Towards the Analysis of Verbal Text Intelligibility in Contemporary Vocal Music

GUNDEGA ŠMITE

Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music

ABSTRACT: The inquiry in the problem of the verbal text intelligibility is in the focus of the article. The verbal text in the musical work can preserve or, on the contrary, lose its communicative potential. The research on verbal text intelligibility is a complex and multidimensional issue, which requires an interdisciplinary approach. Four main factors that influence the verbal text intelligibility, are related to the performer, listener, environment and composer's approach. The inquiry in all four factors is essential, though each of them can be discussed also separately. This article relates to the inquiry of the fourth factor – the music and text conjunction (composer's approach). The purpose of many contemporary composers is not to reflect the meaning of text in a comprehensive level. The priority often becomes a musical text itself, where the verbal text functions as one of the musical elements. The communication of verbal text is influenced by many factors of music and word relationships – vocal style, reflection of prosody, tessitura, the text condition, texture and one special factor – the realisation of verbal text. The analysis, which is focused on the intelligibility level of the verbal text within the score, will be presented with short excerpts from the choral composition *Le Temps scintille...* (2003) by Latvian composer Mārtiņš Viļums.

KEYWORDS: *verbal text intelligibility, linear disposition, masking, modification*

THE intelligibility of verbal text has been a keen question in music history overall, where words and music are conjoined. The verbal text in the musical work can preserve or, on the contrary, lose its communicative potential. Pierre Boulez has proclaimed the following, emphasizing the role of various vocal expressions nowadays that can make the verbal text more or less comprehensible:

> *The conjunction of poetry and music involves many aspects, that relate to the prosody and declamation. Does a poem need to be recited or spoken? Nowadays there are a plenty of vocal expressions to be used, thereby the communication will be influenced from them as well as more or less stated intelligibility of the text* (Boulez [1958] 1986: 177).

Since new trends in the approach to the verbal text have appeared in the 20th century, the communicative function of the verbal text often becomes secondary. An aspect of phonetical quality often becomes primary, or the verbal text is subordinated to the compositional techniques, which remarkably reduces the level of intelligibility. The purpose of

many contemporary composers is not to reflect the meaning of text in a comprehensive level, which frequently functions as "centre et absence" phenomena[1], defined by Pierre Boulez (1963). The priority has become a musical text itself, where the verbal text functions as one of the musical elements.

Though the text intelligibility is not just a problem of composer's interpretation. The language is one of the primary modes of communication. According to cognitive psychology research, sung text is perceived with the same cognitive approach as speech, though the specifics of sung text can interfere with our perception of narrative. The research on verbal text intelligibility is a complex and multidimential issue, which requires an interdisciplinary approach, comprising cognitive psychology, acoustics and linguistics. Four main factors, related to verbal text intelligibility, have been defined as being related to the:

1) music and text conjunction (composer's approach),

2) performer (diction, articulation, etc.),

3) environment (acoustics, etc.),

4) listener (perception) (cf. Fine, Ginsgorg 2007).

Four factors influencing the VTI[2]			
Level linked to the VTI encoded in a composition	Level linked to the VTI appearant in a performance	Level linked to the VTI in the context of environment	Level linked to the perception aspects
Composer	**Performer**	**Environment**	**Listener**

Only the inquiry of all four factors can lead to satisfactory results, though each of the factors should be discussed also separately.

In this paper I will discuss an inquiry into the **first factor**, probably the most simple one, but still very important: the music and text conjunction, which is related to the composer's approach of conjoining text and music. The research subject of this factor is the score, where the level of verbal text intelligibility has been encoded. The parameters that refer to this factor, can be:

1) the specifics of the vocal style (speech/recitation/different ways of singing, voice instrumentalisation, use of extended techniques, that can reduce the intelligibility),

2) tessitura (high or low; or sometimes the verbal text is more comprehensible if it is exposed in the separated tessitura[3]),

[1] Boulez has proposed an idea of the literal text that is in the centre of the pre-compositional phase for a composer, but in the process of composition (as well as result) it can become absent (Boulez [1958] 1986: 183–198).

[2] Verbal text intelligibility.

[3] This aspect relates to choral music and electroacoustical music with voice where different layers of the same source are conjuncted.

3) reflection of prosody (considered or distorted),

4) the text condition (primary or fragmented).

I would like to emphasize one more position, which could be labeled as **verbal text realisation** in the vocal composition, that features more specific aspects of the compositional practise, demonstrating specific aspects of verbal text integration in the texture.

1. **The linear disposition** can be observed if the verbal text has been transmited 'verbatim' – without repetitions or with some exceptional repetitions. The primary goal of the composer is to disclose the meaning of the text. The linear disposition can be realized as:

• horizontaly linear disposition: the text has been set in monorhytmical disposposition in all voices,

• diagonally linear disposition: the text has been set as diagonal transmission from one voice to another as a parallel to *Klangfarbenmelodie* principle.

2. **The structural modification** – the syntax of the verbal text has been reflected in the musical text in a changed condition (from a single word to whole form). The components of the verbal text are reduced, shortened or repeated. It is possible to separate two levels of the structural modification:

• low level structural modification, when there are minimal structural changes observed in the musical text comparing to the verbal text. It can be linked to slight changes of form of the verbal text (for example, the poem is not set in its whole, since one of the verses has not been used),

• high level structural modification can be observed, when the phrases and words are separated into smaller morphological units and the narrative of the verbal text has been disarrranged.

3. **Masking**[4] **–** can be adapted to the situation, when the fragment or fragments of the verbal text are interlocked together in different temporality (within different voices), therefore the verbal text loses its intelligibility and a communicative function. First of all it is essential to separate too general levels:

• low level masking (consisting of two to three textual layers),

• high level masking (consisting of four and more textual layers).

Now it is possible to specify two levels:

[4] Masking as a technique of verbal text exposition has been examined in Peter Stacey's disertation *Contemporary Tendencies in the Relationship of Music and Text with Special Reference to Pli selon pli (Boulez) and Laborintus II (Berio).* Though the author substaniates the specifics of the masking related to his analysis, he does not specify the different angles of it (cf. Stacey 1989).

- monotextual masking – simultanious conjunction of the fragments of the same verbal text,

- polytextual masking – simultanious conjunction of two or more texts (from different fragments of the same verbal text till conjuction of the verbal text from various sources).

If the differentiation of languages are important aspect of the verbal text conception, it is possible to specify:

- monolinguistic masking – conjunction of the different fragments of the text, but just in one language,

- polylinguistic masking – the simultanious conjunction of texts in different languages

4. **Musical integration** occurs when the syntaxis of musical language is dominating and subordinates the verbal text to its features as:
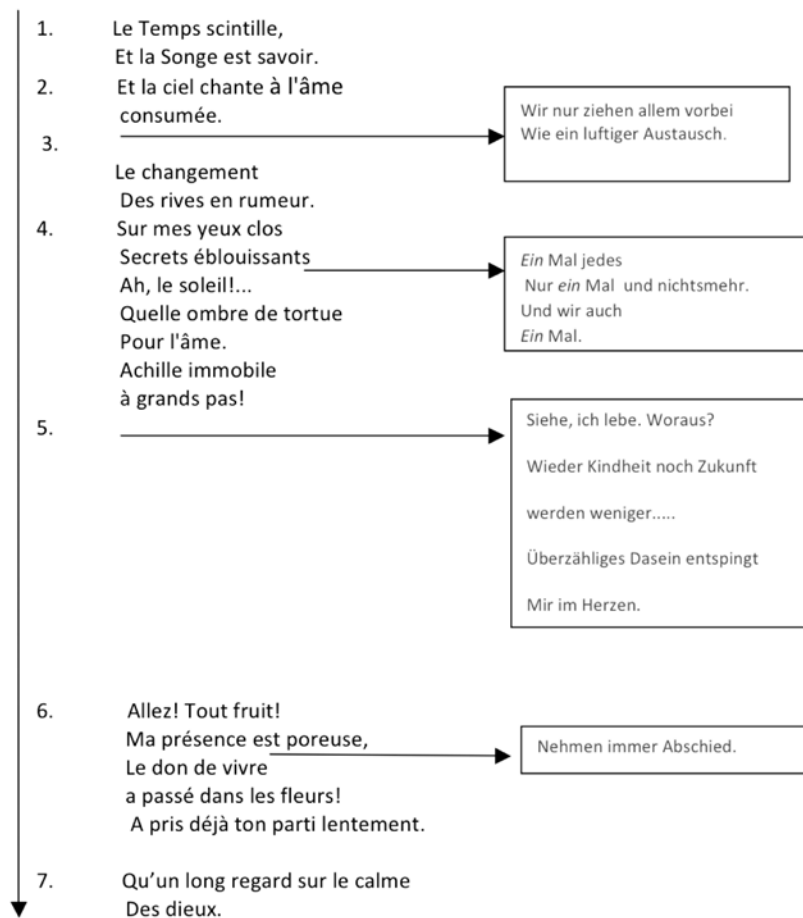
- structural integration (verbal text appears integrated in the composition technique, for example, a separate phoneme can serve as an element of seria),

- sonoric integration (verbal text, most usually – an asemantic text can become a source of the musical text, musical expression itself).

Only the first type of the verbal text realisation in the vocal composition represents high intelligibility, others are demonstrating low or medium level. Though in any case the intelligibility of the verbal text is very specific in each composition and requires an individual approach.

I would like to give an insight of analysis of verbal text intelligibility with some fragments from the choir composition *Le Temps scintille…* (2003) by the Latvian composer Mārtiņš Viļums.[5] The composition represents an individualised approach to the text setting and language – Viļums has selected and united fragments of poetic texts by Rainer Maria Rilke and Paul Valéry in two different languages – German and French, choosing excerpts from poetry by both authors (*Le cimetière marin* by Valéry and *Duineser elegien* by Rilke), that reflects the poetic idea of vanishing existence and creating poetry form in precompositional phase – cento.[6] Based on the linguistic and phonetic differences of both texts, the composer has created harmony, texture and form of the composition – the work consists of seven phases related to the chosen fragments and their juxtaposition.

211

[5] Mārtiņš Viļums (1974) is one of the most remarkable composers from the generation that has been born in 70ies of the 20th century. This generation (also composers Andris Dzenītis, 1978, Santa Ratniece, 1977, Ēriks Ešenvalds, 1977 among others) became apparent at the change of the millenium, in the historical period of the growth of independent Latvia, expressing a direct influence and link to the Western-European avant-garde music traditions – that have brought up a radically new musical language and aesthetical thought in the context of Latvian music. Mārtiņš Viļums has studied the accordion in the Jāzeps Mediņš Secondary Music school, then composition in the preparatory course for the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Music Academy Composition faculty. Later he moved to Lithuania, Vilnius, graduating from the Lithuania Music Academy composition department (graduate studies – with Osvaldas Balakauskas and Julius Juzeliūnas, postgraduate studies – with Rimantas Janelauskas). Especially important has been his studies with music theoretician and composer Janelauskas – a very solitary and conceptual thinker. The composition for Latvian Radio choir group *Le Temps scintille...* (2003) as Viļums' first choral composition brought him a victory at the International Rostrum of Composers in 2005.

[6] Cento – antique poetry form, that consists only from the fragments from poems by other authors (cf. Cuddon 1999: 122–123).

1. Le Temps scintille,
    Et la Songe est savoir.
2. Et la ciel chante à l'âme
    consumée.
3.

    Le changement
    Des rives en rumeur.
4. Sur mes yeux clos
    Secrets éblouissants
    Ah, le soleil!...
    Quelle ombre de tortue
    Pour l'âme.
    Achille immobile
    à grands pas!
5.

6. Allez! Tout fruit!
    Ma présence est poreuse,
    Le don de vivre
    a passé dans les fleurs!
    A pris déjà ton parti lentement.
7. Qu'un long regard sur le calme
    Des dieux.

> Wir nur ziehen allem vorbei
> Wie ein luftiger Austausch.

> *Ein* Mal jedes
> Nur *ein* Mal und nichtsmehr.
> Und wir auch
> *Ein* Mal.

> Siehe, ich lebe. Woraus?
>
> Wieder Kindheit noch Zukunft
>
> werden weniger.....
>
> Überzähliges Dasein entspingt
>
> Mir im Herzen.

> Nehmen immer Abschied.

The verbal text intelligibility in *Le Temps scintille...* is determined by four parameters: text realisation, texture, tessitura, speech intontion and vocal style, creating high, medium and low level of text intelligibility. The predominant aspects, related to these parameters are: masking (monolinguistic and polylinguistic) as the verbal text realisation, tessitura, awareness of the speech intonations of the text (which heightens the VTI) and the differentiation of the vocal style, that the composer specifies as articulated, phonetical and shadow sounds – the articulated text is more comprehensible than phonic and shadow sounds that presents just phonemes derived from the text (Viļums 2009).

For defining the predominating level of VTI (high, medium or low), also the composers' conception has to be taken into consideration.

> *For me the most important aspect is the comprehensibility of some*
> *separate words. If we imagine a dolphin, that appears above the level of*
> *water and then dives in, the same is with the verbal text. The appearance*
> *of the separate word with its particular meaning can create a specific*
> *atmosphere* (Viļums 2009).

So, the composer intentionaly has not aimed to reveal the meaning of the text in its whole appearance. Instead of it just the separate words with their semantic content have been specially marked.

At the first phase of the composition the **high level structural modification** as verbal text realisation is reflected in the most evident way. The line from the Valéry's poem: *Le Temps scintille et le Songe est savoir* has been reorganized, and the phrase starts with *Songe* instead of *Le Temps*. It is exposed in the middle tessitura, where the potential of intelligibility is high, but it is converging with other vocal parts where a shadow and phonetic sounds dominates, therefore losing its comprehensiviness. The text is presented simultaneously in 2–4 vocal parts, thus affirming medium between low level monolinguistic and monotextual masking (Example 1). The only comprehensible word appears just from the fifth measure – *scintille*, that is exposed in *falseto* voice in separated tessitura (measures 5–12, Example 2). The level of the VTI is not equal within the phrase (from medium/low at the beginning till medium/high at its second part), but it can be generalised as medium.

Example 1. Mārtiņš Viļums, *Le Temps scintille…*, measures 1–3.

Example 2. Mārtiņš Viļums, *Le Temps scintille…*, measures 5–6.

In comparison the third phase of *Le Temps scintille...* represents a different situation: the text is realised as polylinguistic, where two texts and two languages are simultaneously exposed. That feature reduces the text intelligibility. Also the texture becomes denser – the same text has been exposed simultaneously in 5–7 vocal parts, thus affirming high level polylinguistic masking. In this phase also the tessitura plays an important role: the French text is exposed in very high and low tessitura while for the German text dominates the middle tessitura. The high density of the text is revealed just in the moment, when the texture rarefies and only two voices expose the text (measures 31–32). However the text in German *Wir nur ziehen...*, exposed in tenor voice, at the very beginning of the phrase is comprehensible, since other voices are absent and enter the musical texture gradually. In this case it is possible to determine just an episodical linear disposition of the text at the very beggining of the phase till the moment when other vocal parts overlaps the voice. Regardless of the vocal style – articulated sounds, that highten the potential of higher VTI the preconditions of the verbal text realisation is determinant and the dominating level for this phase is medium/low.

Example 3. Mārtiņš Viļums, *Le Temps scintille…*, measures 23–24.

The analysis of the verbal text intelligibility – while examining the composer's approach – can not be strictly determined and requires an individualized approach, since the parameters that influences the comprehensibility of verbal dimention of the vocal composition can differ in each case. Also the composers' conception of text setting has to been taken under consideration. In Mārtiņš Viļums' concept the importance of intelligibility of separate words and their meaning (instead of whole verse) is the most important aspect and analysis has to embrace it.

References

Boulez P. (1958). Ton, Wort, Synthese. Translated by M. Cooper as: Sound, word, synthesis. In: P. Boulez. *Orientations: Collected Writings*. Edited by J.-J. Nattiez. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1986, pp. 177–182.

Boulez, P. (1963). *Poésie – centre et absence – musique*. Translated by M. Cooper as: Poetry – centre and absence – music. In: P. Boulez. *Orientations: Collected Writings*. Edited by J.-J. Nattiez. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1986, pp. 183–198.

Cuddon, J. A. (1999). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Revised by C. E. Preston. 6th edition. England: Penguin Books.

Fine, P., & J. Ginsgorg (2007). *Perceived Factors Affecting the Intelligibility of Sung Text*. Paper and poster at CIM07, the Third Conference on Interdisciplinary Musicology, in Tallinn, Estonia, 15–19 August.

http://www.uni-graz.at/~parncutt/cim07/CIM07%20Proceedings/CIM07_Fine-Ginsborg_Perceived%20factors%20sung%20text.pdf

Stacey, P. (1989). *Contemporary Tendencies in the Relationship of Music and Text with Special Reference to Pli selon pli (Boulez) and Laborintus II (Berio)*. New York and London: Garlandia Publishing Inc.

Viļums, M. (2009). Personal interview. 4 January.