Aspects of Performativity in Celan and Leibowitz
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As a written poem is read aloud or performed in a musical setting, how might the transition from a visible to an audible materiality alter its meaning and its way of generating meaning? What impact does this change have on the relation between semantics and sound structure? How might the particular vocalization of the speaking or singing individual affect the interpretations of the text? The present paper approaches such questions through two late poems by Paul Celan. The poems are followed from their written existence on the page through a recorded reading by the author and, finally, into a musical setting by René Leibowitz. Not only do these texts explicitly thematize their own suspension between writtenness and orality, but they also enact the sensory disappearance and threatening collapse of their own language. Spoken and sung, moreover, the poems are subjected to the risks of misrepresentation and misinterpretation inherent in any performance, with concrete and crucial effects on their meaning as a result.

In an aphorism from Rhumbs, Paul Valéry succinctly defined poetry in the following way: “Le poème – cette hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens”\(^1\) (1960: 637). The notion of a hesitation between two things, one may note, suggests a certain incompatibility: sound and sense are at odds with each other, and the poem is the place where they vie for the attention of a recipient. This tension partially mirrors the conflictual interplay between music and poetic language that is present in the poetry of the Romanian-Jewish Holocaust survivor Paul Celan, as well as in the profusion of contemporary musical works that Celan’s poetry has inspired since the late 1950s\(^2\). Keeping these tensions in mind, I would like to follow two of his late poems through three different material stages: as written texts, as oral performances by the author himself, and as joint musical performances by a composer, a singer, and an accompanist. The poems – entitled “In den

\(^1\) ‘The poem – this prolonged hesitation between the sound and the sense’. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

\(^2\) See Englund (forthcoming), in which I attempt a comprehensive study of Celan’s interrelations with music.
Geräuschen” (‘In the Noises’) and “Deine Augen im Arm” (‘Your Eyes Embraced’) – were first printed in the 1968 collection Fadensonnen and recorded in Celan’s own reading by Westdeutscher Rundfunk Köln in the same year. In 1969, the Polish-French composer and conductor René Leibowitz set them to music as parts of his 4 Songs for Bass and Piano Op. 86 (see 1978), subsequently recorded by Roland Herrmann (baritone) and Georges Martin (piano) to be released on CD in 1996.

1. Poetry Printed

No characteristic of Celan’s poetry has been noted more often than its being marked by an intense linguistic self-awareness, constantly staging its own silence, disappearance and failure in order to raise questions about what it means for a Jew to write German-language poetry in the wake of Auschwitz. This meta-linguistic inclination entails a strong focus on the materiality of language. Celan’s work often seems to be consciously situated at the crossroads of the visual and the auditory, of inscription and voice – in a “conflicting interpenetration of speech and writing”, to quote one critic (Fioretos 1994: 295). The first of the two poems addressed here may serve as an illustration of this tendency:

\[\text{IN DEN GERÄUSCHEN, wie unser Anfang,}
\text{in der Schlucht,}
\text{wo du mir zufielst,}
\text{zieh ich sie wieder auf, die}
\text{Spieldose – du}
\text{weißt: die unsichtbare,}
\text{die unhörbare. (Celan 2000: II, 129)}\]

\[\text{IN THE NOISES, like our beginning,}
\text{in the chasm,}
\text{where you fell to me,}
\text{I wind it up again, the}
\text{music box – you}
\text{know: the invisible,}
\text{the inaudible.)} \]

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\(^3\) Paul Celan, “In den Geräuschen”, © 1983 by Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main. Reproduced by permission.