.


When listening (erotically) to Panzéra, Barthes did not hear him “breathe, but only shape the phrase,” whereas in Fischer-Dieskau’s performances he seems to “only hear the lungs, never the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the sinuses,” and disregards Fischer-Dieskau’s particular way of using breathing sounds for expressive purposes, as upheavals of passion (Barthes [1972] 1991, 271). Fischer-Dieskau’s style gives the lungs audibility beneath the language which Barthes heard as an intervention and a disturbance, as an antonym of the lubricated.

Barthes’s main task in “The Grain of the Voice” was to explore how to change the musical object itself by shifting its point of contact to language in such a way that adjectives would be dismissed (Barthes [1972] 1991, 269). In French grammar, the adjective contributes in sustaining the binary opposition masculine vs. feminine (Barthes 1970, 900–07), whereas jouissance is atypical (atopique) and asocial (Barthes [1981] 1985, 176). For Barthes, adjectives represent stereotypes opening a passage to ideology (Barthes [1981] 1985, 174), which resides in the heart of the bourgeois vocal art, with its conception of art as an “additive series of accumulated… details” (Barthes [1957] 2013, 191). The listener who recognizes how these detailed meanings are voiced continuously becomes more confirmed as a (bourgeois) subject of pleasure. For Barthes, the loss of a bourgeois subject is politically and ideologically favored because it offers an escape from established cultural values. A new space is possible only by shifting things (déplacer des choses) in the matter of (bourgeois) language, creating a new typology of language through changes in its rhetoric, syntax, and its values for words (ses valeurs de mots; Barthes [1981] 1985, 162). This, in fact, he tried later to achieve in “Rasch” (Barthes [1975] 1991, 299–312), which focuses on Schumann’s Kreisleriana. Barthes attempted to construct a relationship between music and language without adjectives. Although adjectives are banished from “Rasch,” the essay is in fact full of descriptions, where Barthes portrays Schumann’s body but uses only verbs: Schumann’s body speaks, weaves, stretches out, rises, declares, strikes, beats, dances, etc. These corporeal designations, seasoned with several fragmentary music examples, suggest a musical discourse that is in a flow of becoming. Here Barthes approaches Kristeva’s semanalysis and what he calls the “second semiology, that of
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through this corporeally attuned analysis Barthes aims at reaching music’s signification (geno-level) without the interference of the first semiology (the scales, notes, chords and tones that form the pheno-level). Accordingly, Barthes does not refer in “Rasch” to “the grain” or to “the grain of the voice”; since there is no overlap between the semiology of signification and that of signification, “the grain” would have been situated somewhere in the nebulous, granular borderline region between them.

Notes

1 “Le grain de la voix” was at first published in the November issue (1972) of the Musique en jeu, which collected essays on psychoanalysis and music. It has afterwards appeared in several other contexts and translations. The ones used here, in the order of relevance, are Barthes 1991, 267–77, 1992a, 236–45, 1977, 179–89.

2 “The Grain of the Voice” refers to Barthes’s article; “the grain of the voice” refers to the concept.

3 Square brackets refer to the original French texts. In several cases, when quoting Barthes’s essays translated into English it has been indispensable to consult also the original text and modify the translation accordingly. Only added emphases in the quotations have been indicated.

4 Barthes and Kristeva knew each other well. In the late 1960s Kristeva, an aspiring doctoral student, assisted in several of Barthes’s seminars. Their collaboration included membership in the inner circle of the avant-garde publication Tel Quel (Kauppi, 1994, 122; 132–34). In addition, Barthes was a close friend to Philippe Sollers, Kristeva’s husband since 1967 (Sollers 2015; Samoyault 2017, 346–54).

5 Barthes makes here a reference to Gérard Souzay’s rendition of Faure’s mélodie, “Tristesse.” In his posthumously published Mourning Diary begun soon after the death of his beloved mother, Barthes comes back to his previous evaluation from a different perspective: “[Stupid]: listening to Souzay* sing: ‘My heart is full of terrible sadness [triste affreuse],’ I burst into tears. *Whom I used to make fun of.” (Barthes [2009] 2012, 47).

6 “[D]ans un texte, les sons du langage sont plus que des phonèmes. Tout en conservant la fonction phonémique pour assurer la fonction symbolique—commutative—du langage, les phonèmes reprennent ce que les sont ont perdu en devenant sons d’une langue donnée: ils reprennent la topographie du corps qui s’y reproduit; de même qu’ils prolongent, au-delà des limites supportées par l’usage normatif du langage et par la mémoire ‘normale’, les possibilités virtuelles illimitées des constituants linguistiques (ici: phonémiques) de s’appliquer pour générer des ensembles (ici: morphophonémiques).”


8 His own father, Louis Barthes (1883–1916), had been killed in World War I by Germans, when Roland had been less than one year old. He was raised by his mother Henrietta Barthes (1893–1977) with whom he also shared a flat till her death. (On Barthes’s family, see for instance Samoyault 2017, 27–47.) In World War II Barthes himself experienced strictures of the German military discipline with strongly rolling/r/sounds in the home front through the German occupation of France and the reign of the Vichy government.

9 In his posthumous essay “Evenings in Paris,” Barthes describes how he, the autobiographical protagonist, wanders about Parisian streets and cafeterias looking for (paid) male sexual partners (Barthes [1979] 1992b, 59–63).