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Timbre and the Jazz Voice

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Timbre and the Jazz Voice

timbre: 1. The quality of a sound that distinguishes it from other sounds of the same pitch and volume. 2. The distinctive tone of an instrument or a singing voice. (From the medieval Greek *timbanon*, *American Heritage Dictionary*)

I've been wondering lately about the jazz voice, or more specifically, about why certain jazz singers electrify me. There is Billie Holiday, for example, of whom Ted Gioia writes in his *History of Jazz* "Holiday's range, at best, spanned a scant one-and-a-half octaves. Her voice, moreover, did not project strongly. . . . Holiday lacked the scat-singing chops of an Ella Fitzgerald, the tonal purity of a Sarah Vaughan. . . ." Gioia goes on to explain Holiday's success as a function of timing and phrasing, neither of which do I want to discount. But I ask myself if there isn't a more essential quality than timing and phrasing?

I take out Holiday's 1954 live recording in Cologne, *Billie*, and find her voice breathy, raspy, smokey. She often slips up to a girlish slightness stripped of undertones. Phrases end with deep juicy quavers. Her voice catches, breaks, slides. There is always, and this may be the key I'm looking for, a double quality to any single note. The tensions those dualities set up arc across my brain, through my senses. I twitch like Galvani's frogs when stretch between two poles of a battery. And remember the electrifying experience that set me to thinking about the jazz voice.

As the winter drew to a close in mid-March (no one could foresee the snows of mid-June), Diana Krall took a capacity audience at the Salt Lake City Hilton by storm. The haughty (or was it shy?) singer/pianist was a study in black and white: black silk coat and pants, straight blond hair, stilt-heeled black shoes, black earrings, heavy black eyelashes and black-penciled eyebrows marking a white face, white hands stretching from black sleeves to strike the white-and-black keys of a black Baldwin grand. Two touches of color only: a blue silk shirt and a slash of red lipstick.

As a performer, Krall is distant, disdainful, controlled, and, paradoxically, seductive. When she turned her head and cut her burning eyes to the audience, it felt like she wanted to see and judge. During a breakneck improvised solo on the piano, she reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear – time to spare.

"Peel me a grape, she commanded, crush me some ice / Skin me a peach, save the fuzz for my pillow . . . when I say, 'do it,' jump to it . . . either amuse me or lose me . . . peel me a grape, slowwwwwly." When her lips closed around her teeth and the plosive "p" of the grape, I thought I might expire.

This young woman from Vancouver Island, recording with Russell Malone on guitar and Christian McBride or Paul Keller on bass, is simply remarkable.

Why is that? I wonder. What makes one singer/pianist stand out? While the keyboard chops, the distant and yet intimate personality, the physical presence all

contribute, it reminds me finally that all the great jazz singers have one thing, however varied the manifestations, in common: an unmistakable, singular timbre. What is the quality of Diana Krall's voice?

I remember a heartbreaking catch, a gutwrenching set of modulations, a breathy sexuality. Above all, her voice announces that it works against restriction. The throat that produces the sound feels. . . what? Too tight? Too small? Too present? In any case, its fleshy limits are precisely what give the voice color. Tubes and cavities and chords make the sound, resonate it, curve it back on itself, measure it, restrict it, set it free.

In the liner notes of "All For You," Terry Teachout writes "I once said Diana Krall's voice sounded like wild honey with a spoonful of Scotch, and Diana liked that, though she doesn't make any great claims for her singing. I've always been very shy about singing, she says, and I tried to avoid it whenever I could. I got more work because I could sing, but I didn't like doing it in lounges as a single. I didn't feel I had a clear, precise voice – a pretty voice."

A boy soprano has a clear pure voice. But pure means pure in the sense of lacking something that would make it impure. And that something is the body. (Remember the operatic penchant for castratti?) Krall's voice is not pure.

To test the theory, I listen to DeeDee Bridgewater's "Dear Ella," which edged out Krall's "Love Scenes" for the 1997 Grammy. Here too the thrill, the frisson, the erotic pull of a jazz voice lies exactly between notes, in the broken note, the slant note. Bridgewater is a very different artist from Krall, a fine scat singer, for example, but she too has that double richness of tone, that scratchy jazz timbre in even the clearest notes that catches my attention, arouses my desire.

A jazz singer, if I am on the right track here, sings the body in all its physicality and thus mortality, in its gifted strength and its earthy frailty. A jazz singer's precision is dual, dialectical. Her (or his . . . don't forget Louis Armstrong) timbre reflects, in each note, the improvisational, progressive, unsettled, provocative, questioning beauty of jazz. When she nails a note or phrase, it is a nail with two heads.

Phrasing. Timing. But finally it's timbre that's the *sine qua non* of the jazz voice.

(Bridgewater heated up the Salt Lake night on June 26 as headliner for the Utah Arts Festival. Diana Krall will return to Salt Lake for two concerts in the 1998-1999 Jazz at the Hilton series.)

Scott Abbott