On Instruments Versus the Voice
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(This brief essay was written as part of a collection of music appreciation essays designed to help the person who is not a musician find an approach to musical aesthetics.)

It is a grand subject: to explore the difference between the instrumental and the vocal in music ? one worthy of more than one essay. Since the beginnings of human cultural history, there have been voices and there have been instruments. Each does something the other cannot do. The instrumental and the vocal are polar elements in music; they can be very different ? and yet they inform one another.

Our own musical epoch is biased towards instrumental form in new composition. The movement towards modernism and abstraction in music were ? necessarily, as we shall see ? more instrumental than vocal. Modern operatic style has also leaned far more towards the instrumental than the vocal. It ought to be self-evident that this is unfortunate. Opera ? a vocal medium ? has become strongly instrumental in style.

Instruments do some things the voice can not do, and at other times imitate and idealize the voice. The voice does things that instruments cannot do ? and likewise imitates certain things that instruments do well. Things that instruments can do ? that the voice does not do so well ? are the following:

Instruments can often be played at great length with little consideration for tiring.

Instruments can have a much greater pitch range than the human voice (a piano has 88 notes from very low to very high; most voices have a 24 note range at best).

Instruments can be more agile than the human voice and can create notes with greater speed and clarity than the voice.

Because of their increased agility, range, and lack of tiring, instruments can leap from place to place more easily than the voice.

A single instrumentalist may produce two or more simultaneous real musical parts at once; the voice only does this as a freakish occurrence.

The process of making sound on an instrument can be observed externally, both by musician and audience. Observation of how the instrumentalist plays is one of the interesting things at a symphony or a piano concert, for example. (This is not so with the voice, where the production of sound is internal, and cannot be observed ? even by the singer. Vocal sound production is actually felt more than observed.)

What does the voice do better than instruments?

The voice sustains a rich and satisfying tone better than instruments.

The voice is naturally more expressive than instruments. It carries intimate emotion within it better than any instrument.
The voice is more human than instruments; we immediately identify with it as representing ourselves. Instruments are more abstract.

The voice is immediately either feminine or masculine. No instrument is instantly a gender. An instrument may suggest a gender, in an abstract sense, by its range. (For example: The range of a flute parallels a soprano voice but goes higher.)

The music made by the voice is almost always attached to language or at least its elements, and thus it is attached to specific meaning. (Instruments are not attached to language elements in order to make sounds, and their sounds are not wedded to any meaning in particular.)

The differences in the vocal and the instrumental are evidenced by the interesting ways in which they imitate one another. The voice imitates instruments in only one way: it may temporarily become very agile, producing fast notes and leaps but instruments imitate and attempt to become voice-like in many ways:

With any instrument that is capable of doing so, the player uses vibrato a characteristic of the singing voice. (As with the violin.)

Instrumentalists also idealize the emotionality of the voice in the use of ornaments. The turn or trill used in instrumental music takes its cue from the human voice (and from the singing voice of birds). An instrumental melody is often perceived to be stark and soul-less without occasional ornaments.

Instrumental music may attempt to create gender through masculine or feminine endings to phrases. This is always owed to the music written for the instrument. Nonetheless, it is the closest instrumental music gets to having gender.

Instrumental technique often attempts to reach the satisfying sound of the voice or a chorus of voices through strenuous means designed to create fullness of sound.

In regard to this last aspect, more explanation is needed. The instrumental technique most commonly used to create artificial fullness and sustain is simply to repeat a note very quickly, letting the resonance of one note merge into its repeated notes, creating the illusion of greater sustain and fullness of sound. The tremolo technique of the classical guitar (as is found in that most famous guitar piece Recuerdos de la Alhambra by Tárrega) is a prime example. The double-picking style in mandolin playing accomplishes precisely the same effect.

To strike a long note just once and to let it ring as it dies away is not enough for many instruments. It is often better to keep the long note "ringing" by repeated and very fast striking. In this way a long note on an instrument approaches the total fullness of sustain possessed by the voice in a long note. This serves as evidence that supports the point above that the voice produces a richer and more satisfying sustained tone than any instrument.

Normally a long note struck once on an instrument dies away. If it is a wind instrument, then it sustains more fully like the voice and does not die away. But with instruments, long sustained notes create another problem: the ear has more time to "criticize" the tone produced which is always less rich and
varied than that of a human voice. So now the instrumentalist must try to compensate by trying to create as beautiful and rich a tone as possible — adding vibrato (another imitation of the voice).

Long sustained chords on the piano are often not just struck once and then allowed to die. Instead, chords are broken up and repeated through what is known as an "Alberti" figure (as was very common in classical period piano music from Haydn through Schubert and beyond). Through this artifice, a single chord resonates on top of itself creating a fuller sustain.

The greatest pianists are often those who know how to get their instrument to "sing" a melody in the right hand above a full accompaniment in the left hand. The pianist who can do this is said to be able to bring out a "singing quality" from the instrument — and this is not always easy. Instrumentalists rightly try to express themselves in a "singing style". They go the extra mile in expressiveness — because instruments do not have the natural richness and expressiveness of the voice.

From this one may conclude that instruments do more homage to the voice than vice-versa. This is a testament to the often stated maxim "the voice is the greatest instrument of all". However, all this does not take away from the extremely important role of instruments in music. Instruments have had a great deal to do with the idealization of music itself — with those developments in Western musical culture that take music to great heights of ideal form. Indeed, the greatest achievements of Wagner and his followers, and Verdi and Puccini and their followers, was to bring symphonic form (which carries with it heightened drama) into opera. The idealized world of the symphony thus had a profound impact on operatic form.

Our purpose here, however, is to point out the differences between voices and instruments. These differences result in differences in the music written for them. Good vocal music has qualities that are related to its nature and to what the voice can do best.

Vocal music, therefore, often or has the following qualities:

It is mostly linear and smooth in line.

It is not tiring to the singer.

It often has natural (short) embellishments.

It allows for long sustained tones.

It is tied to words and meanings that should go with the musical emotion.

Instrumental music may have very different qualities:

It may display agility, speed, and complication unthinkable for the voice.

Through complication, a single line may imply more than one line.

It may display complication of voice parts, with many parts played by one person.
It may display a variety of articulation, especially in short notes.

It may indulge in leaps of very wide range.

It may reach an extreme of activity which seems tireless and perpetual.

It may create range of strange tones impossible to the voice.

From the above considerations on the differences between voices and instruments and their music, one may conclude that there is a set of polarities between them. These poles are not absolute? as we have seen? for one imitates the other and one crosses over to the style of the other. Nonetheless, the poles are profound. The voice is intimate, human, and tied to meaning; instruments tend to be objective and abstract. The voice is only felt and heard; instruments are also observed. The voice is specific in gender and meaning; instruments are vague in meaning and without gender. The voice tends to unity of line; instruments to complexity. In a philosophical sense, the voice is meaning, the instrument abstraction; the voice is original; instruments are imitation.

What may be said about opera after pondering such things? It is a given that opera is a medium dependent upon the voice? so it should be obvious that any operatic style that is mostly instrumental in nature is a weaker form than one that is vocal in style. And yet there exists today a predominance of operas that are instrumental in style. Worst of all are those works that continually ask the singer to sing music that is instrumental in nature. The most obviously instrumental technique found in new opera is that of asking the singer to perform wide leaps between pitches? not as a special effect, but continually? in both recitative and arioso. Other operas that are instrumental in style do not let the voice do what it does best? sustain long lines rich in tone. Still others apply abstract concepts to opera? and this also is instrumental in nature. It is not incorrect to say that a twelve tone opera is fundamentally one that is instrumental in nature.

We might also conclude that operas that are not concerned about gender are more instrumental and cerebral in nature. The nature of gender in man and woman is fundamentally vocal? because the voice is always a gender. The more cerebral an opera is? the more it ignores what is specifically masculine and feminine? the more instrumental it becomes. This might explain why so many modern operas? while their libretti purport to be concerned with aspects of love? are really instrumental in nature and therefore sexless.

Operas that are instrumental in nature also tend to the pictorial and not to the emotional? for as we have noted, instruments have much more to do with observation and abstraction than the voice. In early opera, instrumental interludes? like the pastorale? provided a welcome relief from intense vocal experience? from music which was strongly concerned with love, emotion, and meaning. The pastorale in Handel's Messiah is a wonderful example of this relief. Even as late as the romantic and impressionist periods, the picturesque symphonic interlude became an important stylistic element in verismo opera? as is witnessed by the impact of the famous symphonic interlude in Cavalleria Rusticana.

But with the advent of abstraction as a basis for a complete musical style? such as was found in the twelve-tone system? abstraction was forced upon opera, and it necessarily became instrumental?
vocal? in nature. There is no need for instrumental relief in most new operas, for new opera is already predominantly instrumental. Today, a truly vocal moment comes as relief.

The instrument is pre-eminent when it comes to abstraction in music. That is why the era of modernism and abstraction is un-vocal in nature? and opera suffers. Those composers who attempt to be truly vocal, and thus? vocally melodic? find themselves quite challenged in this era of abstraction. To undertake a style driven by vocal melody is to swim against the current of modernism and to strive against suppositions of irrelevance in style. And yet it is a journey that must be engaged for the sake of the health of opera in our time.