The Disabled Body in Babbitt’s Philomel and Wishart’s Red Bird
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The myth of Philomela, from Ovid’s sixth book of Metamorphoses, is a disturbing one, which describes the brutal rape of Philomela at the hands of her brother-in-law King Tereus, who then mutilates Philomela by cutting her tongue out. In this paper I will explore two electroacoustic works that engage with this myth—Milton Babbitt’s Philomel (1964) and Trevor Wishart’s Red Bird (1978). I investigate how the sound design in each piece constructs the mutilated, disabled body of Philomel. As Laurie Stras writes in an essay about vocal trauma, “The disrupted voice conveys meaning even before it conveys language; […] there is more being communicated by the voice than the words it speaks” (Stras 2006, 173). I also explore whether the sound design permits Philomel to tell her own story, to portray her own body. In the myth, Philomela weaves a tapestry telling the story—a process that has been likened to Babbitt’s serial matrix-like weaving of the pitch classes and partitions throughout his electroacoustic piece (Babbitt 1976, Mead 1994, Lewin [1991] 2006, Adamowicz 2011)—and her sister Queen Procne reads and understands the message. At the height of the Baccanalian festival, Procne and Philomela murder Tereus’ and Procne’s son Itys in revenge, cook his body, and serve it to Tereus. In a rage, Tereus pursues the sisters through the woods, where near the moment of apprehension, the gods turn all of them into birds (Hamilton 1995).

It is here, in the wooded pursuit and transformation, that American poet-laureate John Hollander’s commissioned prose poem picks up the story. Complicating the notion of the composer in important ways, Hollander’s original text specifies which phrases should be sung by the live soprano (famously and in this recording, Bethany Beardslee) and which should be sung by the taped soprano (also Beardslee; Hollander 1967). Babbitt departs from Hollander’s scheme
in many places, but what I want to emphasize in this paper is that neither Hollander nor Babbitt seem to allow Philomel to remain pre- or post-lingual. My reading is a strong one, which claims that neither Hollander nor Babbitt allow Philomel to vocalize as a disabled woman. (And you are free to disagree: we had quite a debate about this in the comments pane in an earlier draft of this paper.)

The wordless syllabic interplay (Eeeeee) between taped and live soprano that begins the piece lasts for scarcely more than one minute of the nineteen (0:00 – 1:06) (hear audio example 1, opening). Smaller excerpts like this return for only ten to twenty seconds before the second (4:40-5:02) and third (11:19-11:30) sections of the piece. In this sense, the wordless syllables—which ought to be a defining characteristic of the mutilated Philomel and were in fact a creative inspiration for Hollander— are poorly integrated into the sound design. For Hollander at least, wordless meant voiceless; he writes “the voice Tereus shattered / Becomes the tiny voices of night that the God has scattered” (Hollander 1967). This recalls Lennard Davis’s insight that seeing, hearing, and perhaps speaking are so often projected as markers of intelligence (Davis 1995). Without a tongue, Hollander’s Philomel has also no voice. Babbitt missed an opportunity to counter this misperception, to use melismas and vocalises to allow Philomel to display her vocal power, to sing her body albeit without words.

Improbably, Philomel narrates her own story of flight and reflects upon her own pain; Babbitt usually uses the taped soprano to echo and repeat what Beardslee has just sung (hear audio example 2, strophic interlude). The tape and the live singer do not seem to portray the inner and outer voices of Philomel. Instead, the piece turns away from the mutilated Philomel, unable to hear her as she is. As Siebers (2008, 43) writes, “The sight [sound] of a person with a tender organ disables able-bodied people.” For Babbitt and Hollander, the mutilated Philomel is in need of rehabilitation, and this piece provides it, refusing to hear her mutilated body as it is.

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1 Philomel’s story is “quintessentially operatic, with a great transformation scene in which a soprano who has been singing nothing but vocalises or choppy syllables suddenly can break out into both sustained melody and language” (Hollander 1967, 134). Show a slide of this but do not read it out.
The text is hardly more sympathetic to Philomel as a victim of a brutal rape, a sentiment that Susan McClary hinted at some years ago (McClary 1989); when Philomel says “Feel a million tears” the tape responds, from a distance and channeled to the left, “Not true tears.” Later, when Philomel is desperately fleeing the enraged Tereus, Hollander suggests that it is the forest that is violating Philomel: “I feel trees in my hair / And on the ground / Honeymelons fouling / My knees and feet” and “Fast-tangled in lust / Of these woods so dense / Emptied, unfeeling and unfilled / By trees here where no birds have trilled” (3:24 – 3:39). If this scene reenacts the rape, at least in Philomel’s memory, the responsibility for the brutal crime is strangely displaced from Tereus. When we listen to this example in a moment, note the extremely high tessitura of the text beginning “Fast-tangled.” We hear Philomel at her most feminine, but also at her most vulnerable, at the moment of the rape; the edge of her range marks her femaleness at the same time as it positions the listener at the extreme of her psychic tolerance for violation. Later, words that can be strongly associated with the feminine, including “blood” and “shrill” are set with strangely low, even mangled masculine tessitura (hear audio example 3, fast-tangled, blood, shrill). The sound design looks away from the raped and mutilated body of Philomel. At the same time, it takes away her agency to account for her crime, name her perpetrator, and transform herself in and through her pain.

It seems fruitful to view British composer Trevor Wishart’s *Red Bird* as interacting with the Philomel mythology; though Wishart does not construe his piece this way, he does explicitly reference Lévi-Strauss’ *The Raw and the Cooked* and situate *Red Bird* as articulating the deep structures of myth and metaphor in sound.\(^2\) In this work of *musique concrète*, Wishart explores the transition between birds and human sounds, extending this structure into a contemplation of the complicated relationship between the soundscapes of nature (garden) and machines (factory).\(^3\) In a longer version of this paper, the entire narrative structure of the Philomel myth could be

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\(^2\) “*Red Bird*, like any other myth or work of art, means what people take it to mean…” Wishart [1996] 2002, p. 169. Show a slide of this but do not read it out.

\(^3\) show a slide of Fig. 8.3 Wishart [1996] 2002 p. 170.
mapped on to the sound design. For the sake of time tonight, I will simply reflect upon a few specific places where Wishart’s sound design explores the boundary between woman and bird, and where the listener is productively challenged to explore this boundary between self and other, perhaps imagining the trauma and transformation of Philomel.


To my ears, the first 10 or so seconds of the piece are a sonic microcosm of the entire myth in extremely abbreviated yet also shockingly confrontational form (hear audio example 4, *Red Bird* opening). Much longer sections of the 45-minute piece elaborate on the events encapsulated in this microcosm. Wishart often leaves us on the border—for example where phonemes turn into language, or language disintegrates into noise; or where human sounds become animal, as in this next example where we may aurally witness the mythic transformation of the mutilated Philomel into bird form (hear audio example 5, *Red Bird* human to bird). It is uncomfortable, unpleasant, and challenging to be left here in the borderland. In this piece, Wishart does it again and again. But I wonder if there isn’t some productive tension here too. In contrast to Babbitt/Hollander’s aestheticized, romanticized Philomel, Wishart allows us to hear
the mutilated Philomel as she is. It seems to me that when we hear the voice—particularly the mutilated or distressed voice—we are invited to blur the boundary between our self and the disabled, traumatized Philomel. As Stras says, “When listening to the damaged voice, we are susceptible […] to the negative affect it transmits” (Stras 2006, 183).

Wishart construes the metaphorical structure of the piece as relating to the binary opposition between closed and open (Wishart [1996] 2002, pp. 168-169). He gives three examples for how one’s perspective might vacillate between closed and open in sociopolitical, linguistic, and natural philosophy spheres. We might add “bodily” to this chart, reflecting the disability studies notion that in a closed society, whose rules are defined by the “ideology of ability” (Siebers 2008, 10), bodies must either look “normal” or be ostracized, ignored, institutionalized, controlled, exterminated. In the open attitude, the human condition is defined by a full range of bodies, abilities, and permutations in physical appearance (Siebers 2008). It’s worth exploring whether Wishart constructs such a utopia in sound. To my ears, Red Bird moves significantly in this direction—often by challenging the listener to hear and exist in the porous boundary spaces—thereby allowing listeners to question what it means to be human.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Binary oppositions for Red Bird</th>
<th>Closed</th>
<th>Open</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociopolitical</td>
<td>“human society is a functional totality in which every person has an assigned role”</td>
<td>“the world is rationally orderable only up to a point”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>“meaning results from the interaction of semantics and grammar”</td>
<td>“meaning is approximated via semantics and grammar, but unfixed”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Philosophy</td>
<td>“the world is reducible to natural laws”</td>
<td>“the world is well-ordered but not deterministic”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodily</td>
<td>acceptable bodies look “normal”, i.e., conform to hegemony for class, race, gender, and physical appearance/ability</td>
<td>the human condition is defined by a full range of bodies, abilities, and permutations in physical appearance</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 1: Wishart’s deep-structure binary oppositions underlying Red Bird, after Sonic Art pp. 168-169. I have added the term “bodily”.

Works Cited


Recordings Cited


Listen to the whole piece here: https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/32495518/Philomel%20for%20soprano%2C%20and%20synthesized%20sound.m4a


Listen to Part I here: https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/32495518/RedBird%20Part%201.m4a

Listen to Part IV here: https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/32495518/RedBird%20Part%204.m4a