

Joan La Barbara

Voice Is The Original Instrument

Arc Light Editions LP

Tapesongs

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The opening track of *Tapesongs* – the second of this pair of reissues of late 1970s LPs by extended vocal techniques pioneer Joan La Barbara – has a funny-peculiar title and a funny-ha ha back story. “Cathing” is the avant garde equivalent of a diss track in a rap feud or a grime MC’s send to a rival from another end in East London. In 1977, La Barbara gave a concert at a Dutch music festival. During the intermission, for reasons lost to history, the audience heard a live radio interview with Cathy Berberian: in many ways, La Barbara’s immediate precursor, an opera diva who incorporated sub-musical sounds like gasps, coughs and laughs into her performance. In the interview, however, Berberian distanced herself from the new school of vocal explorers, dismissing their work as at best “research” and at worst the exhibitionism of “freaks”. The project of pushing the voice to new outer limits had reached “an impasse, a kind of stop”, she opined, adding that no sensible composer would write for “one of those singers” because the resulting work would be too tailored to their inimitable quirks.

Incensed, La Barbara channelled her umbrage into a compelling composition. *Cathing* takes samples from the offending interview, subjects them to harsh electronic treatment, and weaves around these fragments of butchered Berberian a bravura showcase of exactly the kind of vocal acrobatics demeaned by the older singer. Something like five or six layers of vocalising are in play here: palate-clicking tut-tuts that Berberian scholar Kristin Norderval suggests sound like La Barbara taking Berberian to task; quizzical descents that similarly suggest bemused disagreement; a free jazz-like squawk; a deep didgeridoo-like rumble; holy drones like a hovering Estonian choir; a revolving creak. As for the sporadic

bursts of distorted Berberian, these sound like they’ve been suspended in solution until spiky crystals have formed around them. A take-down that eclipses a once admired ancestor on her own terrain, *Cathing* shows how in all the arts competitiveness and generational struggle coexist with the most dispassionately high-minded impulses. Adding an eerie edge to the ‘kill the mother’ subtext is the fact that the names Berberian and Barbara are so close phonetically.

If you ignore the invisible ‘mere’ between the lines of Berberian’s comment, her description of extended vocal techniques as research fits 1976’s *Voice Is The Original Instrument* rather accurately. Take *Voice Piece: One-Note Internal Resonance Investigation*: as the title suggests, this is a testing of the sounding capacities of cavities within the human torso, neck and head. As La Barbara emits nasal chimes, throaty croaks and feedback-like hisses, it’s like she’s playing piano exercises or creating the equivalent of a demonstration disc for a new synthesizer. Influenced by the circular breathing techniques of jazz horn players, *Circular Song* is a test in a different sense: a feat of flexed strength. The lungpower required for any one of her plunging lunges of inhaled and exhaled breath here would likely cause civilians like you or me to faint on the spot. The lattice of ascending and descending moans resembles crisscrossing contrails of fighter jets at an air show.

Probably the most compelling of *Voice*’s three live-recorded pieces, *Vocal Extensions* is the only one subjected to technological tampering: what sounds like reverb and panning were added in real time. From echo creating a fanning effect akin to a peacock’s feathers to a cracked glass sound caused by a vibrato gargle at the back of the throat, *Vocal Extensions* often makes you forget that a human being is the shaping source of these sounds. But at other moments La Barbara’s voice takes on the insistent quality of emotive language, as though you’re eavesdropping a muffled argument

heard through a wall: tones of indignation, accusation, anxiety are discernible, if indecipherable in their details. Then the performance devolves back into near abstract sounds that evoke only the labour of their own creation.

Released in 1978, *Tapesongs* – as its title suggests – builds on the bionic enhancements of *Vocal Extensions*. Primal voice sounds and late 20th century technology converge most audibly on *Cathing* and *Thunder*, where the electronically processed zigzagging whispers and twitters sometimes recall Trevor Wishart’s *Red Bird*. The roll and tumble of two tympani players form a rhythm jungle through which La Barbara darts like a parakeet on fire. *Thunder* takes up the whole of *Tapesongs*’ second side and while exciting, there doesn’t appear to be much reason for it being 23 minutes long, as opposed to, say, nine. Composed for La Barbara by John Cage, *Solo For Voice 45 (From Songbooks)* is the closest thing on either of these albums to recital. For the first time, the listener consciously registers that La Barbara is a soprano: her squiggles, telegraphic dots, flourishes and glyphs suggest the dainty but frantic brush strokes of a calligrapher faced with an insurmountable deadline.

Although composers such as Cage wrote pieces for her or have recruited her gifts for the realisation of particular projects, for the most part La Barbara is a composer-performer. More than that – as the debut album’s title proclaims – she is a composer-performer-*instrument*. In interviews she has compared herself and singers generally to athletes: “vocal cords are muscles” and singers “live” inside their own instrument, so should keep them in good shape.

Her work is founded on the disciplined production of sounds that often connote the body at its most disordered. This is perhaps where Berberian’s disparaging comment about the freakishness of extended vocal performers originates: the sense that

Simon Reynolds
witnesses the
early moments of
composer **Joan La
Barbara** finding
her voice in the
extended vocal
experiments of
her first two
albums

this work exists on the outskirts of the respectable and civilised. La Barbara herself has spoken of “a kind of singing that is impolite in a way, and very, very visceral”. The basic grammar of her compositions – especially on these early works – are sounds associated with loss of composure: the preverbal, sometimes involuntary, noises of exertion, pain, ecstasy, distress. Retching, panting, gasps, sobs, sighs, moans, shivers, dry heaves... At times she’ll recall the shamans of the Venezuelan Amazon, tripped out on DMT, strings of snot hanging from their chins. And La Barbara has talked of picking up tricks from recordings of Balinese monkey chant and Inuit women, with their “vocal games” and breath-pulse rhythms.

La Barbara builds sophisticated conceptual structures out of the raw sounds of embodied existence at its most rudely insistent and intense: the labour of birth, a newborn’s cries, the wordless lulling of a mother, death-rattle croaks, the ululations of mourning widows. Sounds that are less expressive than simply expulsive: the pulmonary pushing of air from the body to relieve incommunicable sensations. Patriarchy associates these kinds of threshold regions of life with a fearsome female power. This may be why extended vocal technique is something of a queendom, from the precursor Berberian, through her friend Meredith Monk, to contemporaries like Diamanda Galàs and Yoko Ono, to more recent figures like Maja Ratkje.

Yet in a larger sense, an abject underside to vocal production is immanent in all singing, no matter how trained or tidy or tame it seems. Voice *is* the hinge between the physical and the mental, the concrete and the conceptual. Voice is where the moist interior of the body – air pushed in vibrational friction through flesh-lined passages and chambers – *sublimes* itself into the abstract mathematical perfection of music. Indeed it is the most strenuously achieved vocal music – choral singing, opera, Tuvan throat singing, and so forth

– that most etherealises itself, creating a disincarnate grace traditionally associated with Heaven or the celestial beyond, with angels, the afterlife and the supernatural. Some of La Barbara’s work touches on this reversibility of the physical and the spiritual, the corporeal and the cosmic: from the 1970s piece *October Music: Star Showers And Extraterrestrials* to 1990’s solo opera *Events In The Elsewhere* (inspired by astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, whose life and work capture the tragedy of man’s questing soul caged in a prison of frail flesh). But then the word spiritual itself comes from *spiritus*, the Latin word for breath.

Listening to La Barbara on these crucial reissues, there’s often a sense of shifting scale – inner and outer, micro and macro, are evoked at different moments, or simultaneously. Sometimes her voice suggests the pre-social – the querulous or agitated sounds of a small child or animal. Sometimes she operates at human scale, her voice taking on an almost theatrical quality, albeit wordless: you half-hear the sounds of old men jabbering in Yiddish or some East European tongue, the low menacing talk of Mafiosi, gouty and portentous grandees from the House of Lords. At other times, her vocal productions are suggestive of industrial processes of smelting, sanding, glazing, the hiss of steam from a cracked boiler. At the largest and most disorienting scale, there is a becoming-geologic or a becoming-cosmic: subterranean rivers (La Barbara spelunking through the deep inner caverns of her body), the friction of continental plates, bubbling magma, solar winds, sunspots.

At such moments of intimate immensity – a Gaston Bachelard phrase borrowed for the title of a work composed by her partner Morton Subotnick in which La Barbara performed as She – her voice is less the original instrument than an originating instrument. At her utmost and outermost. La Barbara sings like a mythological deity breathing the world into existence. □

Mic controller: Joan La Barbara

