Introduction

The original idea for this book was for a single-authored volume by a singer, giving a broad historical overview of singing in a global context. One of the anonymous readers of the proposal for Cambridge University Press gently suggested that this might be rather a lot for one person to undertake, and sure enough, several missed deadlines later the project morphed into a book with two authors: one a specialist in Western singing and the other in non-Western music.

The first thing we should say is that it is *a* history of singing, not *the* history. This is not just because trying to write a comprehensive history of all the singing in the world really would, even if possible, require a vast team and not just two authors, but also because there is no way of knowing exactly what the history is. The chapter on origins makes it clear that the when, as well as the why and what, of the origins of singing cannot be established with any certainty. There is also a danger of getting bogged down in the question of what singing actually is. A great deal of vocal tract activity, often a long way from bel canto or crooning, is accepted as singing even if actual pitches are not always discernible. Inuit 'throat singing', the whispered songs of Burundi and even the singing of Tom Waits all rely on timbre and rhythm rather than pitch and tune yet are readily classified as singing.[1] Laurence Picken, a biologist as well as a distinguished musicologist, wrote 'This is indeed song: the fundamental frequency of phonation generated by the larynx is varied systematically. Song is nothing else.'[2] While we have a scientific description of singing we must distinguish between 'song' as physical act and 'singing' as meaningful human activity.

[1] Jonathan Stock's transcription of a Burundi whispered praise song notates the voice on an unpitched single line, with the explanation 'rhythm only'; see his *World Sound Matters* (London: Schott Educational Publications, 1996): 57–9.

[2] From the foreword to Peter Fletcher, *World Musics in Context: a Comprehensive Survey of the World's Major Musical Cultures* (Oxford University Press, 2001): 10.

Still, it would be impossible to write a history of singing without including some history of songs and singers.

Regarding how to approach even a small sample from the bewilderingly diverse music cultures of the world, the question inevitably arises not only of how the strands may be brought together but also of how perceptive and informed the resulting accounts may be. Sources will vary hugely in nature and validity. Writings in the English language inevitably predominate, meaning that much of the information has been documented by 'outsiders' who, nevertheless, for the most part strive to convey as closely as possible the 'insider' terminology, perception and, above all, evaluation of what the music means. This can bring to the history all sorts of legends and beliefs which do not accord with other available facts; but they must nonetheless be admitted and appreciated as they are what 'insiders' believe and therefore help to shape their perception of music and its meaning. Because of this need to elevate the 'insider' view, the 'outsider' researcher shrank away from the temptation to impose his or her views and attempted instead to become an idealised conduit through which ideas might flow directly from their source into publication. The data could be challenged even then and the whole methodology brought into question through the realisation that the researcher was not a neutral conduit but more of a filter.

Perhaps we are turning full circle to the first half of the twentieth century, an era when Western scholars followed the obvious path of comparing what they discovered with what they already knew: an approach disparagingly known as comparative musicology. It is very hard to put all pre-conceived ideas out of our heads and pretend that unfamiliar music is not somehow being evaluated and understood in terms of what we already know and think of as music. In so doing we are seeking out points of reference, the universals which are a major impetus behind cross-cultural research. If there are no universals then it becomes impossible for one culture to hear another culture's music as music. We even go outside our species and find song among the birds and whales. At the same time the warm embrace of such perceptions leads to obstructive fallacies, perhaps the most familiar of which is the notion of music as a universal language. Picken made the connection from this misconception to much broader methodological concerns: 'That which would begin to make sense of "ethnomusicology" as a scientific discipline is a primary recognition and acceptance of the "otherness" of music, as compared with language.'[3]

[3] Ibid.: 26.

While music is not the same as language in the first place, and therefore cannot be adequately compared to it, the analogy throws up at least one useful notion. Language is universal (as is music) but languages are mostly mutually unintelligible, so the process of translation is necessary. The fallacy also rests on the assumption that music needs no such process, implying an instant understanding. We may enjoy listening to a poem or watching a drama entirely in a foreign language we do not understand, revelling in the sounds and soaking up the special atmosphere, and this is really how we listen to so much 'World Music' (a poor term largely replacing the old-fashioned – and even worse – 'exotic'). So the ways in which we approach foreign cultures – and what our responses are – must be an abiding concern, which extends to the ways in which these cultures are presented. The reader should be aware of the dynamics and potential for partial understanding and even misinformation.

Laurence Picken set out an analytical framework, admitting both insider and outsider views, and issued a warning which we do well to heed:

> Reading ethnomusicological writings of the last decade, a biologist is at times saddened to witness the attempt to comprehend, and give definitive, all-embracing description, to complex ritual processes. Our minds are not equipped so to do; our most useful intellectual attribute is that of analytical discrimination. Comprehensive description, whether diachronic or synchronic, eludes us. The modern abusive use of the term 'reductionist' is symptomatic of the age. At times it seems to be used almost as if any analytical approach to any aspect of culture is to be regarded as 'racist'.[4]

The reference to diachronic or synchronic description also appears to jeopardise the attempt to trace a history, and the thrust of Picken's remarks is not only to sound a note of caution but may also seem to paint us into a corner. Ethnomusicology is not lacking in ambition and even seems to be trying to do everything. An ethnomusicologist is often perceived to be someone studying music outside the Western classical tradition and having some knowledge of all such music. How this dauntingly extensive knowledge is obtained is to be left open, though if it is to be acquired at all it must be primarily of a secondary nature, relying on the work of others rather than on one's own primary research (usually through fieldwork). To paraphrase Wittgenstein: whereof one has not undertaken fieldwork, thereof one must be silent. The reliance on fieldwork lies at the heart of ethnomusicology, directing its fundamental research methodology, but it presents a contradiction when attempting a wide survey, such

[4] Ibid.: 23.

as the one for which Picken wrote his trenchant foreword, or this one. The contradiction emerges whenever the scope of the research becomes over-ambitious and the critical reception is correspondingly unforgiving.

A good example is the Cantometrics project of the 1960s, devised by the great folk-song collector Alan Lomax (1915–2002). Despite the controversy surrounding the project it was a notable attempt to help us understand and classify the wealth of singing styles around the world by correlating singing styles with social and cultural data. It was never really put to extensive use, yet its contribution to our understanding of what singing is, how it varies and how it can sound remarkably similar in cultures separated by thousands of miles should not be ignored and for this reason at least a brief discussion of Cantometrics must have its place in a history of singing. Lomax asked some original and important questions; the fact that he could not be expected to find all the answers should not lead to the outright dismissal of his controversial theories. He was in many ways ahead of his time in realising, by the 1950s, that staff notation was inadequate to capture the essence of folk song as it could not express the texture and gestures that are essential to the singing style, and certainly could not give any clue as to the music's social function.

On a field trip to Spain in 1953 (and later in Italy) Lomax perceived a relationship between the singers' high-pitched, strained and emotional sound and the high degree of sexual prohibition (specifically of female pre-marital intercourse). In more permissive areas the singing tended to be lower, softer and more relaxed. These observations led not only to the whole idea of Cantometrics but also perhaps to its most notorious aspect. They are also held up as an example of the flaws in the project, most notably the danger of generalisation. Vocal tension is hard to determine simply by listening and on that basis the hardest criterion on which to reach a consensus. One would, moreover, expect singing style to reflect more than just one aspect of a culture.

Lomax formulated and applied the aims and methods of Cantometrics in the 1960s in collaboration with Victor Grauer, a composer and musicologist, at Columbia University (New York).[5] Cantometrics was a statistical method to study the performance style of singing rather than the

[5] Lomax met Grauer in 1960 during a visit to Wesleyan University, Connecticut, where Grauer was working on an MA under the supervision of the distinguished anthropologist and ethnomusicologist David MacAllester (Gage Averill in Ronald D. Cohen (ed.), *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings 1934–1997* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003): 237). Work began in earnest on the generously funded Cantometrics project the following year. Grauer is still helping to keep some interest in it alive today, largely via blogs.

actual songs. It was nothing if not hugely ambitious, and its pretensions were bound to attract a proportionate amount of criticism. Cantometrics attempted to establish something universal, an attempt which was attractive both to music lovers and scholars, as the universality of music and the ability to appreciate so much across such divergent cultures is almost an anchor for the study of music. At the same time it is fraught with problems as so much of what might be glibly termed 'universal' is no such thing and a search for the universal may be no more than an attempt to force irreconcilable variants together under a single world view. To give Lomax and Grauer credit for a pioneering achievement, Cantometrics did seek a better understanding of music and its social function – a quest which has never ceased to be the cornerstone of ethnomusicology. Cantometrics must be treated as a heuristic, rather than a purely objective method. In its very broad-based comparisons it compelled a union, not entirely comfortable, between specialists and generalists. It rested on a set of premises: how people sing is influenced by the dominant values of their society and affected by modes of subsistence, political and class structures, sexual mores, treatment of children, and so on; the singing varies according to social structure, so solo and unison singing go with social cohesion and centralisation, while more varied group singing without a leader goes with individualistic societies and egalitarian groups; the distribution of vocal styles relates to the distribution of societies, so when dissimilar societies resemble each other according to these criteria their singing styles will also resemble each other; this will permit such groups to be placed into much larger regional groupings.

Part of the criticism of the methodology involved in Cantometrics was that the investigation relied on decontextualised recordings and the sample of ten songs per culture was deemed too small to be reliable; yet the real question was not the size but whether the sample was representative. Lomax relied to some extent on the collectors themselves to choose representative selections, according to their expertise and experience, which could vary from one collector to the next. While not generally adopted by ethnomusicologists Cantometrics has by no means fallen into complete obscurity or survived merely as a historical aberration.[6] Statistical analysis is problematic and perhaps less appealing to ethnomusicologists than to scientists. Yet it is precisely the lack of scientific objectivity and rigour,

[6] Gage Averill pointed out, however, that of 'the many obituaries and tributes that followed Alan Lomax's death in 2002, few even mentioned Cantometrics, the centrepiece of his academic project' (in Cohen, *Alan Lomax*: 234).

as well as a reliance on hypothetical conclusions, that led to the rejection of Cantometrics within the humanities. A different explanation was offered by Grauer: simply that Lomax was not an academic and resisted any temptation to become one, but in so doing isolated himself not only from an influential army of arbiters of intellectual worth but also from a potential body of graduate students who could carry on and champion his work.[7] Worse still, Lomax failed to make his database readily available, thus denying even those wishing to adopt Cantometrics any real means of doing so.[8] Unsurprisingly, therefore, Cantometrics has fallen to scientists to attempt a greater degree of scientific objectivity and rigour, finding a new lease of life in the work of the evolutionary biologist Armand Leroi (at Imperial College, London), in collaboration with Brian Eno and the Alan Lomax Foundation of New York. With more sophisticated technology and a sample of something in the order of twenty times the already large collections of songs available to Lomax almost fifty years ago the research should lead to a revaluation of the original project, even if only through taking it as a starting point and inspiration.

Cantometric theory would also be very difficult to apply to Western classical singing (the necessary fieldwork would mean acquiring a great deal of personal information which singers might be reluctant to give) and theories or histories of vocal development within Western music are thin on the ground. Pop singing has only come within range of musicologists and analysts within the last thirty years or so, and the rush to invest pop musicology with academic credibility has sometimes caused considerable obfuscation, much to the amusement of those rock singers inclined to read the literature. The questions raised by obscure pop lyrics, for example, could often be solved by picking up the phone to the singer; rather than resort to this simple short cut we can opt for lyrical analysis, a version of the 'lit crit game' which often tells us more about the writer than the written about. It is not surprising that the legitimisation of pop music over the course of the twentieth century has produced a legitimising literature, and pop musicology now has distinguished authorities of its own to call upon; but for many years musicologists would look outside music for points of reference, conceptual frameworks or even suitable vocabulary.

The last quarter of the twentieth century in particular saw numbers of academics drawing on Roland Barthes's eloquent essay 'The Grain of the Voice' in an attempt to understand how pop singing worked. In

[7] Grauer quoted by Averill in ibid.: 243. [8] Ibid.: 244.

geno-song and pheno-song, Barthes's terms borrowed from the semiotician Julia Kristeva, many commentators found a way of explaining the process by which pop singers communicate meaning. Barthes's 'grain' was the point at which voice and language meet. Geno-song is the area of vocality which presents the meaning – the sensual, physical pleasure that excites the neural pathways; pheno-song is the supporting technical process which enables this to happen. Some singers have a gift for geno-song, others merely go through the motions and we only hear pheno-song. Ironically, Barthes was talking about classical singing, and he cited Charles Panzéra and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as examples of the respective modes. In the singing of the latter Barthes hears only 'the lungs, never the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose',[9] whereas Panzéra expressed the truth of language. Barthes asked if he was alone in perceiving this, and the answer was a resounding 'no' from many musicologists, who recognised Barthes's seductive terms not in classical singers, but in pop singers.

Few of those who drew on Barthes were singers themselves, and those who were often found it difficult to understand how the musical taste of a French philosopher could have such an impact on musicology. Barthes learned his singing from his armchair, and his writings on the subject are purely subjective. It is quite possible to listen to his two singers and come to the opposite conclusion about their deployment of his two modes. Taste is time specific – Panzéra is of a previous generation to Fischer-Dieskau, and represents the kind of singing Barthes would have heard in his formative years. Fischer-Dieskau is the new singing – Elvis Presley to Panzéra's Sinatra, or John Lennon to his Elvis. Had he been born a generation later Barthes would have thought rather differently. In another irony, Barthes derived his theory from his listening yet ignored the creative subjectivity with which listeners complete a performance in their own heads. The result has been a lot of intellectual endeavour based on a speculative theory which singers have very little time for. The fact that classical singing has largely ignored Barthes is something of a relief (the prospect of conservatoire courses in geno-song is not a happy one), but there have been attempts to produce perfect singers. In some classical

[9] Roland Barthes, 'Le grain de la Voix', *Musique en jeu* 9 (1972), trans. Stephen Heath, in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977): 183–4. Barthes elaborated on his love for Panzéra's voice in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). The relevant section is reprinted as 'Music, Voice, Language', in Martin Clayton (ed.), *Music, Words and Voice: a Reader* (Manchester University Press, 2008): 79–84.

singing studios computers are used to enable students to copy successful models, and pop music entrepreneurs are able to create boy and girl bands more or less to order. In our survey of singing we have generally steered clear of why singing works in the way that it does, believing that it is the listeners' prerogative to decide that for themselves. In any culture or genre, the most creative singers will always have something that no one else has, and if there was a secret to perfect performance we certainly would not want to reveal it.

Mindful of the problems facing anyone wishing to write – or read – what purports to be a comprehensive survey or post-Cantometrics research model, we can only attempt presentations of varying magnitude and depth from selected traditions and world cultures, accepting that the proportion of the impossible 'everything' they occupy must be tiny. Because preferences, quirks and individual expertise are unlikely of themselves to produce enough material, other strategies need to be adopted. Commencing an incomparably more wide-ranging and single-authored book, Peter Fletcher remarked: 'Generalist books usually contain a distillation of the specialist work of others',[10] which will of course apply (to a lesser extent) to this book, especially in those pages that venture beyond the European art tradition. As already argued, the question of how far beyond and exactly where is deeply problematic. The aim is to touch upon issues from less familiar traditions in various parts of the world, which may help the lay reader to form a historical image or series of contrasting images to inflect and enrich those already acquired from the process of enculturation.

Western classical singing does loom rather large in this context, in part because its history (and even, to some extent, its prehistory) can be deduced from written sources over a period of some two thousand years. We have not attempted to construct a grand theory of singing that might draw together the various global strands, but have broadly tried to explain our own specialist areas as we understand them (some chapters are individually authored, others are collaborations). We have conceived the book in three broad categories, two of which are necessarily silent and therefore somewhat speculative as they pre-date the recording watershed. The first of these, on mythology and muses, offers some thoughts on the possible origins of singing as a human activity; the second section, on historical voices, looks at the evolution of Western classical singing up to the end of the nineteenth century; the third part, on recorded voices, continues the

[10] Fletcher, *World Musics in Context*: v.

more recent history of the Western classical tradition, but in the context of other sorts of singing that we can hear on record: singing from non-Western cultures (especially the Indian subcontinent) and the evolution of singing in popular music. In the final section we take two slices across the planet, on latitudes 42 degrees north and 22 degrees south, not with a view to joining vocal dots, but rather the reverse: to give an idea of the extraordinary diversity of vocal activity we humans get up to. More slices would reveal an almost unimaginable variety of singing, confirming the impossibility of the task. We have tried to interrupt the narrative with only a minimum of footnotes, but all our sources are documented in the final sources and references section. This not only explains where we got it all from, but also includes other material that we may not have used but which readers might find helpful. We are very conscious of the fact that this is a small book on a big topic, so we have tried to give readers the possibility of exploring further if they wish.