

“Both Sides, Now”: Voice, Affect, and Thirdness

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In his endnotes to the novel *An Equal Music*, in which he records the musical experiences of his violinist protagonist Michael Holme in remarkable, exquisitely fine-grained detail, Vikram Seth writes: “Music to me is dearer even than speech. When I realized that I would be writing about it I was gripped with anxiety. Only slowly did I reconcile myself to the thought of it” (Seth 1999, n.p.). Despite his strong misgivings, Seth produces nuanced, captivatingly accurate descriptions of the experience of listening to and playing chamber music in the novel, proving, in fact, that it is possible to write about that seemingly most untouchable of mediums. Without doubt, the task of writing about music is fraught with certain challenges in trying to capture both its sonic and affective elements through written language, which is seemingly such a codified system of meaning-making and so far removed from the music’s visceral, nonverbal terrain.

Seth’s anxiety is in my mind as I turn to analyze one of Joni Mitchell’s most notable and treasured songs, “Both Sides, Now.”¹ What I want to address in this chapter is how this particular song presents a compelling example of the power of the human voice to trigger strong affective responses in listeners, so much so that it can become emblematic of their own histories and experiences. This song, perhaps uniquely in Mitchell’s canon because of its history, offers a highly productive case for considering the ways in which the singing voice occupies the space between singer and listener, enfolding the subjectivities of both. This kind of intersubjectivity I will explore through the concept of “thirdness” in this chapter. I will also think about how Mitchell’s voice embodies time passing (when we hear the song sung at different stages

in a life) in the change to timbre and tessitura (its texture and range) as it ages. While speaking and singing voices are generally considered to be two mutually exclusive categories, I will explore the early twentieth-century experimental practices of *Sprechstimme*—in which the binary of speaking and singing breaks down to convey deep emotion—as an instructive parallel to Mitchell’s somewhat raw and ragged vocal production in her later version of “Both Sides, Now.” This chapter will also consider the changes “Both Sides, Now” itself goes through, in terms of its musical setting and instrumentation, since these too undoubtedly contribute to the sheer power of the song to generate deeply felt emotions in its listeners.

An iconic song, “Both Sides, Now,” whose history is long and whose place in the popular cultural fabric is assured, was written by Mitchell in March 1967. First recorded by Judy Collins on her 1967 album *Wildflowers*, the song has two incarnations by Mitchell herself. She recorded it in 1969, as the concluding track on the album *Clouds* (whose title lifts one of the song’s main lyrical symbols), and then again in 2000, as the concluding track on the concept album *Both Sides Now*.² In this later incarnation, “Both Sides, Now” stands alongside “A Case of You” as one of two revisions an older Mitchell makes to seminal songs from her youthful oeuvre.³

“Both Sides, Now” is one of Mitchell’s most covered tracks; at a recent count, over eighty artists between the late 1960s and the present day have interpreted and recorded the song. Its appeal surely lies in its ability to make us *feel*, but how do we find terms in which to talk about the song’s power to move? Which critical tools will help us understand the ways in which the song is saturated with Mitchell’s affect, but is also astoundingly capable of drawing out our own? Metaphorical and melancholic, the song’s lyrics speak of a life long lived and a state of profound understanding about the indeterminacy of human experience. The song seems to embody a preternaturally astute awareness of life and its losses, its arc toward diminishment and alienation.

Yet one of the remarkable things about “Both Sides, Now” is that it was written by a 23-year-old Mitchell at a very early point in her musical career. In 1996, in an interview with Robert Hilburn, Mitchell describes the inspiration for the song as her reading of Saul Bellow’s 1959 novel *Henderson the Rain King*.⁴ Sitting reading on a flight herself, Mitchell finds its protagonist’s observation

that humanity has only recently been able to view clouds from both sides in the wake of the advances in aviation technology to be a philosophical stimulus. However, in a later interview in 2012, Mitchell gives a much fuller account of the traumatic circumstances that underpin the song’s genesis, the aftermath of giving her daughter up for adoption at 21: “‘Both Sides, Now’ was triggered by a broken heart, the loss of my child. In this three-year period of childhood’s end, I’d come through such a rough, tormented period as a destitute, unwed mother. It was like you killed somebody, in those times” (Marom 2014, 25). This life-changing loss shaped Mitchell’s early adulthood, bringing early profound pain, as she explains: “I had some serious battles for a twenty-one-year-old” (2014, 25). Mitchell’s retrospective analysis of the song is both insightful and helpful for the sense it gives of the song’s considerable potential to act as an affective container for the emotions of its listeners. She notes that “in its generalness, there was much that people could read into it [. . .] I know one guy played it for his parents, then sat them down and announced, ‘I’m gay.’ *It found utility in people’s lives*” (2014, 25, emphasis mine). This notion of the song’s “utility” is one I want to pursue through this chapter, asking what it is about “Both Sides, Now” that makes it *useful* as a conduit for one’s own affects and thus ensures it occupies a cherished place in many people’s emotional histories.

Thirdness

In its lyric cycle, “Both Sides, Now” articulates a list of binary oppositions through its three objects of focus: clouds, love, and life. In the course of the life lived in the song, these three immaterial things are viewed from radically different locations: up and down/give and take/win and lose. Clouds can be seen as “ice-cream castles in the air” but also “block the sun.” Love is epitomized by “Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels” but is also “just another show” which inevitably ends. Life is captured in “dreams and schemes and circus crowds” but also “something’s lost but something’s gained/in living every day.”⁵ Most importantly though, “Both Sides, Now” proceeds to overturn these oppositional stances. Such binaries only serve to teach the narrator of their insufficiency and concrete meanings, in the attempt to pin these elusive

abstract things down, dissolve into “illusions.” The song invokes the refusal of the binary and in its place, Mitchell espouses “both sides,” seen and understood. In this strong sense, the song is an invocation of the in-between, of a kind of thirdness in the form of the third option of *both sides* (rather than one or the other)—of the failure and limitations of neat categories that define themselves against each other.

This might be a place to start to understand the affecting nature of this version of “Both Sides, Now.” In order to illuminate the affective terrain of the song, I will consider its lyrical content, the specifics of Mitchell’s voice and vocal production, and the structures of its later orchestration through the theoretical concept of thirdness, as articulated by the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin in her work on the psychodynamics of interpersonal relations between human subjects and the co-construction of feeling and identity.

If we frame the notion of the “in-between” in Benjaminian terms, we come to the figure of the third, the experience beyond the binary of self and other, and the notion of co-construction. In Benjamin’s construction, human communication is fraught, threatening and, in complex emotional situations, confusing. The most common way of trying to control this confusion, often unconsciously, is to enforce “the one-way street,” in which one person is the “doer,” and the other person is the “done-to.” This turns one person into the “subject” and the other into the “object.” By contrast, healthier, more productive encounters are relational and acknowledge the connectedness of our subjectivities, our intersubjectivity. The metaphor of music, particularly musical improvisation, is useful for Benjamin, as it helps her to denote the complex transmission of affect that can, in the best circumstances, take place between two human beings, the subtle “two-way traffic” through which affect is jointly created and channeled:

The *thirdness* of attuned play resembles musical improvisation, in which both partners follow a structure or pattern that both of them simultaneously create and surrender to, a structure enhanced by our capacity to receive and transmit at the same time in nonverbal interaction. The co-created third has the transitional quality of being both invented and discovered. To the question of “Who created this pattern, you or I?” the paradoxical answer is “Both and neither.” (Benjamin 2018, 31, emphasis added)

For Benjamin, this is both a paradigm for good, effective analytic practice and more broadly, in the public sphere, a model for political action and restorative engagement between warring states and factions. The third is, to quote Benjamin, “the vantage point outside the two,” the triangulated space that affords us the necessary reflective distance to comprehend the shape of our own identity and experience, at the same time as those of the other (Benjamin 2007). This may seem a very long way indeed from the frame of late twentieth-century popular music and Mitchell’s oeuvre, but I would like to suggest that utilizing the concept of the third will allow us to get beneath the complex surface of musical form and its textures in order to understand its deep impact upon our felt experience, particularly thinking here about “Both Sides, Now.”

Love Actually: a case study

As a shortcut, a cultural case study, I want to use a notable deployment of “Both Sides, Now”—and indeed of Mitchell herself as a cultural figure—by Richard Curtis in his popular (if much-debated) 2003 film, *Love Actually*. In among the broad sweep of the soundtrack, which ranges across popular music from the 1960s to the 2000s, and includes three original scores by Scottish composer Craig Armstrong, Mitchell’s revisited “Both Sides, Now” acts as the film’s affective core. Mitchell, indeed, has central structural relevance within *Love Actually*, appearing first in a mid-film scene in which the middle-aged couple Karen and Harry, played by Emma Thompson and Alan Rickman, sit together while she wraps family Christmas presents. Mitchell’s 1971 song “River” plays in the background, well-placed because of its own Christmas narrative but also because, in its plaintive description of a love lost through lack of care, it scaffolds the storyline in which Harry will come to jeopardize his marriage and family life by getting drawn into an office affair. Harry questions Karen disdainfully about the music she is playing:

HARRY: What is this we are listening to?

KAREN: Joni Mitchell.

HARRY: I can’t believe you still listen to Joni Mitchell.

KAREN: I love her. And true love lasts a lifetime. Joni Mitchell is the woman who taught your cold English wife how to feel.

HARRY: Did she? Oh well, I must write to her sometime and say thanks.
(Curtis 2003)

If Mitchell teaches Karen to feel earlier in her life, she also charts the emotional trajectory through which Karen must move in the course of the film, from the tired domesticity of a loveless marriage to the wreckage of the discovery of Harry's affair on the eve of Christmas, just before their children's school nativity play. This discovery turns on Harry's Christmas gift of the boxed edition of *Both Sides Now* which is not, after all, the expensive gold necklace Karen has accidentally found in his coat pocket days before Christmas and delightedly assumed is for her. Realizing that the gift must have another intended recipient (his secretary, in fact), "Both Sides, Now" swells in volume and Karen removes herself to the marital bedroom to absorb the revelation, to cry in desperation and then to swallow down the agony enough to rejoin the family and bustle them out of the front door. The wrenching scene's emotional charge depends upon catching together the acoustic backdrop of the song—a collage of Mitchell's voice and the richly textured orchestration of the song's later version—with Thompson's masterly performance of emotional disintegration, followed by an anguished repression.

Mitchell's necessity to the scene is neatly evidenced by Curtis's wife Emma Freud, live-tweeting about the film in a recent 2015 screening in New York: "Joni Mitchell. Help. Still hurts. Sat on the floor watching her do that scene—7 takes. Crying every time. Goddess. #LoveActually [6:29 AM—13 Dec 2015]." In an overdubbed commentary on the film, Curtis and cast members discuss the scene and Curtis explains how the song and plot are intertwined:

This is a version of "Both Sides, Now" that Joni Mitchell recorded 30 years after she originally wrote it. And I can't remember what came first but I think when I heard the song I thought it was so powerful that it was the thing that made me write this plot really. The thing is when Joni Mitchell wrote the song originally it was sort of precocious, you know, talking about what life and love and all those things add up to, when she was 25 or something but

revisiting it to [sic] this sort of voice that smoked 10,000 cigarettes looking back on the whole of life, I think it's a great song.⁶

Curtis's description of the way in which the power of the later version of the song suggests a whole plotline of middle-aged marital infidelity to him indicates the generative potential of its emotional range. Echoing something of Mitchell's own account of the journey from youth to experience, Curtis focuses on the nature of the shift from "precocious" youthful philosophizing without the sufficient grounds of maturity to a revisiting 30 years later with "the voice that [has] smoked ten thousand cigarettes." I am particularly interested in his identification of Mitchell's voice as the locus of pain, experience, and authenticity; it is the voice profoundly affected by life, age, and the ravages of heavy smoking that most powerfully conveys Karen's wordless expression of pain and loss which quickly cedes to repression.

To return to the concept of thirdness with which I began the chapter, we might think about subject positions and locations here to understand something of how our own affective responses are mobilized. Watching the scene, located literally as selves outside its action, we witness Karen as the Other, disintegrating in the privacy of her bedroom. Mitchell's voice occupies the space of the third, the space in between us, as spectators, and Karen as jilted, middle-aged wife. The transmission of affect via Mitchell's voice triggers our processes of identification, taking us into the realm of our own experiences and personal histories, which chime with the pain we watch unfold on the screen.

Life, voice

How can a singing voice do this to its listeners? And indeed, what is it that we hear in the different voices of the two versions of "Both Sides, Now"? Let us consider the 25-year-old voice in the first recording. Untrained but supported by good breath work, it incorporates unique vocal phrasing with a sense of suppleness and depth. The song is delivered mostly in Mitchell's head voice, though it dips down through the mix into chest voice in the drop on the phrase "I recall," from C# to F#. In this incarnation, the voice is backed

only by a guitar part that cycles through chords and a simple—though it has to be said signature, by which I mean nonstandard—strum pattern. In terms of structure, the song has a relatively common verse/verse/chorus pattern repeated three times.

The first striking difference in the rerecording of “Both Sides, Now” is, of course, the radically transformed voice that sings in a dramatically lower key. Where the song sits in F# major on *Clouds*, it has dived down to D major on *Both Sides Now*, lingering around D3, which is to say the D below Middle C—a location which the female voice, even an alto voice, usually cannot reach. Thus the 57-year-old voice exists in a radically different place from its youthful equivalent; the tessitura has dropped radically, from head to chest and, in its drop, embodies the timbre of age. For those familiar with the earlier recording, there is a strong emotional charge in listening to this aged voice. Like a kind of ghosting, the youthful voice of the 1969 recording is evoked by the dropped vocal register; the two versions sit in relation to each other in a way that creates a kind of third space for us as listeners, our own experience of age and time passing stitched into the act of listening.

As title track and last track on the album *Both Sides Now*, it is also important to consider the key role the song is ascribed in the cycle. As in *Clouds*, it is located as the concluding track. *Both Sides Now*'s construction was carefully considered and built to reflect a philosophical premise about the trajectory of emotions in the time frame of a human life story. Its coproducer Larry Klein describes it as “a programmatic suite documenting a relationship from initial flirtation through optimistic consummation, metamorphosing into disillusionment, ironic despair, and finally resolving in *the philosophical overview of acceptance and the probability of the cycle repeating itself*” (emphasis mine).⁷ Klein goes on to describe the success of the recording in relation to Mitchell's vocal performance and its affective charge in strikingly embodied terms “the results have surpassed our expectations. In singing these songs, I believe that Joni has achieved something quite extraordinary in that *she has truly sung them as if, as Nietzsche would say, she had written them in her own blood*” (emphasis mine).⁸

Klein's description of *Both Sides Now* is instructive, first, for the way it describes the affective state of the last track as a “philosophical acceptance,”

but also because of this highly charged description of Mitchell’s singing in Nietzschean terms as an expression of her own corporeal authenticity. Klein refers here to Mitchell’s versions of various jazz standards, but also, by implication, he infers that this profoundly embodied vocalization also occurs in Mitchell’s own songs on the album. In this context, it is notable where Mitchell’s voice has been placed in the mix. Sound engineer Allen Sides’s mix on the album brings this aged, affecting voice right forward, in front of the lush orchestration, so that our encounter with it is full, intimate and utterly inescapable. Undoubtedly, by comparison with its 25-year-old equivalent, there is much less vocal production and a loss of vocal suppleness such that the words, at times, appear almost spoken. The voice departs from traditional modes of singing and our encounter with it becomes something like being part of an intimate conversation, privately addressed by Mitchell who is attempting to impart her hard-won wisdom to us.

Voice, spokenness

In a seemingly random sidestep, I would like to consider this move toward spokenness through the early twentieth-century vocal technique of the Viennese vocalist Albertine Zehme. Working with the Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg, Zehme commissioned the piece *Pierrot Lunaire*, a melodrama setting for a 21-poem cycle by the German poet Otto Erich Hartleben. A musical universe away from Mitchell’s later twentieth-century folk in “Both Sides, Now,” there are, nevertheless, some productive comparative points to be made about voice, affect, and communication. Zehme regarded the traditionally trained singing voice as an inadequate tool for expressing deep, primal emotion, writing that “the singing voice, bound in otherworldly chastity, fixed in its ascetic bondage as an ideal, exquisite instrument—even a strong exhale dulls its inaccessible beauty—is not suitable for intense emotional outbursts” (1911). Zehme went further in arguing that “to communicate, our poets and our composers need both singing as well as the spoken tone [. . .]. The words that we speak should not solely lead to mental concepts, but instead their sound should allow us to partake of their inner experience” (1911). In an attempt to disentangle

the enmeshment of thought—circumvented at all times by language—and feeling—the experience of affect—Zehme advocated the *Sprechstimme* style. *Sprechstimme*, which translates from German, as “speech-voice,” is a musical term that describes a vocal technique in the singing voice that hovers between spoken and sung sound. For Zehme, this hybridic sound is the most effective for conveying deep, affective meaning. As Clara Latham describes:

[Zehme] characterized the trained singing voice as ascetic and ideal, writing that as an instrument it was not suitable for the production of raw emotion. It is this sense of “real feeling” or emotion that Zehme wanted to achieve. [. . .] She believed that the sound of the voice, unharnessed by technique, could produce affect and emotion, and this capability was independent from the function of the voice as a producer of meaningful expression. (2013, 106)

Zehme and Schoenberg’s collaboration on *Pierrot Lunaire* produced a groundbreaking unconventional musical work which was received by the early twentieth-century musical establishment and educated European audiences as a redefinition of the terrain of both composition and vocal style. Alongside the innovations of atonality and in the allocation of instrumental voicings, Zehme’s *Sprechstimme* technique recalibrated existing paradigms of the relationship between vocal production and meaning-making, a reinvention described even with regards contemporary twenty-first century performances as having “decisively changed our understanding of pitch and the relationship between words and music.”⁹

Sitting in the audience at its premier at the Choralien Saal in Berlin in October 1912, the influential, revolutionary composer Igor Stravinsky came to describe *Pierrot Lunaire* as “the solar plexus as well as the mind of early 20th century music.”¹⁰ Stravinsky’s allusion to the complex mesh of nerves in the abdomen as a signifier for this radical piece is an instructively embodied metaphor, which returns us to the body and the visceral impact of the voice which hovers somewhere between speaking and singing. Both in Western biomedical terms and the esoteric discourses of Ayurvedic teaching, the solar plexus constitutes one of the core locations of human bodily constitution. In colloquial terms, in the English language, we identify the solar plexus as the place where deep knowledge and felt experience become enmeshed; we talk of “gut feeling.”¹¹

This deep embodied effect upon the listener, who encounters the soundings of the voice that speaks as it sings in *Sprechstimme*, anticipates the formulation of the transformative potential of the embodied voice in the later twentieth century. Roland Barthes’s theory of the “grain” in the human singing voice is particularly instructive here. An organic metaphor, we might think of the grain of wood as a way of understanding Barthes’s concept; wood’s grain describes the specific arrangement of the cellulose fibers out of which it is constituted. Similarly, Barthes’s grain describes something both structural and organic, it alludes to the embodied production of sound: “the ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings” (1977, 188). What we encounter then, when we hear the *grain* of the voice, is the close proximity of the body of the singer and the body of the listener (Barthes describes this as being “given” the body of the singer), taking them to the place (in the right circumstances and with the right singer) that Zehme identifies above as “inner experience” (Barthes 1977, 189). Accessing the body in this way depends upon *Sprechstimme* demonstrating its own kind of thirdness, as it breaks down the traditional binary between speaking and singing.

Undoubtedly, I am bringing discordant materials together here. Mitchell is certainly not vocalizing in *Sprechstimme* style in the later version of “Both Sides, Now”—however ravaged her voice she is singing and not speaking. But in the example of *Sprechstimme*, I want to capture some of Zehme’s ideas about the transmission of affect possible in altered vocal style. Just as *Sprechstimme* blurs the boundaries between speech and song, in the rawness and almost unsung timbre of the untrained voice that has smoked 10,000 cigarettes but also lived 57 years, Mitchell also eschews what Zehme terms “otherworldly chastity” in favor of broken vocal phrasing, snatched breaths, riffing on her own 25-year-old melody reflectively, laconically, and with a melancholic evocation of loss. In this sense, Mitchell’s voice becomes a third to itself; it articulates both sides—innocence and experience—in the present moment, the “now” of its performance.

Orchestration, chance

There is, however, another third to consider. The affective power of “Both Sides, Now” exists in the in-between that lies between Mitchell’s aged timbre

and the striking orchestration which is so radically different from its early guitar accompaniment. It is impossible to analyze Mitchell's later voice and the valences of the second incarnation of "Both Sides, Now" without considering the soundscape in which they exist. If the voice is changed in 2000, so too is the musical backing; from the sparse guitar backing has grown the thick, multilayered texture of full orchestral arrangement.

The third in the trinity of hands upon *Both Sides Now's* conceptualization and realization was the American composer, arranger, conductor Vince Mendoza, who signed to Blue Note Records at the start of his career and has worked with a diverse range of artists from Robbie Williams, Björk, and Elvis Costello through to seminal jazz figures like Pat Metheny and Charlie Haden. Talking about his collaboration with Klein and Mitchell on *Both Sides Now* and the album that comes after it, *Travelogue* (2002), Mendoza describes his arrangement in the following way:

For the first one [*Both Sides Now*], as you know, most of them were standards. We did a couple of Joni's tunes. And the experience was so nice that we immediately went into plans to do another one, which consisted of all her music this time. *I think it was partly because we thought that on the first record, her songs were the most effective in an orchestral setting, treated as tone poems.*

Her poetry is so wonderful, and deep, and interesting, that to write poetry in music was the natural thing to do. So the second record was really all about writing tone poems with her music. Of course, there were a lot of challenges involved in that—when to use guitars and when not to, when to use her parts and when not to use her parts, *what is composed and what isn't*. All the problems inherent in redoing such staples in the American popular culture.

That was a challenge. But just *the thought of doing orchestral tone poems to her music was natural; the words are vibrant and deep that was a natural thing to want to dive into that pool.* [emphases mine]¹²

In particular, there are two key insights in Mendoza's description of the creative process of orchestrating the two Mitchell songs on *Both Sides Now* which help to explain the profound affective charge of both voice and the rerecording. Mendoza describes the choice of orchestral tone poems as "natural" settings for Mitchell's poetic lyrics. In musical terms, a tone poem is a "romantic work

in one movement that is intended to portray extra-musical ideas in sound” (Bowman 2002, 170). In the same way as Klein’s descriptions of Mitchell’s Nietzschean singing from the body and notions of philosophical acceptance suggest, the musical tone poems Mendoza writes as containers for the voice function as more than just settings, evoking the arc of life and experience embodied in the voice, the journey of one movement which symbolizes the life course, from beginning to end. Mendoza also describes the complex process of navigating Mitchell herself as songwriter and musician in deciding “when to use her parts and when not to use her parts,” in other words what to retain of the original song structure and what to lose. Notably he talks of “what is composed and what isn’t.” (Mendoza, 2007) What is certainly striking about the orchestration of “Both Sides, Now” is the way it constitutes a wash of sound behind Mitchell’s vocals. At the outset of the song, the orchestra produces a swirling sound mass, a soundscape in which pitch is only occasionally clearly articulated and in which strings seem to segue into and out of each other in a sumptuously random way.

This soundscape might well be described in musical terms as “aleatoric.” The term “aleatoric music,” also known as Chance music, derives from the Latin *alea*, for dice, connoting the throw of the dice that is open to chance. It is defined as a “synonym for indeterminacy, i.e. music that cannot be predicted before performance or music which was composed through chance procedures” (Kennedy and Kennedy 2007). As the following extract from an aleatoric score demonstrates (Figure 3.1), many of the elements are left to chance and rely upon individual musician’s choices about how to realize and perform the score. The boxed sections allow a musician to choose the duration of notes and rests; the headless beam notes allow the musician to choose pitch. If we were to think about this form through the concept of thirdness, we would of course note that any realization of the music relies upon every musician’s attuned co-construction of the work.

If Mendoza’s orchestral scaffolding for Mitchell’s voice is an aleatoric tone poem, this is entirely in keeping with the philosophical premise of the song; that clouds, love, and life are unknowable, open to chance, that the most profound state of human subjectivity and experience is structured around illusion. “Both Sides, Now’s” orchestration is strongly affective, it pulls and tugs at our

Of A Time

A Beckett

Oboe: *f* *mp* (any order, repeat pitches, add rests, vary durations) *f* *mp* (any notes, not diatonic) *ff*
 Clarinet in B \flat : *f* *mp* *Trem.* *f* *mp* *ff*
 Violin: *f* *p* (any order, repeat pitches, add rests, vary durations) *f* *mp* *ff* (any notes, not diatonic)
 Violoncello: *ff* *mf* *con sord.* *pizz.* *arco* *sfz* *mp* *ff*
 (any order, repeat pitches, add rests, vary durations)

Figure 3.1 “Of A Time”

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emotions. It builds, it swells. As we reach the most intense phase of the lyrical journey, the point at which life itself defeats the endeavor of understanding and only its illusions remain, Wayne Shorter’s soprano saxophone screeches and tears across the landscape of orchestration, keeping company with the angst and pain which Mitchell’s voice embodies.

Voice, culture

In conclusion, I return to the case study of Curtis’s *Love Actually*, and the early scene in which Karen wraps Christmas presents and Harry disparages her choice of music for the evening. Karen’s comment that it is Mitchell who teaches her, as a “cold English wife,” how to feel, of course refers to Mitchell’s

status as an iconic singer-songwriter of the 1960s and onward, and the ways in which her music educates her own generation and those beyond. But it also gestures toward something more specifically cultural. Joni Mitchell, Karen tells us, helps her to overcome the reticence and emotional repression that are associated with Englishness, to trade coldness for warmth. This teaching begets a lifelong love affair which may, the spectator speculates, outlive the failing marriage between Karen and Harry. Beneath the ironic, faintly comedic delivery of these lines, there is a message being conveyed about the power of music, and voice, to transform the coordinates of our emotional lives and histories. There is also a proleptic acknowledgment of the teaching Mitchell will deliver to us, as viewers, within the frame of this film’s narrative. I bring this back to Mitchell’s aged, ravaged, authentic voice, singing through the later bedroom scene and providing a crucial third space between the horror of marital infidelity and our own witnessing of it.

In his analysis of the relationship between the human voice and culture, the sound artist Yvon Bonenfant defines the way cultures teach us to either allow or withhold the breath depending on the amount of emotional and psychic repression structured into that culture’s ideology. He writes that “we [. . .] end up embodying a culture of these choices, and invent together a cultural body that regulates vocal sound.”¹³ The regulation of vocal sound “[represses] this thing we might call emotional flow” and thus, by extension, “represses the *voice*.”¹⁴ Karen does not, indeed cannot, speak of her realization about Harry’s betrayal; she cries silently so as not to alert either the children, or Harry himself, to her tears. The voice we hear in this scene is Mitchell’s, ably conveying the depth of pain and loss that Karen cannot. Bonenfant notes that “the voice is an evident, key relational tool.”¹⁵ We might use this insight on two levels in relation to this filmic moment. On the one hand, Mitchell does the emotional work that Karen cannot, representing the passionate and evocative liberation of deep feeling through the voice. On the other hand, representing a kind of relational third, Mitchell’s voice does this work for us too, allowing us (English or not!) to overcome our own respective repressions and to enter into an identificatory relationship with a character’s abject fragmentation.

Richard Curtis concludes that “Both Sides, Now” is “a great song” for the formidable palette of affective depth it gives him in writing and realizing a

script about love, loss, and human relationships. It is a song that also seems to possess its own tangible identity, independent even of Mitchell herself. She notes: “It was a song that I think I had to grow into. I don’t think I performed it well until I was in my fifties” (Marom 2014, 25). In an uncanny sense, then, it is a song that arrives before its time in Mitchell’s life and which cannot reach its full, magnificent potential until her voice and her experience have caught up with it. This journey, in the most moving of ways, is one we take with her.

Notes

- 1 Mitchell first published the song with the title “Both Sides, Now” in 1969 (*Clouds*). The title then comes to be used for the concept album *Both Sides Now*, sans comma, in 2000. This album includes the rerecorded and transformed version of the song as “Both Sides, Now” which forms the focus of this chapter.
- 2 The album *Both Sides Now* is mostly a collection of jazz standards, coproduced with Mitchell’s ex-husband Larry Klein and orchestrated by Vince Mendoza. Larry Klein is, of course, notable as a musician in his own right—as bassist, songwriter, and producer, he has worked with many of the major names in late twentieth-century jazz. A generation younger than Klein and Mitchell, Vince Mendoza is an American composer, conductor and music arranger who has worked with a wide range of musicians across jazz, classical and soul genres.
- 3 “A Case of You” was first recorded in 1971, the penultimate track on Mitchell’s forth studio album *Blue* (Hollywood: Reprise Records, 1971).
- 4 See Robert Hilburn, “Both Sides, Later,” *Los Angeles Times* (December 8, 1996). Bellow’s 1959 novel *Henderson the Rain King* details the escape of its protagonist Eugene Henderson from his middle-aged affluent existence in America to the remote villages of Africa.
- 5 Joni Mitchell, “Both Sides, Now,” *Clouds* (Hollywood: Reprise Records, 1969).
- 6 Richard Curtis, Audio Commentary with Hugh Grant, Bill Nighy, and Thomas Sangster, *Love Actually* (Working Title Films, 2003).
- 7 Larry Klein, *Both Sides Now* liner notes, *Both Sides Now* (Hollywood: Reprise Records, 2000).
- 8 Klein, *Both Sides Now*, liner notes.
- 9 Program notes, Arnold Schoenberg “Pierrot Lunaire. Op. 21” Chicago Symphony Orchestra, February 25–28, 2012, 4.

- 10 Quoted in Virginia Sublett, “*Pierrot Lunaire* at 95: Arnold Schoenberg’s Musical Hybrid and Twentieth-Century Vocal Chamber Music,” *College Music Symposium*, 49.50 (2009/2010): 451–458. The Russian composer Igor Stravinsky is regarded as one of the most influential and innovative composers in transforming the landscape of twentieth-century classical music.
- 11 Further discussions of the complex relationship between the gut and feeling, and its expressions in forms of everyday speech, can be found in the work of the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Alexis Brook. See Brook, “Bowel distress and emotional conflict,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 84 (1991): 39–42.
- 12 Vince Mendoza, quoted in Paul Olson, “Vince Mendoza: Color, Counterpoint and Open Ears,” *All About Jazz*, September 10, 2007. <https://www.allaboutjazz.com/vince-mendoza-color-counterpoint-and-open-ears-vince-mendoza-by-paul-olson.php?pg=5> (accessed: March 31, 2018). *Travelogue* is a double album, which comprises twenty-two reworkings of Mitchell classics, all orchestrated by Mendoza.
- 13 Yvon Bonenfant, “On Sound and Pleasure: Meditations on the Human Voice,” *Sounding Out!* (June 30, 2014). <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/06/30/on-sound-and-pleasure-meditations-on-the-human-voice/> (accessed: June 2, 2018).
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.

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