

Teenage Lontano

Marina Rosenfeld

“Now it seems to me that what singers are singing, above all,
is a listening...”
—Peter Szendy, “Listen: A History of Our Ears”

In Teenage Lontano and Teenage Lontano/16 Channels, I reconstructed Gyorgy Ligeti’s vibrating, utopian-modernist 1967 orchestral work Lontano as a vocal composition to be performed by teenagers. For the first performance of the work—at the Park Avenue Armory in New York in March 2008, as part of the Whitney Biennial—a choir of 34 teenagers sang while listening to 20 discrete vocal scores that I had laboriously transcribed, initially from Ligeti’s hyper-detailed score and later, both exhausted and emboldened, by ear, creating a new score, digital in format and more than twice as long as the original, for transmissal via headphones and mp3 players. With shared pairs of “earbud”-style headphones distributed to them mostly in pairs, the teenagers were in the interesting and, metaphorically speaking, probably familiar position of hearing, in addition to my (sonic) instructions in one ear, their own voices and the voices of their immediate neighbors in the other, enabling the choir as a whole to produce a series of complex dissonances without resort to written notation. Further personalizing—in Szendy’s paradigm, “signing”—my “cover version,” I encircled both choir and audience with freely interpolated analog-electronic sounds, which swept the architecture of the site, a former military drill hall, with arcs of abstract sound from a single horn suspended overhead and rotating at 33 1/3 rpm. For an installation version of the work, Teenage Lontano/16 Channels, I remixed the performances by the teenagers that I had captured during our sessions together into yet another “cover,” this time of my original, fashioned primarily from the fragmented commentary, amusement, objections, virtuosity and asides of my killer performers, whose multifarious interpretation of my interpretation ultimately demanded its own version...

