



## STRIVING FOR THE UNDERNEATH: BODY AND PATHOS IN CHAYA CZERNOWIN'S COMPOSITION FOR VOICE IN *INFINITE NOW* AND *HEART CHAMBER*

Sarit Shley-Zondiner

---

**Abstract:** In her two recent operas, *Heart Chamber* (2017–19) and *Infinite Now* (2015–16), Chaya Czernowin uses vocal ensembles to embody a single character. In a 2016 article, she explained that she wanted to liberate the individual voice from its fixed emotional, social and individual conventions (especially its ingrained pathos), and to work with the voice as a free imaginative sonic material, using the ensemble technique to achieve this. This article argues that the voice ensemble technique amplifies and intensifies the pathos of the voice rather than eliminating it. Recognising that the voice has strong somatic qualities since it is produced in the body, I suggest a material-musical analysis, based on the theories of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Brian Massumi, that focuses on the body, the sensual experience and the physical space, and rejects the hermeneutic tradition that refers to meaning and interpretation only. What emerges is that the voices, instrumentation and electronics of the ensemble are designed to embody the inner body and the outer space at the same time. The voice ensemble may split and produce multi-layered mental–physical states, and express how traditional dichotomies, such as culture/nature, body/mind and subject/object, can meld into multi-perspective processual movements. It is in this intersection of sound and drama, manifesting the corporeal, that the unique power of opera is evinced.

---

This article examines vocal composition in Chaya Czernowin's two recent operas, *Infinite Now* (2015–16) and *Heart Chamber* (2017–19).<sup>1</sup> Czernowin's compositional technique includes the use of vocal ensembles to embody a single character, revealing their inner physical and mental processes by creating combinations of homophonic, heterophonic and polyphonic textures in the ensembles. She renders fractured, ephemeral, constantly moving mental states that challenge conventional voice expressions. In this way she avoids essentialism and teleological paradigms for her characters, blurring their defined

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented at the July 2022 *Tzvil Meudcan* Musicological Roundtable.

purposes while creating ambivalent, even conflicting presences that cast multiple shadows from a single phenomenon.

In a 2016 article,<sup>2</sup> Czernowin clarifies her artistic intentions, maintaining that the immutable quality ingrained in the human voice can pose a barrier when one seeks to create unrestrained, imaginative sonic inventions for it. She explains that the human voice, as expressed in instinctive exclamations (a baby crying for its mother), individual timbre (recognising a person through their voice signature), speech (semantic meanings of words) and songs (which bear emotional and cultural resonance) creates nodes of attachments that are quite difficult to unravel.<sup>3</sup> She especially emphasises how pathos, as a distinctive emotional mode of persuasion embedded in songs, obstructs free imagination and liberation of the voice from its fixed emotional, social and individual conventions:

A flute can sound like a strange trumpet, like wind, or like a metal pipe, but the human voice sounds like a human voice even when we try very hard to disguise it...<sup>4</sup> The desire to hear a voice singing without pathos feels to me at times like the desire to unveil the real wood of a table underneath a sticky film of lacquered finish.<sup>5</sup>

In my view Czernowin's voice ensemble technique, especially in *Infinite Now* and *Heart Chamber* when the voices also carry texts, does not eliminate pathos but rather multiplies and intensifies it, sculpting vivid, vibrating, fluctuating, refined physical–mental states. The voice, including the pathos ingrained within it, has strong somatic qualities since it is produced in the body, and we feel that voice from within. The instrumentation and electronics in both operas are designed as a continuation of the voice, embodying the inner body and the outer space at the same time, with the body absorbing its surroundings and blurring the boundaries between the two. Therefore, I suggest a material analysis based on the material theories of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Brian Massumi that focuses on the body, the sensual experience and the physical space. Both these theoreticians present new revolutionary epistemologies, turning to the material, the corporeal, the ephemeral, building a deeper understanding of works of art in a richer spatial–physical–cultural connection.

### Czernowin's Opera as a Subversive Genre

Czernowin's striving for inner depth did not start with her recent operas. Her first opera, *Prima... Inwards* (1998–99), is based on the novel *See Under: Love*, by David Grossman.<sup>6</sup> This 1986 novel expressed new, different attitudes towards the memory of the Holocaust in Israel. While the predominant attitude in the country emphasised the heroic rebellion against the Nazis and justified Israel's founding as an inevitable result of the Holocaust,<sup>7</sup> Grossman revealed a private, personal story of a young boy, Momik, the son of Holocaust

<sup>2</sup> Chaya Czernowin, 'The Primal, the Abstracted and the Foreign: Composing for the Voice', *Contemporary Music Review*, 34, nos 5–6 (2015), pp. 449–63.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 450–52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 449.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 452.

<sup>6</sup> David Grossman, *See Under: Love*, tr. Betsy Rosenberg (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Yael Feldman, 'Whose Story Is It, Anyway? Ideology and Psychology in the Representation of the Shoah in Israeli Literature', in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 223–26.

survivors, who subliminally senses their fears, rage and anxiety. The prohibition against voicing such personal trauma in a society that was committed to rebuilding itself, strong and powerful, makes Grossman's expression even more daring, even revolutionary.<sup>8</sup> He reaches into the ineffability of the Holocaust, exposing an hidden self-afflicted injury.

Czernowin uses the voice ensemble technique in *Pnima... Inwards* as a communication between the two protagonists: a young boy and an old man. The ensemble embodying the old man combines two male voices, a bass and a high baritone, a saw containing large quasi-arioso parts, six double basses, a trombone, clarinet, saxophone and a large skin percussion, all scratched and struck quietly, creating subtle but penetrating noises. The ensemble of the child combines two female voices, a viola, cello and small-pitched percussion, all functioning as a sonic contrast to the old man's ensemble. The opera has no text; both voices and instruments perform sounds and actions in which the body is explicitly present: nail scratching on percussion, explosive attack with the lips of the singers, strong wood or hair friction on the strings, breathing sounds on the wind instruments. The division of each character into diverse, physically accented, dynamic, clashing voices and instruments exposes each personality's discontinuity and fragility.

This technique serves as a zoom-in, taking us into the character's body and mind,<sup>9</sup> and embodies, not only in a representative-metaphoric manner but also in a direct-physical one, the fractured, muted reality presented in *See Under: Love* as it challenges national and social paradigms. Yet these musical-dramatic techniques cannot deny the presence of these cultural realities, even if Czernowin might wish that they did. Even when they appear smudged, fuzzy, broken, they still remain,<sup>10</sup> penetrating both the 'film of the lacquer' and the 'wood beneath'. *Pnima* demonstrates some vital aesthetic issues, including breaking down the boundaries of paradigms: the social versus individual, cultural versus freely imagined, object versus subject. In the material inquiry that follows, I hope to provide insights into similar interactions in her later operas, where the explicit presence of society and culture is mediated by the semantic meaning of words.

### Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht: Production of Presence

The operatic genre, in which music is expressed at its most complex and advanced through elaborate vocal melodies, intricate harmonies and richly designed orchestration, is a key example of what Gumbrecht calls 'production of presence'.<sup>11</sup> Presence, in contrast to the interpretation or hermeneutics, is about physical, spatial, ephemeral qualities, rather than meaning, text or symbolisation, the default concepts of the humanities since Descartes in the seventeenth century. According to Gumbrecht, Descartes' emphasis on abstract thinking and its derivatives (having doubt, imagining, affirming, refuting)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 235–8.

<sup>9</sup> Czernowin, 'The Primal', p. 454.

<sup>10</sup> Assaf Shelleg, 'Composition in the Aftermath of Hebrew Culture: The Musics of Betty Olivero and Chaya Czernowin', *Israel Studies*, 28, no. 1 (2023), p. 211.

<sup>11</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, 'Production of Presence, Interspersed with Absence: A Modernist View in Music, Libretti, and Staging', in *Music and the Aesthetics of Modernity: Essays*, eds Karol Berger and Anthony Newcomb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 343–45.

favoured metaphysics at the expense of concrete, physical states – nature, sports, body, performance, sensual ceremonies – all of which are under-theorised subjects in the humanities.<sup>12</sup>

In order to validate his approach, Gumbrecht turns to the philosophical roots found in Heidegger's *Being and Time*<sup>13</sup> and to what he describes as Heidegger's conservative revolution, reversing and redefining the outside world's subject/object paradigm beyond the limits of human consciousness and metaphysical traditions. According to Gumbrecht, Heidegger considers Descartes the ultimate 'other' in his theory, focusing on material content instead of abstract ideas. Heidegger's comprehension of truth is not about transcendent fixed knowledge, but about a gradually exposed process, something that unfolds.

To describe and explain this *present-ness*, Gumbrecht uses the Heideggerian term *being*: that is, to enjoy spatial contact with the things in the world, to have space, to be concrete. It is a process with a 'thingly' character that has a three-dimensional quality. The first stage is spatial: occupying space, being there, moving, fluctuating, gathering oneself in order to stand. The second stage involves looking towards the outside, moving towards the observer. The third stage, when the thing is already physically present (occupying space, consolidated) and consciously noticed (being looked upon), is withdrawal. It relates to composure: letting things be, abandoning any transcending processes of imagination, manipulation or transformation.

Thus the movement of being is somehow paradoxical. It strives to refer to things in the world before they become part of culture, before they are interpreted and structured through any network of historically or culturally specific concepts. Then, in a processual movement, it approaches the borders of acknowledgement and recognition, which are social and cultural. Finally, it moves backwards again, away from this recognition border, and withdraws.<sup>14</sup> Gumbrecht presents, via Heidegger, a complex, multidirectional point of view, embodying both physical-spatial and cultural elements while distinguishing their interactive qualities.

This paradoxical fluctuation, moving forwards and backwards, enables works of art to become part of the *process of the truth*.<sup>15</sup> The performance of an opera is tantamount to an epiphany: the narrative of the plot is exposed as an ongoing process through the physical bodies of the singers, instruments and stage sets. It is a production not only of presence, but of accentuated presence:

You do not walk on the stage of an opera – you stride, and you dance – just as characters of the opera do not speak, but sing. These observations can be formulated as a paradox: while such procedures of articulation set the bodies on stage apart from their environment, they enable the intensification of their present-ness (the impression that they are tangible).<sup>16</sup>

Gumbrecht calls on his musicologist colleagues to embrace his vision, to enrich our apprehension of works of art and to expand our hermeneutic traditions with sensual qualities that evince music as a substance of sound, an 'epiphanic form of its emergence and vanishing'.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 346, 348–50.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 66–72.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 72–73.

<sup>16</sup> Gumbrecht, 'Production of Presence, Interspersed with Absence', pp. 252–353.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 355.

### Material Inquiry of *Infinite Now*

An analysis of the opera *Infinite Now* reveals such a process. The opera is based on two different, remote textual sources that resonate and are reflected in each other when they are juxtaposed in the opera. The first source is the multilingual play *Front* (2014), written by the opera's first director, Luk Perceval. The play is based on Erich Maria Remarque's famous novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), which documents the horrors of the World War I in four European countries. The second source is a short story, *The Homecoming*, written by the Chinese author Can Xue, one of a collection of stories translated as *The Embroidered Shoes* (1997). Can Xue's story portrays nightmare-reality being; temporal and spatial dimensions are often distorted and the characters are reflected and unified in each other, while discontinuity, fragility and vulnerability are ultimately present. The plot twists are often fantastic, creating a flow of alternative happenings, with no unified, realistic meaning.<sup>18</sup> Although the texts in the opera differ in their geographic, cultural and social origin, they share the sense of living under terror and the continuous emotional-physical-cognitive state that evolves from such a life.

The voices of *Infinite Now* are divided into two ensembles: in the first are mezzo-soprano, countertenor and baritone; in the second are soprano, contralto and bass. In the beginning of the third act (see [Example 1](#), bars 580–93) there is a low, crawling, continuous glissando, starting in the bass and doubled in shifting, imprecise unisons by the baritone, contralto and countertenor, each of them articulating different vowel sounds. The composer emphasises in the score that no attempt should be made to synchronise the glissando, as the voices 'try to melt into each other' and their lines 'moves [sic] by IRONING the smallest intervals between notes',<sup>19</sup> creating a sonic *mélange* in which the singers' distinct individuality cannot be detected. This sonic material is designed to manifest a consolidation process: pre-stabilisation and pre-recognition within a self-gathering and a material substance.

This sonority anticipates the mysterious text from *The Homecoming*, performed by the female voices from the two ensembles, the soprano and the contralto: 'He leads me to the appointed small room. He tells me not to think about anything. . . I have to learn to adjust. . . I must depend on the senses of touch and hearing.'<sup>20</sup>

This text establishes the sonic *mélange* as an epiphany within the opera's narrative stream. In conjunction with the relatively independent movement of the voices the text is like a revealing glimpse caught by an external observer: 'he leads me' (as if saying: 'here I am; he leads me but we are still separated individuals'). The duo starts with subtly resonating, 'smudged' unison/counterpoint movements for the voices, in a heterophonic texture (see [Example 1](#), bars 596–97), but the character's state of mind fluctuates quickly; there is no individual line for her and instead 'she' is divided between the soprano and contralto in a quasi-organum texture, imitated with the slightest of speaking/breathing deviations. Her individuality is subtle and fragile.

<sup>18</sup> Jianguo Chen, 'The Aesthetics of the Transposition of Reality, Dream and Mirror: A Comparative Perspective on Can Xue', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 34, no. 4 (1997), pp. 348–75.

<sup>19</sup> Chaya Czernowin, *Infinite Now: Perusal Score* (Mainz: Schott Music, 2017) <https://www.schott-music.com/en/preview/viewer/index/?idx=MzIzNzEw&idy=323710&dl=0> (accessed in May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023), p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Example 1:  
Chaya Czernowin, *Infinite Now*, bars  
577–600.

Example 1:  
continued.

The (female) character in the text is required to abandon her capacity for independent thought. At the words 'he tells me not to think about anything', the music moves into unison, erasing individuality (see [Example 1](#), first two beats of bar 598). It continues as a rhythmic

590  $\text{♩} = 50$

Tim 1  
Tim 2

C.A.  
B.

Glocken  
Electronics  
Text

Bassoon  
Clarinet  
Bassoon  
Db. bass

Horn  
Trumpet  
Trombone

Violin  
Viola  
Double Bass

In Violins I this small section is written in proportional notation so that the short figures (♩, ♩) will not be played together, but will be approximately around the same time.

He leads me to the ap - point -

Example 1:  
continued.

unison, with slight deviations in pitch/speech/breath (the two last beats of 598 and first two beats of 599), until, at the end of the phrase (last beat of 599), the voices merge completely to whisper the end of the word 'anything', their vocal substance now nearly obscured. The individual voices, like the individuality of the character they represent, have become entirely fluid, their unification illustrating a physical state of deletion or cancellation. Consciousness is being suspended, drained of its independent existence.

This process starts with consolidation and self-gathering materiality, continues with seeds of independent individuality and eventually melts back to presence-less corporeality (whispers in unison). The voices' multiplicity in the ensembles reveals these delicate musical-textual processes.

597

S. me... He tells me not to think a - bout an - y - thing.

C.A. -ted small room. He tells me not to think a - bout an - y - thing. I have to learn to ad - just h.

Fl. *ppp* *ppp*

Fl. *ppp* *ppp*

VI.1 *ppp* *ppp*

VI.2 *ppp* *ppp*

Vc. *ppp* *ppp*

DB. *ppp* *ppp*

Opening an iron mesh

intensity of reaction grows

5/4

Example 1:  
continued.

### Brian Massumi: Towards the Body without Image and the Quasi-Corporeal

Intricate body–space–sight–language relations are the fundamentals of Brian Massumi’s theory on the ingrained and inseparable intersections of physical experience and abstract comprehension. Massumi describes elementary perceptions of the body in movement: different perspectives focus on the body while it moves, and various frozen pictures taken from different perspectives appear while the observer also moves. None of them and all of them are ‘real’ at the same time. There is also an additional perspective from within the body: this sight may inhabit the actual self-experience of moving, sensing the continuity of the physical presence, but it is also absent. When one can sense oneself from within, one cannot fully see oneself. Massumi calls this realm constructed by different, tangent, overlapping, contrasting and complementary perspectives *body without image*.<sup>21</sup> It emphasises the presence of the physical qualities in human perception that determine the way that experience, knowledge and consciousness are composed. Massumi does not discard or deny the cultural residues that these physical perspectives bear. He keeps uttering that the site of the body (including the gaps and the blind spots) simultaneously affects and is shaped by our cultural and social narratives.<sup>22</sup> Massumi’s aim is to define both the intersections of the body itself, beneath and between these views, and the possibilities of the different, new narratives that may arise from them.

The inside-body perspective is central: a frozen, pre-conscious, potential-embryonic abstracted vision. It has no temporal or spatial dimension – it remains outside of any present–future linearity, in a measureless gap between bodies and things – yet also resides within the body and its sensations. Massumi suggest that there are two

<sup>21</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (London: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 48–51, 57–58.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.



types of sensibility here. The first is the tactile sensibility that is connected to the skin, located in and drawing from the body's outer surfaces and borders. The softness of a cat's fur or the stiffness of a cold floor, for example, are exteroceptive sensations that imprint their physical impact in the tactile memory. The second level is the visceral sensibility embodied in the flesh, creating strong, embedded memories that anticipate outside stimuli such as sight, sound and touch. This sensibility activates the muscles and ligaments, producing tension, relaxation and dynamic movements. The visceral level is the midpoint between exterior stimuli and the interior body: it affects internal organs but still reacts to outside, tactile and spatial stimulations. It creates a fracture in the direct stimuli-reaction chain, a gap that abounds with intensity and passion, and its inner volcanic tension and power create a zone that Massumi defines as 'quasi corporeal': body-in-suspension, inner-held-intensities, where affect is consolidated. One such affect is emotion. Massumi's vocabulary is rigorously designed to emphasise these midpoints, overlaps and intersections between body, flesh, muscles, skin, space, vision, affect, emotion and consciousness.<sup>23</sup>

### Material Inquiry of *Heart Chamber*

A similar sense of multi-perspective perceptions and complex, tactile, and visceral experiences are deeply embedded in Czernowin's opera *Heart Chamber*. It is manifested through vocal divisions (baritone and countertenor for the male character, soprano and contralto for the female character) and instrumental, electronic and amplification configurations. The technological manipulations, using very close microphones, enable the listener to grasp the most intimate sound production of the singers. The slightest breath, sigh or whisper can penetrate the orchestral texture, resounding clearly. This sensory technique attempts to immediately capture the audience's physical reactions – as in ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) videos (the composer refers to ASMR technique in specific scenes in the score). This sound manipulation is related to representing the *intimate zone*, the most immediate area of human interaction,<sup>24</sup> by enhancing its sensory experience.<sup>25</sup> It crosses the border between bodies and space, articulates inside-body sensation, enables new qualities of touch through sound and reflects the continuous and erotic sense between the characters.

The instruments provide a continuation and extension of the voices, inseparable from them. The solo voices are also blurred by distorted doublings: the choir partly echoes them and the electronic part contains pre-recorded voices that merge with solo parts. All of these are constructed as an active sonic surrounding for the voices, rendering it difficult to distinguish their individuality. The substance of the sound emphasises the similar qualities of voices and instruments: strings playing very close to the bridge with wide-ranging glissandi while the soloists sing glissandi; woodwind instruments exhaling and inhaling without reeds or mouthpieces while the singers exhale and inhale in a close amplification; electric guitar playing damped

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Guilia Accornero, 'What Does ASMR Sound Like? Composing the Proxemic Intimate Zone in Contemporary Music', *Contemporary Music Review*, 41, no. 4 (2022), pp. 337–43.

<sup>25</sup> Czernowin, interviewed in the article above, said that this kind of subtle, intimate expression is present both in her instrumental and vocal compositions.

sounds while the singers perform muted screams and vocal consonants. The instruments rarely produce conventional, familiar sounds; instead, the various sound sources used in the opera, whether vocal, instrumental or electronic, interpenetrate and are absorbed into each other, constantly blurring any sense of 'inside' and 'outside'.

An example of this kind of sound design can be found in the scene 'Close Up II: He - Lake' (see [Example 2](#)). The text (written by the composer) is direct and simple, articulating a quest for solace that is unfulfilled. The male character is going to the sea, getting away from the city, where he feels suffocated; but he is unable to breathe a new, fresh air that might offer him relaxation and comfort. Instead he has the sensation that he is breathing his own skin: 'The sea smells like my own skin... my own flesh', sensing what Freud would characterise as an *unheimlich* (uncanny) experience. The music creates a sense of a multi-layered experience. The first layer appears in percussion, countertenor, baritone and a choir: there are delicate glissandi on three timpani (the players scratch the skins with their fingernails); transient sounds, such as a whispered 's' glissando in the choir, disguise the singers' individuality and add a subtle quasi-white noise. Although the soloists' vocal parts include text, these are not highlighted within the overall sound and are audible only through amplification: the baritone, for example, performs a long, final glissando on the word 'suffocate' that resembles the glissandi in the timpani.

The second layer consists of obstructed, obsessive, repetitive attacks: percussive, unpitched attacks from the muted strings of electric guitar and piano, air consonants from the baritone saxophone and brief outbursts from the electronics; all of these sounds are short, pointillistic, bursting out suddenly and then disappearing, unable to sustain themselves beneath the layer of the white noise, but flickering around its surface. This sonic substance embodies the surface of the body, the skin and the man's physical imprisonment. At the same time, different aspects of the music's textures embody his visceral, inside-body aspiration to be absorbed into the outside world of

The image shows a musical score for the scene 'Close Up II: He - Lake'. The score is arranged in a vertical stack of staves. At the top, the title 'Close Up II: He - Lake' is centered, with a box around the 'B3' and a tempo marking '♩ = 69'. The staves from top to bottom are: Baritone (with lyrics 'me? I would go to the sea. Sometimes I'), Electric guitar, Percussion (with dynamics like *pp* and *mf*), and Choir (with a performance instruction 'keep moving while keeping all around'). The percussion staff shows complex rhythmic patterns with various time signatures (2/4, 3/4, 4/4) and dynamic markings. The baritone staff shows a long glissando on the word 'suffocate'.

Example 2:  
Chaya Czernowin, *Heart Chamber*,  
bars 261–68.

27

58 459

Example 2:  
continued.

fresh air and water – embodied by the ‘s’ glissandi – and his sense of the blocked, impassable border of his skin – embodied by the repetitive attacks. The fusion of all these sounds represents a multidimensional sensory experience and perception, in which a desire for universal experience is mingled and juxtaposed with a sense of devastating, obstructive suffocation. It is a fusion redolent of physical and mental tension: the body is charged, frozen, paralysed.

The fluid boundary between desire and suffocation, passion and death, is presented in one of the most ecstatic parts of the opera. In the scene ‘Third Dream: Moss, woman, children’, the contralto speaks an immediately comprehensible text, while the soprano produces powerful utterances – wild glissandi, half-spoken, half-sung vowels and consonants, high-registered, obsessive repetitions – all of them

very fast, never achieving any relief of the tension. There is complete separation between the contralto and the soprano: the composer's setting creates a dichotomy between words, their semantic meaning and their physical-affective-emotional expression, as if the conscious, arranged, symbolic meaning of the words spoken by the contralto is completely detached from, and cannot be synchronised with, the affective-emotional feeling manifested elsewhere in the music. This dissociative state is also present in the text, which describes a terrible dream, a nightmare:

My bathroom is long and endless/ It's white, but some moss is appearing behind the tiles/I don't notice it at first/ But it's growing fast/ Now I see it/ I try to peel away the moss/ I scratch it hard with a brush/ With a knife, with my fingernails, my teeth/ The leaves are so small they escape me/ Now they're sprouting out from under my finger nails/ Spreading across my hands, my stomach, enveloping/ My breast my/ My mouth, my nose, my eyes/ I cannot see/ ... I can't move/ ... Can't breathe.<sup>26</sup>

The separation between soprano and contralto is not mediated by the instruments; on the contrary, they create an abyss, with very low heavy pitches from the brass instruments, air noises from the woodwinds, sul ponticello glissandi with heavy bow pressure from the strings and rubbed sandpaper noise from the choir, all of which create a widespread diapason and constant approaching and distancing movements of sounds (bars 676–94; see [Examples 3](#) and [4](#)). The instruments, in contrast to what appears in the scene of the man going to the sea, do not pierce through the voices: the soprano is isolated in her high register, and the contralto speaks directly with only minor changes in intonation (the score indicates just the words and their relative timing).

These two scenes manifest two very different relationships between the characters and their surroundings. In the first scene the man wants to be absorbed into his environment, to escape the bounds of his own body, flesh and skin, and to experience release through his breathing. But then he discovers that his body is an impassable barrier, that his skin is a cage. The sound of the attacks and glissandi in the instruments swallows the voices. In the woman's scene we witness the opposite: she feels threatened by the possibility of being absorbed. In her dream, the surroundings are uncontrollable, devouring, violently preventing her from seeing, moving, breathing, and so her manifestation in music is split; words and semantic meanings (contralto) are detached from affect and physical embodiment (soprano). When her sense of self, mental and physical, is fractured, her surroundings become distant and inaccessible (very low brass pitches, sandpaper noises or sul ponticello glissandi). The voices' split enables an opening of the 'self' and fractures it into various positions in relation to the physical presence and its surroundings. These stressed, passionate, tensed positions reveal human existence in its most uncovered, raw and fragile physical and mental states.

### Multiple Fluctuate Presences – Voice Setting in *Infinite Now*

Such a raw, fragile existence is present in the fifth scene of *Infinite Now*. When the organum texture of the voice fractures, the individual

<sup>26</sup> Chaya Czernowin, *Heart Chamber*: Perusal Score (Mainz: Schott Music, 2019) <https://www.schott-music.com/en/preview/viewer/index/?idx=Mzc0OTQz&idy=374943&dl=0> (accessed in May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023), pp. 91–99.

Example 3:  
Chaya Czernowin, *Heart Chamber*,  
bars 669–73.

Example 4:  
Chaya Czernowin, *Heart Chamber*,  
bars 686–91.

parts become more independent, creating vocal polyphonies as powerful, reciprocal forces arise. Multiple inner mental layers are discovered: fear, terror and despair, but also vitality, longing and passion. These affects do not erase one another but project, illuminate, alternate and even intensify each other.

In bars 1510–70 there is a dense stretto based on the texts of *Front* and *The Homecoming*. In *Front*, a female character, a nurse, Sister Elizabeth, speaks of her experiences in taking care of the wounded in the war:

Sister! Sister! There are heads and knees. . . There are eyes, blind eyes, eyes of delirium; and mouths that cannot articulate; and parts of faces. The nose gone or the jaw. There are these things, but no men; so how could I be a woman here and not die of it? Sometimes, suddenly, all in an instant, a man looks up at me from the shambles, a man's eyes signal or a voice calls 'Sister! Sister!'. Sometimes suddenly a smile flickers on a pillow, white, blinding, burning, and I die of it. I feel myself dying again. It is impossible to be a woman here.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, in *The Homecoming*, the female character suddenly accepts her ambiguous, disoriented position, and is even drawn towards it:

As soon as I heard the owner telling me that below the cliff is the sea, I started to feel an irrational attraction to that world below. How long I've been staying in this house? I can't keep track because it's always so dark. We two are living above. We never turn on the light. So it's almost as if we don't exist, isn't that so?<sup>28</sup>

The musical juxtaposition of these two texts reveals hidden correspondences, casting them in an entirely new light. In bars 1526–29 the mezzo-soprano, soprano and countertenor sing a long descending glissando on the word 'die' ('How could I be a woman and not die of it') while the contralto speaks: 'it's always so dark'. 'Die' and 'dark' shine for the first three beats of bar 1529, when the three upper voices (mezzo-soprano, countertenor and soprano) combine to form an E flat major chord in second inversion that lasts until the countertenor slides away on the fourth beat of the bar. All three voices perform a unison breath in bars 1531–32 (see [Example 5](#)).

The sweet, familiar colour of the major chord, sounded on the beat in a high, projecting vocal register and sustained for three beats, indicates that this is not a dark moment, but a sweet, erotic one. It becomes stronger in bars 1538–46 ([Example 6](#)): the glissandi of the mezzo-soprano become wilder: fast and spread over a large span, articulating the words 'man' and 'eyes';<sup>29</sup> the contralto and the soprano sing a love-song duet ('We two are living above/ We never turn on the light') in a rhythmic unison but at varying intervals: in bar 1541 they begin a third apart and close to a second, and in bar 1545 they begin with a fifth and get progressively closer, with a fourth, a third, and then a second (see [Example 6](#)). The changing intervals emphasise that these are two separate characters who have fallen in love, rather than sharing a unified identity, as might be suggested by an exact unison.<sup>30</sup>

The light that turned off and the excitement of the nurse reveal a moment of longing: even in horrifying circumstances, confronted by threats and fears, a vivid power may arise, the desire to see and to be seen, to touch and to be touched.

### Striving for the 'Underneath'

Since her first opera *Chaya Czernowin* has striven for a mode of vocal expression that is uncontaminated by cultural and social conventions. She is seeking a freely imagined sonic material created from the voice, to release it from the most common, regular expressions, and remove

<sup>27</sup> Czernowin, *Infinite Now*: Perusal Score, pp. 188–193.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 188–192.

<sup>29</sup> This also happens with the mezzo-soprano and countertenor in bars 1554–65: 'a smile flickers on a pillow, white, blinding, burning, and I die of it'.

<sup>30</sup> This reoccurs later between the soprano and the contralto, in bars 1548–55, when the entire scene seems to take on the hallucinatory state of Can Xue's text: 'as if we don't exist'.

1524 speaking  
There are these things, but no men: so how could I be a woman here and not die of it?

1530 Sometimes, suddenly, all in an instant, with some grove some-times some-times

I can't keep track because it's always so dark.

Can in and out perc. + bubbles  
with background of bubbles in the cut

2 silver shakers *mf*  
2 silver shakers *mf*  
2 silver shakers *mf*

continue (or go back to it at any moment)  
continue (or go back to it at any moment)  
continue (or go back to it at any moment)  
continue (or go back to it at any moment)

Example 5:  
Chaya Czernowin, *Infinite Now*, bars  
1524–32.

the habitual residues ingrained in it. The voice ensemble seems an optimal solution, since its multiplicity blurs the individual distinction and its conventional automatic associations. An analysis of the voice ensembles when they carry texts shows that the voice's individual signature has not disappeared, however: the voice ensembles create intricate connections based on the physical, affective and emotional state of the character, embodying its inside multiplicities. The character's deepest, most private physical and mental states are exposed, revealing fear, stress, excitement, passion and longing all at the same time. I read Czernowin's aspiration to reach beneath the polished surface of the voice as an artistic desire to create a naked pathos that has shed the clothes of culture and society to express itself from within the body, the breathing, the muscles, the flesh. The physical dimension opens new possibilities for music and drama.

1537 instant, a man looks up at me from the shambles, mal-don-ty a ma... n loo... ku lu a ma... n

1543 a man's eyes signal or a voice calls 'Sister! Sister!', ey... hu (ey-)... en

Example 6:  
Chaya Czernowin, *Infinite Now*, bars 1537–48.

Material analysis, based on the theories of Gumbrecht and Massumi, similarly suggests new possibilities for musical and aesthetic research. The focus on the physical state facilitates an inquiry into the most basic, primal modes of musical expressions. The bodily experience, with its tactile and visceral depths, its multiple perspectives on sense and the body's surroundings, opens new possibilities for designing and experiencing sound. It relates to spatial orientation, location and dislocation, which are constructed in technological means and can alter spatial perception. Such manifestations expose sound at its most fundamental. Uncovering rawness and opacity, sound enables us to traverse the boundaries between voices and instruments, electronics and acoustics, natural and amplified sounds. This material approach does not invalidate cultural, hermeneutic, symbolic analysis, but adds to it. It offers a new path along which these basic questions can resonate and vibrate, helping to provide new answers to an age-old question about opera and suggesting that, through the corporeal, both sound and drama can intersect and manifest the epiphany of art as truth.