

Rouge. Smuggling sonorous variations into textual repetition, *Rouge* is the experience of ‘words that become sounds again’ (Certeau 1984: 163). Indeed, it is not just that an over-emphasis on the work’s textual base would obscure this metamorphosis. Conversely, it seems that Cox’s understanding of Chopin’s work as merely concerned with the sounding materiality of the voice similarly falls short. Rather than fully abandoning the word, giving us the sounding voice as such, *Rouge* explores the tension between word and sound – or indeed, symbolic and real – as they coalesce in the perimeter of the voice.

Better yet, this field of tension foregrounded in *Rouge* is perhaps nothing other than the voice itself, ever carrying meaning(s) that somehow remain alien to it. In view of Cox’s insistence on the autonomous reality of sound as such, the voice seems particularly challenging in that it always already appears to be quite a bit more than that. Obviously, this is true of its culturally significant appearance in speech, music and so on, yet the issue itself is more fundamental. The voice, regardless still of *what* it says, *says something*. Perhaps it is precisely this that we call voice: a *sounding* carried by a *saying*. As such, I tend to disagree with the common argument that Chopin’s later work finalizes the break with language merely instigated in early works such as *Rouge*.¹⁵ It is true that later audiopoems lack the overt linguistic basis of *Rouge*, yet the communicativeness of the voice runs deeper than the surface of words. That the voice in its mere presence remains out of reach is, of course, not to deny its existence. Furthermore, *saying* and *sounding* never simply coincide, and the voice precisely emerges as the incongruity between the two. If *Rouge* was said to insist on this discrepancy, the following analysis of Chopin’s *Dynamisme Integral* serves to demonstrate how later work, rather than making the definite turn to the real, scrutinizes further the structural tension that is the voice. In addition, a new issue emerges as Chopin increasingly turns to the tape recorder as a tool to modulate and (re)organize his vocals. If recording technology was supposed to register indiscriminately, attending to sound as such, what to make of this technologically augmented voice, which at times sounds barely vocal at all?

Dynamisme Integral

Already in *Rouge* – its second part in particular – Chopin explores what the tape recorder had in store beyond mere registration. Although he kept working with a basic recording setup, Chopin’s later work increasingly came to bear on various sound effects.¹⁶ *Dynamisme Integral* is a striking example of the highly unusual sounding work that resulted.¹⁷ As mentioned, the piece lacks any discernible linguistic content, and at times, it barely sounds vocal at all. Yet, the tape recorder is not merely used here as a local sound effect. Although the creation process of *Dynamisme Integral* is undocumented, the main procedure can be deduced from careful listening. The basis of the work consists of the same recording appearing on both the

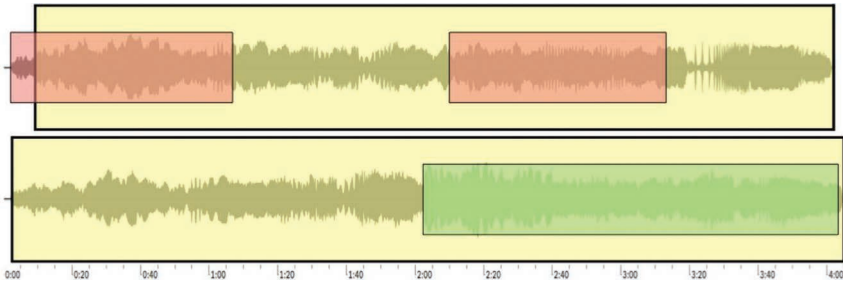


Figure 9.4 *Dynamisme Integral*'s basic construction relative to the waveforms.

right and left track, which are separated by a delay interval of 6.5 seconds (in the beginning).¹⁸ This correspondence between both tracks – quite dense in terms of sound material – is easily missed. More than this, it is above all the superimposition of three additional versions of the same recording that troubles the straightforward perception of the work's structure.

Figure 9.4 displays the global form of the work. Considerably shorter in duration, the 'added' versions are accelerated versions of the initial recording (yellow), played at two (green) and four (red) times the original speed. All materials thus appear five times in total, be it at three different frequencies and unevenly distributed in the stereo field.

If this complex sound structure – unequivocally the product of editorial interventions applied to the initial recording – clearly cannot be understood as the voice manifesting itself in its pre-symbolic presence, it should be noted that the initial recording itself is no transparent rendering of Chopin's performance either. As there is not enough space here to address its construction in detail, suffice it to say that techniques such as overdubbing, feedback, recording at various speeds and so on dramatically leave their mark on Chopin's vocal input. At this stage already, the latter's immediate presence does not simply resound onto tape, as technological artefacts instead express the unbridgeable distance that post-recording interventions will merely come to accentuate further.

Chopin's method thus seems to emphasize what many perceive to be common to the recorded voice as such. R. Murray Schafer (1977: 90), for example, coined the term 'schizophonia' to refer to the split that separates sound from its technological reproduction. In a not-too-distant past, all sound was profoundly original: 'The human voice travelled only as far as one could shout'. With the emergence of recording technology, sound obtains 'an amplified and independent existence', and the voice 'is no longer tied to a hole in the head but is free to issue from anywhere in the landscape' (Schafer 1977: 90). Whereas Cox (2018: 77) suggests that recording thus 'promises a return to the presence of the voice', Schafer seems to argue for the reverse. Rather than disclosing an auditory real to us, the recorded voice, separated

from the uttering body, might now become subject to symbolic exchange.¹⁹ Although this is not to suggest that recorded sound *represents* in the manner of a linguistic sign, it at least *re-presents* something that is no longer there.

Whereas Cox, like Kittler, strongly insists on the *registration* of sound, Schafer and many others have instead focused on its *reproduction*. In doing so, a wholly different understanding tends to result. Kittler (1999: 12) suggests that ‘a reproduction authenticated by the object itself is one of physical precision’, yet with a signal-to-noise ratio that would convince few of us today, the phonograph itself seems to suggest otherwise. If the many recording formats that separate our present time from Edison’s hoped to close the gap to achieve a more realistic listening experience, the target of total transparency is bound to remain an ideal. As an after-effect, the recording can only ever approach a sounding presence with which it never coincides.²⁰ Indeed, it is not just that a full transparency between the sounds recorded and reproduced is impossible, even the registration itself necessarily assumes an objectifying listening post. The phonograph, like our ears, never hears the entire picture.²¹

Clearly, the general idea of a phonographic access to the auditory real becomes untenable here, yet Chopin’s methods are all the more challenging in view of Cox’s theory. For how pertinent is the recording’s ‘markedly non-human’ (Cox 2018: 120) functioning in view of its application in a markedly human practice? If Chopin, like many working with sound, finds in the tape recorder a means to organize materials into meaningful structures, the technology is perhaps best understood as an advanced form of writing. Instead of emancipating the voice’s *sounding* from its *saying*, could we say that the tape recorder rather enabled composers to integrate into their musical lexicon what traditionally fell beyond the symbolic reach of the score? The noisy remained, becoming part of the text – could it be that the tape recorder, rather than attending to the voice’s *sounding* as such, ensures the composer’s final *say(ing)*?

If a work such as *Dynamisme Integral* cannot possibly be thought of as passively disclosing the ‘independent reality of sound’, the opposite reading as well ultimately falls short of properly accounting for the work. It is true, of course, that Chopin obtains an unprecedented degree of control over his voice. Even if he could not possibly foresee the precise outcome of his superimpositions, these chance elements by no means subvert the composer’s authority. Rather, the work’s construction is exceptional in that it confronts the perspective of Chopin as a vocal performer with that of the tape’s reconfiguring operations, giving way to a most unusual experience of the voice. Rather than passively opening onto a vocal real by dissociating a sounding from a saying, the tape recorder here actively renegotiates our experience of Chopin’s initial performance. Combining multiple ‘readings’ of the same recording, displacing and stretching it in time and space, *Dynamisme Integral* subverts the voice’s situatedness by offering us a plural experience. If Cox (2011: 155) invites us to think of sound as ‘an anonymous

flux', preceding and exceeding not only listeners but also composers whom, following Cage, are perhaps best understood as its 'curators' more so than 'creators', the antihumanism of his sound art theory does not sit well with Chopin's explicit presence as a vocal performer in his works.²² Even in *Dynamisme Integral*, where the vocal nature of the materials is at times transformed beyond recognition, there are, nevertheless, instances that precisely foreground their physical origin in the uttering body. At the same time, however, and this is true for Chopin's work more generally, he himself appears to become subject to the operations of his machines.

A passage towards the end of *Dynamisme Integral* is exemplary in this regard. Around 3'15", an extremely dense and abstract texture, mostly carried by ear-piercing feedback, quite suddenly dissolves and gives way to a sequence of percussive sounds that are unambiguously identifiable as coughs. Appearing on both the left and right track – separated by a delay interval – these coughing sounds are part of the work's two-fold foundational structure as outlined above. From a listening perspective, the presence of a 'speaker' is naturally assumed here, even if the delayed re-presentation of the sounds across the stereo field already detracts from the latter's vocal authority. More importantly, this quasi-natural echo relation is disturbed as the sequence's reoccurrence is affected by a gradual increase in playback speed. The effect is most unusual: Chopin's quasi-physical presence as an uttering body is confronted with the repurposing of 'his' vocals in technological procedures that draw them away from this origin – the voice emerges as product and input at once. Holding the middle ground between vocal performance and tape composition, what we hear is not so much a (recorded) voice, but a voice in the process of being recorded: Chopin speaks while being spoken. As such, the voice here does not reach us as an autonomous *sounding*, nor do we witness instead the triumph of an omnipotent *saying*. Once again, the voice materializes at/as their intersection.

If we are to draw this conclusion from the global construction of *Dynamisme Integral*, it should be noted here that Chopin's struggles most certainly do not go unnoticed from a local listening. The coughing example already made this clear, and although it is beyond the scope of the present chapter to provide a detailed account of the strategies involved, one additional example might illustrate the point. Chopin's extensive use of feedback throughout the work might be understood as giving a voice to the recording agency.²³ If feedback is commonly avoided as an unpleasant, noisy sensation that disrupts the transmission of an intended signal, Chopin not only welcomes these ear-piercing timbres but foregrounds them by shaping them into melodic contours by tampering with the recording speed of his machine(s).²⁴ Interestingly, the sections of the initial recording that feature such feedback motifs are generally accompanied by Chopin performing a variety of percussive sounds at a mostly steady and rather fast pace. The accelerations foregrounding the feedback sounds as musical material

have the reverse effect on his contribution, in that they often cross a certain threshold at which the individual impulses can no longer be heard. Chopin then literally disappears into the background (noise), giving way to a singing machine. This is just one of the techniques by which Chopin makes the aforementioned tension the very subject of his sound poetry.

Conclusion: The Mic as a Scalpel

Rejecting the fixed normativity of the word, Chopin's turn to 'vocal microparticles' often led him to compare his tape recorder to a microscope, an 'enlarger' that attends to 'our infinite vocal vibrations, that we could not limit to the sounds designated by our 26 letters' (Chopin 1994: 20). Elsewhere, Chopin describes his microphone as a 'probe' (Chopin 2001: 77–78) or – more interestingly – a 'scalpel' (Lentz 1996: 51). Indeed, the connection with the subject of *Rouge* here is difficult to miss. If the skinned one was continuously opposed to his 'particles' in the work's text, which was then said to mirror the skinning itself, Chopin's sound poem similarly explored the tension between the word (*rouge, rouge, rouge*) and the sonic differences subsisting through its continuous repetition. If speech relies on an obscuring of its noisy origin, *Rouge* can be said to move in the opposite direction, starting out from comprehensible language and then – through the tactics addressed above – slowly revealing the sonorous multiplicity hiding underneath. While later works such as *Dynamisme Integral* have often been understood as ridding themselves of the figurative basis in Chopin's early sound poems, the above analysis has demonstrated how a similar tension between saying and sounding remains at stake here too. In many ways then, *Rouge* is programmatic of his entire creative project. Instead of presenting to us, on a magnetic platter, a voice in its full sounding presence or a clean *cut* of an auditory real, Chopin's sound poetry begins at the symbolic surface, staging the *cutting* itself.