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# ‘Think of me fondly’: Voice, body, affect and performance in Prince/Lloyd Webber’s *The Phantom of the Opera*

## ABSTRACT

*This article argues that Lloyd Webber’s megamusical The Phantom of the Opera, and specifically Michael Crawford’s original performance of the title role in London, New York and Los Angeles, combined sound, voice, gesture and technology in a unique physical expression of desire that reinscribed, exceeded and even redefined spectacle at the level of both the visual and the aural realms (paradoxical as that may seem). This argument runs counter to existing arguments about the separation of scopophilia and audiophilia in the theatre and also departs from some of the arguments about the narrative in different forms which is often discussed as privileging sound and hearing over image and sight.*

## KEYWORDS

Andrew Lloyd Webber  
*The Phantom of the Opera*  
Michael Crawford  
body  
voice  
theatrical spectacle

## PROLOGUE

In the work that follows, I invoke my dual identities as scholar and fan of *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986) in order to argue, along two distinctly different but not incompatible critical paths, that part of the allure of the long-running megamusical, now more than 25 years old, successfully exploits and makes

use of what have sometimes been viewed as limitations of modern theatrical sound technology, and that it does so at the levels of both melodramatic performance and content. I will argue that those so-called limitations, to be discussed below, actually enhance the collaborative efforts of *Phantom's* creative personnel and their collective characterization of the Phantom, articulating and then masking over an aural/visual split in meaning in a manner at once typical of the megamusical and especially suited to the melodramatic themes of *The Phantom of the Opera*. I assert that what I read as a body/voice split enacted by sound technology is used productively in *The Phantom of the Opera* to develop the characterizations and thematic preoccupations of that show, underscoring a radical schism between the Phantom's horrifying face and his beautiful voice and evoking both monstrosity and pathos simultaneously.

The first line of argumentation will be conducted through a theoretical examination of that sound technology and its ramifications. The second, performance-based line of enquiry, however, will take as impetus (though not as its *raison d'être*) my own multiple viewing experiences of *The Phantom of the Opera* as both scholar and fan over the past 27 years and, even more importantly, the historical theatre critics' assessments of the original Phantom, Michael Crawford, and aspects of his performance. Because of the markedly (though not uniformly) positive reception given Crawford's performance of the titular role, which he originated in London, continued on Broadway, and took to Los Angeles, I consider it historically significant, worthy of revisiting, and deserving of scholarly attention, particularly as it fades into the past and into memory. This is not to deny or minimize the talents of the myriad actors who have filled the role since Crawford's departure from the role in London in the late 1980s and from his final surrendering of it in 1991. It is, however, to acknowledge the historical significance of a specific performance at a particular moment in time. As a media historian and scholar of popular culture, I was surprised to discover that virtually no *scholarly* critical literature exists about Crawford's original performance of the Phantom, save for discussions of the development of the Phantom's characterization in preproduction, mostly within the context of examinations of director Hal Prince. I find this omission curious, particularly when Crawford's award-winning performance was singled out and highly praised by many theatre critics of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as I shall discuss. Historical considerations of actors' original performances of roles in classical and/or non-musical theatre abound, but the same appears not to be true for this popular musical production that has been, essentially, mass-(re)produced around the world with countless Phantoms inheriting the mask from Crawford after his initial five-year run in the role.

Thus, I will discuss the manner in which fragmentation of voice from body in this megamusical's sound technology and their periodic, fragile reassemblage work to the show's advantage, enhancing its thematic and specifically melodramatic dimension as well as the characterization of the Phantom as an angel of music with a voice from heaven and a face from hell. This is true, regardless of who is in the role of the Phantom. However, in Crawford's incarnation, as the historical record demonstrates, the Phantom's fragmentation and reassemblage were an especially affective element of *The Phantom of the Opera* that is worthy of historical discussion and consideration some twenty years later.

A word on scholarship and fandom before I continue: as scholar Matt Hills notes, the idea of the 'scholar fan' has customarily been viewed somewhat dubiously by the academic community (Michael 2000; Hill 2002), as if 'the

question of whether the media academic who is also a media fan represents some kind of problematic or scandalous figure’ (Hill 2007: 34); the basic idea is that passion for an object of study may somehow occlude a critic’s rational, analytic vision. ‘[S]cholar-fans have been interpreted as carrying some hybridized or logically regressive identity in relation to their academic status – i.e., they have been viewed in some quarters as “not proper academics”’ (Hill 2007). However, in an increasingly mediatized world of cultural production, Hill prefers to argue now that

[a]cademics, far more generally, ‘are not proper academics’ [...] if by this we mean that their scholarly selves cannot be cleanly separated out from the media-audience-based identities [...] all too often attacks on scholar-fandom have sought to attack this hybrid category per se for its supposed transgressing of scholarly detachment, while exempting academia in general from any related critique or censure.

(Hill 2007)

The fact is, all of us are consumers of media – television, internet, radio, film – and yes, many of us are consumers of megamusicals, which are reproduced in global mass markets. Certainly, there is scarcely a media academic working today, including those in theatre, who can legitimately claim to exist wholly separate and apart from media and theatre formations about which she or he writes.

### ‘LET THE DREAM BEGIN’

It seems an appropriate time for this reconsideration of *The Phantom of the Opera*, coinciding as it does with the aftermath of the 25th anniversary of its debut on Broadway, where Crawford recapitulated his original performance of the titular role in London and where he won a Tony for his performance. Popular fascination with the musical show and the Phantom at its heart has not been restricted to anniversary celebrations, however. It is ongoing and widespread. According to the show’s official website, over the past 26 years ‘*The Phantom of the Opera* has been produced in 145 cities, in 27 countries around the world, including the UK, US, New Zealand, Japan, Austria, Canada, Sweden, Germany, Brazil, Mexico, Australia, Holland, Switzerland, Belgium, Korea, Denmark, Spain and Russia’ (*The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.). Further, although the original production debuted in London’s West End in 1986 (and runs there still), a new production of the show by Cameron Mackintosh premiered in Plymouth, England in March 2012 and inaugurated a multi-city tour of the United Kingdom that continued into 2013. It is presently scheduled and playing in over twenty cities in the United States in 2013 and 2014.<sup>1</sup>

Equally evident is that both Mackintosh and composer/producer Lloyd Webber are nothing if not masters of media promotion, sales and profit. ‘It is estimated that *Phantom* has been seen by more than 130 million people, and the total worldwide gross is in excess of \$5.6 billion’ (*The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.). *The Phantom of the Opera* was only one of a number of British imports to New York in the 1980s, prompting some American critics and theatregoers to decry a virtual ‘British invasion’ of American musical theatre (popularly if incorrectly mythologized to that point as a ‘purely’ American form). Further, as has been noted by several critics and scholars over the years, including but not limited to Jessica Sternfeld and Vagelis Siropoulos,

1. Further evidence of *Phantom*’s popularity lies in its far less successful sequel *Love Never Dies* (2010), also composed by Lloyd Webber. The subject of fierce debate by a segment of original *Phantom* fans who have excoriated it, it nevertheless testifies to the staying power of Lloyd Webber’s *Phantom* and people’s desire to see more of him (cynics might also argue that it could bear equal witness to Lloyd Webber’s own wish to profit by that desire). The show opened in London on 9 March 2010 and continued playing to very mixed reviews until it closed after only eighteen months. By contrast, however, a reworked production achieved moderate critical success in limited Australian runs in Melbourne (2011) and Sydney (2012) with a recording of the Melbourne production produced for DVD distribution into theatres and homes alike. The show opened in Copenhagen in October 2012 and toured the UK in 2013. Thus, it is not only *The Phantom of the Opera* that commands the money, eyes, and ears of consumers but the hope that the narrative world that Lloyd Webber’s *Phantom* haunts might be extended as well.

2. Thanks to one of the anonymous readers of this article for bringing this to my attention.

megamusicals were often dismissed by critics at the time of their debuts in the United States who resented their non-American origins and because they were faulted for what was perceived as an emphasis on style, size and profits over substance. As Martin Gottfried pointed out, however, it was only when British Andrew Lloyd Webber appeared on the scene that box office success on Broadway was no longer regarded as a sign of artistic quality but as something suspicious.<sup>2</sup> Other critics were genuinely disappointed by what they viewed as shows that pleased and entertained without educating or challenging their audiences (Sternfeld 2006: 4). Collectively, these attitudes contributed to a lack of serious evaluation or consideration of the megamusical and its practitioners for at least ten years after their appearance on the scene (I would guess that such cultural devaluation has also been one reason why a scholarly contextualization of Crawford's performance of the Phantom has not yet been undertaken). Indeed, upon the publication in 1989 of the first edition of his in-depth biography of Lloyd Webber, which included a serious consideration of the composer/producer's work, Michael Walsh was admonished by a number of critics for studying his work in the first place, as has been pointed out most recently by Siropoulos (2010).

Relatively little scholarly literature exists about Lloyd Webber even now – despite the more recent work of Sternfeld (2006) and Siropoulos (2010, 2011). Even less appears in depth in the scholarly literature about Lloyd Webber's Phantom as a dramatic figure, although there are notable exceptions of varying depth and degree (Ilson 2000; Sauter 1995; Burston 1998; Snelson 2004; Sternfeld 2006; Chandler 2009). And, as I stated earlier, no scholarly work exists around Crawford's original performance of the titular role. But to understand its historical and thematic significance in the context of the show as a whole, an examination of some of the key features and effects of sound technology in the megamusical is necessary.

### **'A STRANGE NEW WORLD'**

Despite the intervening fifteen years between its original publication and the present, Jonathan Burston's 'Theatre space as virtual place: Audio technology, the reconfigured singing body, and the megamusical' is useful for the theoretical implications it offers the interpretation of individual performance within the megamusical, and specifically within *The Phantom of the Opera*. Burston discusses at some length the use of radio microphone technologies within theatre generally between 1980 and 1998, and despite advances in sound technology since the time of his writing, his key points still resonate. The effect of such systems, he notes, is that the experience of sound within live musical theatre (not simply megamusicals) began to more closely resemble the virtual rather than the real – and this is vital to my reading of the show's success because of the way in which sound contributes to a disintegration or fracturing of the voice from body that, I will argue, underpins the melodramatic impact of the Phantom's character:

Within the parameters of the megamusical aesthetic, it can be said that live musical theatre is no longer expected to produce a 'live' sound. Instead, it now aims to reproduce an acoustic entirely identifiable with digitally recorded music. It also aims to carry its scrubbed, undistorted timbres [an unscrubbed quality is what cultural critic Roland Barthes has called 'the grain of the voice'] out to its audience almost exclusively

via loudspeaker technology. It strives to create a kind of hyper-real sound, closely and indeed often deliberately linked to the aesthetics of the compact disc.

(Burston 1998: 208)

Burston draws upon the work of John Corbett, who advanced the notion of an ‘audio-visual split’ (by way of formulations by Barthes and feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey):

Corbett argues that a quality of ‘fetishistic audiophilia’ is now widespread within popular music production. Fetishistic audiophilia’s chief impulse is the desire to separate the sound of music from the body performing it, so effecting an ‘audio-visual split between music and musician’ (Corbett 1990, p. 85). According to Corbett, production standards in popular music have worked to eliminate the grain of the voice, and thus ‘to widen the gap between the bodies of performers and the sound of their music’ (ibid, p. 91) [...] The sound of fingers, lips, legs, and nose are all traces of the performer, the absent performer.

(Burston 1998: 209–10)

If, however, according to Burston’s account of Corbett’s model, the recorded or amplified voice is effectively untethered from the body that produces it in the contemporary digital era, then I would go further and argue that *both* an aural and a visual ‘philia’ are often enacted, at least in instances such as music video or stage performances that inevitably include a visual dimension. That is, voice and body are divorced, reified, but equally fetishizable: the performing body *may* be evacuated of its grain (an ‘audiophilia’ exists) and yet the physical traces of the performer persist as *disconnected* traces, and therefore are potentially subject to a scopophilic regime. Hence, I argue subsequently in this piece that such a fetishistic scopophilia is evident in contemporary theatre critics’ original fascination with Crawford’s expressive use not simply of his body generally but specifically of his hands, for example. Indeed, that same scopophilia is evident in the surreptitiously videotaped records of portions of the Crawford-era productions of *The Phantom of the Opera* that have found their way onto YouTube (in far greater numbers than for any other Phantom actor, though some footage of other Phantoms does exist) and are well known to fans and scholar-fans of the show. These records have terrible audio and image quality, reveal shaky camera work, and are valuable only to the serious researcher *or* fan who is already intimately familiar with the show. Often, though not always, the anonymous videographer of these pieces endeavours to focus the camera on the Phantom alone, even in joint scenes in which both he and Christine play key roles (e.g., ‘The Music of the Night’, ‘Wandering Child’, ‘Past the Point of No Return’, musical interludes to which I shall return at the end of this article).

As I have just suggested, Burston’s discussion of Corbett’s work has implications for the interpretation and experience of vocal and bodily performance particularly in the megamusical. In applying Corbett’s ideas to the megamusical specifically, Burston traces the ways in which the performer’s voice and body are dis-integrated: voice appears not to issue from the body but rather from strategically placed speakers throughout a theatre; among other things, changes in performance direction and location are thereby sonically glossed over, and ‘the ever-changing sounds of the body-in-motion

are voided' (Burston 1998: 211). However, I believe that what is embodied and voiced in Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* is a kind of paradoxical *aural spectacle* in which body and voice are first dis-integrated and then occasionally reassembled, and when they are not, the audio-visual fissures about which Corbett writes actually enact a body/voice split that speaks compellingly to the melodramatic characterizations and thematic preoccupations of *Phantom* itself.

This precise concept of aural spectacle – involving dis-integration, fetishization, reassemblage, and fissuring that may or may not be successfully masked over – and its implications for not only performance but interpretation and reception are embryonic but not developed in either Sternfeld's or Siropoulos' work on the megamusical and *The Phantom of the Opera* specifically. Siropoulos uses the term 'aural images' six times throughout his piece to describe Lloyd Webber's compositional approach: 'the postdramatic character of Lloyd Webber's theatrical compositions derives mainly from his tendency to think not so much in terms of psychologically developed characters and strongly sustained narratives, but rather in terms of semi-autonomous aural images and dramatic highlights, almost self-contained melodic and dramatic forms' (Siropoulos 2011: 16). However, he does not specifically define the term or comment upon its oxymoronic quality. From my point of view, coming from a film studies perspective, the paradoxical dimension of the phrase *aural spectacle* as I have defined it is useful to a multivalent reading of sound technology and performance – and to an understanding of the process of dis-integration, fetishization, reassemblage and fissuring, which *The Phantom of the Opera* specifically performs.

For Sternfeld, the 'recorded, processed sound' of the show, particularly in the title number during which the Phantom leads Christine from the world of the opera house to his lair below it, enhances what she has called a 'cinematic montage feel', observing that when the two arrive in the lair, 'The sound reverts to its more normal acoustic space (still heavily miked, but obviously emanating from the bodies onstage)' (Sternfeld 2006: 262). For me, however, it is not so much that the sound itself changes during this sequence (though the musical shifts that Sternfeld describes so well do occur), but that there are fewer distracting (albeit still visually stimulating) moving parts to the *mise-en-scène* (i.e., the 'winding set of shadowy ramps and paths set far back from the audience' have disappeared, the candelabra rising out of the lake are in place, the gondola in which the Phantom and Christine travel across the subterranean water has come to rest, and the Phantom and Christine have arrived at their destination). This, then, allows the audience to focus its attention on the two actors and their bodies in a way that we have not been able to before, and our perception of their 'recorded, processed' voices is that they are more closely yoked to those bodies than they have been in the earlier part of the musical number 'The Phantom of the Opera'. In fact, however, whether one sits near or far from the stage, it is actually very difficult to perceive sound coming directly from the actors' throats, amplified and variously distributed as it is in a sophisticated system of multiply dispersed speakers throughout the given theatre. Thus, what is enacted here and elsewhere in *The Phantom of the Opera* is that process of fragmentation and fetishization of sound and body (recapitulating the Phantom's own fetishization of Christine's voice and body). Further, as I shall discuss in a historical examination of contemporary critics' reviews, during Crawford's original performance of the Phantom in particular, a certain degree of reassemblage then seems to occur through

a marked and melodramatic insistence on the body in the Phantom’s movements and gestures, in which voice and body are temporarily united. Throughout ‘The Music of the Night’, for example, *in addition to* ‘the audience hear[ing the actors]’ voices blasted over the sound system, intimately close to their microphones’, audience members are able to focus on the bodies of both the Phantom and Christine more narrowly, and on their gestural and bodily performances. Christine is in a kind of trance; the Phantom seduces and beguiles with voice and, in Crawford’s case in particular as critics noted at the time, with gesture as well. As Roland Barthes observed, ‘The “grain” is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs’ (1977: 188), and for the duration of ‘The Music of the Night’ the divorce between the audio and visual execution is effectively masked over. For a few precious moments, the Phantom becomes his voice, as beautiful and mesmerizing as the song he sings, the voice that sings it, and the body that performs it.

### ‘I AM THE MASK YOU WEAR/IT’S ME THEY HEAR’

Burston rightly asserts the dis-integration of voice from performer that tends to occur within the megamusical (and, I would suggest, within other forms of modern theatre) because of its reliance on the radio microphone, more recent sound technologies, and their amplification systems. At times, however, this consists of more than an emptying out of the grain of the voice and actually enhances the theatrical experience. He astutely comments that Martin Levan’s original sound design for *Phantom* ‘deliberately emphasizes the sonically fantastical’ (Burston 1998: 211). Or, to put it another way, in exploiting the capacity of existing sound technology to dissociate voice from body, Levan’s design enhances the portrayal of an all-powerful Phantom as master ventriloquist who can project his voice anywhere from virtually no discernable location: ‘I’m here! I’m here! I’m here!’ an unseen Phantom taunts, seemingly from all four corners of the theatre. Obviously this is a function of technology: no actor can be in four places simultaneously.

At the same time that the Phantom is everywhere, however, he is also nowhere, unlocalizable, and therefore distinctly supernatural: ‘There is no Phantom of the Opera’, fumes a frustrated Raoul to Christine, who nevertheless perpetually hears the Phantom’s voice ‘inside [her] mind’. The issue of who is hearing and singing what – of which body sings and the singing body itself – is explicitly thematized in *The Phantom of the Opera* during the title song as Christine declares, ‘I am the mask you wear’, the Phantom replies, ‘It’s me they hear’, and together they continue, ‘Your/my spirit and your/my voice in one combined ...’. The fragmentation of voice from body and its periodic, fragile reassemblage is something which the sound technology actually underscores, enhancing the thematic dimension of the show and the characterization of the Phantom as an angel of music with a voice from heaven and a face from hell.

Observing that ‘radio microphone technology inevitably strives to produce volume levels louder than would otherwise be possible in the theatre’, Burston comments in passing: ‘the Phantom’s super-human volume levels spring immediately to mind [as an example]’ (Burston 1998: 211). Indeed, contemporary reviewer Richard Christiansen of *The Chicago Tribune* observed that Crawford in the role was ‘able to both caress and boom out the melody of his big song, *The Music of the Night*, with great power’ (*The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.). Christiansen’s remark about Crawford’s dual approach to vocal

delivery points to another observation made by Burston. The voice/body split effected by the radio microphone and its amplification systems also permits a restructured intimacy with the body – both in terms of an actor’s performance and the audience’s relationship to it:

[R]adio microphones are rightly understood to have opened up a wide range of dramatic possibilities for stage performance previously unavailable to performers, creators and collaborators. This expansion of innovative possibility appears to herald the arrival in theatrical space of a moment similar to one described by Frith (1986): a moment in which close miking reveals its potential to make us more intimate with the body.

(Burston 1998: 211)

Thus, the Phantom’s holding of boldly articulated high notes that ring throughout the theatre is complemented by parallel moments in which his saddest of whispers can be heard by every member of the audience, including those in the furthest back rows. ‘Oh, Christine’, the Phantom sighs very softly in Act One, following Christine’s first unmasking of him in his lair, articulating all the longing of ‘the man/behind the monster’. In Crawford’s performance, his very breath (captured on the original London cast’s soundtrack recording), could be heard at this moment as he shrank away from Christine’s gaze, and it is in this and other comparable moments in the show when voice and body, sound and image, are once again intimately yoked. However, as I observed earlier, it is precisely the Phantom’s inescapable narrative tragedy that sound and image are ultimately rejoined in a kind of difficult, fraught and unavoidable tension. The Phantom can never escape the fate of social ostracization to which his visual disfigurement condemns him. The melodramatic pathos and power generated by and structured into the characterization of the Phantom, regardless of who plays him, are rooted in the paradoxical dual ‘philia’ of the aural spectacle itself. I will explore the links of melodrama to both the affect of this show and the way the sound design enables that impact in a moment. For me, this aural spectacle induced a double scholar-fan philia – for the Phantom, regardless of who plays him, and for Crawford’s original embodiment and vocalization of the Phantom specifically.

## **THE PERFORMANCE OF A LIFETIME: HISTORICAL TEXTS AND CONTEXTS**

The title role is certainly the kind most actors only dream of. Crawford invests it with horror and heartbreak. He has a stunning physical presence that seems to mutate with the mood of the moment.

(Richards in *The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.)

Though a self-professed scholar-fan of *The Phantom of the Opera*, I was not alone in my compulsive return to the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles between 1988 and 1991 where Crawford played the role of the Phantom, or in my ‘phan-nish’ willingness to wait in line ten, sometimes twelve, hours for the chance to buy last-minute tickets released by the theatre to a sold-out show I had already seen multiple times. A look at Crawford’s own remarks about this period reflect this historical moment: he remembered it as ‘a wonderful time. People would

queue up around the block and sleep overnight to get tickets. It was extraordinary to come to the theatre and see so many people wanting tickets. This went on for months and months' (Julian 2010). But what was the source of people's fascination with both Crawford and the show itself at the time?

An examination of contemporary critics' reviews of Crawford's performance provides some insight into a much-lauded moment in his career and in the annals of actor portrayals of the long-running Phantom. Succinctly put, there is a general agreement that it constituted a unique evocation of monstrosity, desire and pathos that contemporary reviewers noted time and again, usually commenting upon Crawford's sensuous physicality – both vocal and corporeal – that struck them as unique and affective: 'Using subtle vocal intonation and body movement in an extraordinarily moving performance, an almost unrecognizable Crawford devastates us with the anguish and despair of the Phantom' (Barkley in *The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.). It was through his unique combination of voice, gesture and movement that he seemed to command the stage absolutely and, moreover, to draw an emotional and sometimes physiological response from the audience. From the start of 'The Music of the Night', Crawford's Phantom embodied that man's desire as much in the graceful yet tortured movements of his body (movements that were unique to Crawford's portrayal of the character, though the basic stage blocking remains the same in the original production from actor to actor) and in the sweet, piercing tenor that issued from it. Tellingly, for Crawford himself, his physical embodiment of the Phantom was intimately rooted in Lloyd Webber's music, which he cited as an almost physiological inspiration for his performance to which he responded physically and which seems particularly *a propos* given the nature of the musical genius he played: 'The tragedy of the character was deep in my heart. I felt it when I first heard the overture. The hair stood up on the back of my head [...] I could feel [the Phantom's] stance, the beginning of the physicality of the man' (Julian 2010).

While I emphasize here Crawford's performance of desire and affect and the historical critics' and audience's almost fetishistic experience of them specifically, the collaborative nature of the creation of the Phantom's erotic character as Crawford performed it has been well documented and should not be underestimated. Sternfeld describes that collaboration from the outset, across different creative aspects of *The Phantom of the Opera*, underscoring especially its sensuous elements. She notes in particular director Harold Prince's

most important revelation about what the show needed: sex. It is an erotic tale, not just a romantic one, about a man longing for a lover, for someone to touch him for the first time in his life [...]. The notion of the Phantom's search for sexual fulfillment helped not only to shape the show and the performances but the sets as well; rich fabric drapes the stage, candles and shadows abound, the lighting is often quite dim and glowing, and the arch of the stage itself is framed by gilded statues of people who, as Prince pointed out, 'if you look carefully, you realize are in various stages of ecstasy'. The research of Prince, set designer [Maria] Björnson, and lighting designer [Andrew] Bridge in Paris became context over which they built a sensuous look of their own imaginations.

(Sternfeld 2006: 229–30)

Given the multifaceted dimension of erotic design, then, it is not surprising that Crawford's affective performance as noted in reviews of the

period – articulating and animating space in tandem with the *mise-en-scène* and its movement – was experienced, viscerally, bodily, by the audience:

Michael Crawford is magical as the phantom (he vanishes but he's indelible). And, believe me, when he cries out to Christine at the very end ('You alone can make my song take flight, it's over now, the music of the night ...'), your heart will skip a beat. Crawford sings and acts eloquently. It's the performance of his life.

(Kelly in *The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.)

Kelly's turn of phrase here is important, noting as it does his own affective, physiological response to Crawford's performance.

If Prince's concept of the Phantom is less as a figure of horror (though he succeeds in terrorizing and horrifying those around him, including Christine) and more of an erotic figure of pathos, Crawford noted the difficulty in executing and performing that particular combination in his origination of the role, as Harold Prince's biographer Carol Ilson has pointed out:

Crawford, much praised for his performance of the phantom, said, 'Prince saw the character as a very sexual thing between myself and the Christine character [...] but it's very hard [...] you actually can't think sexual [...] what you have to think is great passion and love for her and then hopefully it will look sensual to the audience [...]. I think that's what has happened [...] so it was a great journey.

(Ilson 2000: 347)

It is not simply the staging, however, but the specific vocal and corporeal elements of Crawford's performance that worked to generate that eros. Again, that was something on which he and Prince collaborated. Speaking of how he worked with Prince, Crawford said that the director at first gave him an outline of what he thought the character should be. Crawford explained that, because he worked very much alone in the show,

I worked a lot of the time alone in rehearsal [...] and then obviously when it got our [his and Brightman's] segments, I would then be in the rehearsal room and work with Hal and Sarah [...]. I would then sort of offer things that I thought of. What I liked was [Prince] allowed me the freedom to build up the characterization as I saw it and whenever it was off track he would put it right. I enjoy working in that kind of free way.

(Ilson 2000: 352)

Again, the blocking and choreography of the original production of the show remains the same, regardless of the actor who plays the Phantom, but there are subtle differences: for example, Crawford's fingers were long and graceful in ways that other actors' hands in the role are not, and it was his expressive use of that particular feature of his body that attracted the fetishistic attention of more than one critic: 'Just with his hands he orchestrates a universe of feelings' (Stayton in *The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.); 'I found myself watching his beautiful hands as he pushes Christine's face away gently with his palm, not his fingertips; as he sensually, yet tenderly, caresses her in their duets creating an aura of passion and restraint' (Reichman in *The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.); 'It is the humanity under the mask that seizes the

3. Coveney in *The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.



Figure 1: Michael Crawford's expressive hands as the Phantom.

attention, not the least when his flickering, desperate hands suddenly merge from behind an Angel of Music hovering over the lovers on the Opera House rooftop' (Billington in *The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.).

The supreme irony underscoring the cultural and literary themes of Gaston Leroux's original novel is that, historically, Crawford's melodramatic performance of desire and monstrosity was, in fact, beautiful in itself and fascinated within and across multiple registers of meaning.

### **'YOU WOULD BE WELL ADVISED TO HAVE THE KLEENEX HANDY'<sup>3</sup>**

Affect has traditionally been suspect within intellectual study and discourse, as has the scholar-fan: they are thought to veer away from the genuinely analytic and into the realm of emotion. But if *The Phantom of the Opera* belongs to the megamusical, as such it also participates in the conventions of theatrical, literary, and film melodrama, and emotion is key to an experience of melodrama, which elicits affect. Certainly Sternfeld explores melodramatic aspects of the megamusical from the outset of her book. As she notes, 'the plots of megamusicals are big in scope: they are epic, sweeping tales of romance, war, religion, redemption, life and death, or some combination of these and other lofty sentiments' (Sternfeld 2006: 2). As a scholar who paid early serious attention to the importance of melodrama in theatre and literature, critic and theorist Peter Brooks rightly termed it a 'mode of excess' (1976) that appears in a range of representational forms. Although the adjective 'melodramatic' in common parlance – and even among present-day reviewers and critics of theatre, film and literature alike – is still usually employed pejoratively (and has certainly been leveled against Lloyd Webber and *The Phantom of the Opera*), it is used more carefully across a range of scholarly literature. As Sternfeld's description of the megamusical suggests

4. Peter Brooks comments that one of the recurring figures in melodrama is the mute (Brooks 1976: 56–80). For his discussion of desire in narrative, see Brooks (1984).

above and as Brooks states here, ‘melodrama’ and ‘melodramatic’ have complex connotations: ‘The desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode. Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand onstage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship’ (Brooks 1976: 4). Melodrama’s very tendency to express and evoke strong emotion in its audiences, its ‘striving to makes its representations clear and legible to everyone’ (Brooks 1976: 14), in fact, renders it intellectually suspect in a number of western cultures. Further distinctions between high and low art, between the appeal to a few and the appeal to more select audiences, also play a role in its cultural devaluation. The megamusical is one of the more recent reformulations of theatrical melodrama, as Sternfeld’s work explicitly demonstrates.

Siropoulos, too, touches upon the ‘melodramatic’ within *The Phantom of the Opera* in his analysis of the dynamic of narcissism within postmodern culture, noting that ‘Lloyd Webber brings [a] more melodramatic representation of narcissistic longings and anxieties to a whole new level of complexity and sophistication with *The Phantom of the Opera*’ (Siropoulos 2010: 284). More interested in narcissism than melodrama, per se, however, Siropoulos reads the former in terms of what he views as the 1980s ‘postmodern narcissistic culture [which] started emphasizing outward appearance to an extraordinary degree, creating impossible standards of beauty, which made many individuals feel lacking in front of the media images of über-masculinity and über-femininity’ (Siropoulos 2010: 284). By contrast, I am interested in isolating the bodily and vocal aspects of melodrama inherent in the Phantom (and as originally conceptualized primarily by Lloyd Webber and Prince in tandem with Crawford) – both evoking and analysing that melodramatic affect and contextualizing voice and body against the backdrop of sound technologies and practices in the megamusical.

Film critic and theorist Thomas Elsaesser noted in 1972 that melodrama depends in part on ‘mechanisms of emotional solicitation’ (Elsaesser 1972: 8). Although Elsaesser hails from a different field of critical enquiry than theatre, I find his turn of phrase useful for its evocation of a technological metaphor, as mechanisms of sound (and other) theatrical technologies certainly worked in tandem with melodramatic performance in *Phantom* to articulate and generate affect. A mode of expression that traverses various representational systems and cultural products, even as it takes specific forms within each, melodrama engages with affect in a manner that makes its performance – and experience of performance – a critical site of investigation. In particular, melodrama often addresses familial structures, gesture, the schism between voice and body, and the ability to speak (or in the case of *The Phantom of the Opera*, to sing and give voice to desire<sup>4</sup>). As such, its configuration in *The Phantom of the Opera* assumes added relevance in light of my foregoing discussion of fragmentation of body and voice and its periodic, fragile reassemblage.

## DARK SEDUCER

The subject suddenly realizes that he is imprisoning the loved object in a network of tyrannies: he has been pitiable, now he becomes monstrous.

(Barthes 1978: 165)

What are the aspects of melodrama, articulated across a technologically fissured bodily and vocal landscape, that persist across different actors' performance of the Phantom, mostly by virtue of the way in which the show is written, staged and scored? Rather than try to assess all the factors, I will restrict my discussion to the consideration of an element that Roland Barthes has isolated in his study of amorous discourse (itself a form of melodrama) across different ages and cultures – namely, the ways in which the desiring subject inevitably becomes monstrous because of his or her exerted control over the loved object – psychologically, physically and vocally. It seems to me that this, above all, is the melodramatic dynamic that *The Phantom of the Opera* addresses and, ultimately, resolves in its final moments.

Contrary to the Phantom's own assertion towards the end of the musical, it is not his ravaged face that marks him as monstrous ('this face/which earned/a mother's fear/and loathing') nor even, as Christine counters, his 'soul/[where] the true/distortion/lies'. Rather, it is in the insistent, unreciprocated desire he feels that is, by definition, excessive: his body, through voice and gesture, articulates the very excess of its unreciprocated burden. (Were Christine to return his love, the tale would suddenly transform into Beaumont's or Villeneuve's tale of 'Beauty and the Beast', leaving a handsome man in the Phantom's place, physically transformed by love – but such reciprocity is not his fate. The Phantom remains condemned to monstrosity and to its perpetual performance.) Nowhere are his monstrosity and his allure more compellingly joined than in Act Two's 'Wandering Child' and 'Point of No Return', in which love, longing, desire, compulsion, threat and violence are spellbindingly, if disturbingly, distilled both vocally and physically. 'The Music of the Night' gives us a taste of this in Act One, as Frank Rich of *The New York Times* astutely observed in his original review ('[Crawford's] Act I declaration of love, *The Music of the Night* – in which the Phantom calls on his musical prowess to bewitch the heroine – proves as much a rape as a seduction' in that Christine is, at best, merely a hypnotized participant [*The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.]), but it remains for these elements to be played out more fully in the second act.

Dan Sullivan of *The Los Angeles Times* observed of Crawford's Phantom specifically that, 'It's a soulful and sympathetic characterization, yet still a kinky one' (Sullivan in *The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.). Kinky, indeed, and perhaps for that reason, undeniably compelling, and this is true of the Phantom, regardless of which actor plays him. It lies partly in the manner in which the Phantom traverses the boundaries of cultural taboos without absolutely transgressing them: therein lies our own dark seduction to the extent that we are willing to listen to 'the music of the night' in which 'fantasies unwind'. The melodramatic narrative underscores Christine's love for her deceased violinist father and his dying promise that he would send her the Angel of Music. As John Snelson accurately (if somewhat reductively) describes the story, 'the entire tale can be viewed as a metaphor for Christine's sexual awakening and maturing, as she is pulled unwillingly from the adolescent relationship of parent-child (the Phantom as "Angel of Music" substituting for her dead father) to that of adult lover with Raoul' (Snelson 2004: 91). And yet, it is precisely because the Phantom inadvertently emerges as the hero of the story, displacing (though not entirely supplanting) Raoul as the focus of our romantic interest, that Snelson's assessment of the metaphor is incomplete: Ann C. Hall is closer to the mark (though not quite on it) when she quotes reviewer Ed Siegel from *The Boston Globe*: 'Lloyd Webber grasped,

5. See, for example, Las Vegas *Phantom* (now closed), 19 January 2012, as well as the UK tour of *Phantom of the Opera* (also now closed), 23 July 2012 (Dublin, Ireland), respectively.

or nearly grasped, what has eluded all the film-makers – the Phantom is not a disfigured old man. He is not only a more romantic would-be lover than [Raoul], he is a sexier one' (quoted in Hall 2009: 193).

But what are the implications if the Phantom is 'sexy' as well as a displaced father figure? What is the nature of that twinned fascination? In the show, the Phantom is *both* 'a disfigured old man' *and* 'sexy', ultimately resulting in a conflation of both father and romantic lover, each of whom is more than a little controlling? As Snelson indicates, Christine believes the Phantom to be a link to her beloved dead father (even that he might *be* her father in 'Wandering Child'). The threat of a metaphorical and coercive incestuous desire surely haunts and underscores the relationship between them, rendering it forbidden, culturally monstrous – and undeniably resonant.

In 'Wandering Child', during Christine's visit to her father's grave, the Phantom sings (at first hidden to her but always visible to the audience, again reiterating the voice/body split – to a degree), 'Wandering child/so lost/so helpless/yearning for my/guidance', to which Christine replies, half in hope, half in fear, 'Angel or father/friend or/Phantom?/Who is it there/staring?' (In a departure from the show's original lyrics, in which the Phantom sings of his 'far-reaching gaze' – making it clear that, near or far, Christine is always the site of his objectifying desire – some later productions changed the Phantom's phrase to 'fatherly gaze' and, alternatively, 'fathering gaze', perhaps to make the implied relationship between them more of a cruel deception on the Phantom's part, rather than one in rich erotic and paternal ambiguity simultaneously<sup>5</sup>). The fetishistic gaze of the Phantom is invoked, who, himself, must hide his face from view. Raoul, who has followed Christine to the graveyard only to find her transfixed again by the sound of the Phantom's mellifluous voice, characterizes the Phantom most aptly, declaring him without reservation to be a 'dark seducer' and then exclaiming, 'Christine! Christine, listen to me! Whatever you may believe, this man ... this *thing* ... is not your father!'. Ultimately, in an endless series of melodramatic displacements and negations, the Phantom effectively becomes all of these things to Christine: angel *and* father, friend *and* phantom, Raoul's romantic rival and Christine's would-be seducer. It is from this very imbrication of roles – and from the oscillation between voice and body and the disjunction between the two that the musical enacts – that the Phantom has derived much of his power, fascination and horror over the past 26 years.

In a passage of *A Lover's Discourse* titled 'I am odious', Roland Barthes writes of the alternating state of the lover, torn between his pitiable state of longing for the loved object and the 'tyranny' of obsessions to which he subjects the loved being (with no thought of the loved one's own experience or subjectivity). The Phantom resorts to a series of deceptions, tricks and snares, assuming finally the triple role of dark seducer, pitiable lover, and killer most compellingly in 'The Point of No Return'. This passage traces his rapid progress from Don Juan to masked Phantom to unmasked, grotesque older man in only a few minutes and marks the start of the show's dénouement. By the end the Phantom will be hunted, abandoned, and utterly, devastatingly alone – but he will also abandon the network of tyrannies in which he has held Christine and redeem his own amorous monstrosity.

The conclusion of the musical is remarkable for the manner in which it illustrates Roland Barthes' further thoughts about the (not-always-linear) progress of amorous discourse. The Phantom imprisons Christine in his lair once more, Raoul follows to rescue her, and after an angry, passionate

exchange among the three, the Phantom demands that she choose either to spend her days with him or send Raoul to his grave. However, the unexpected kiss and embrace that are her considered response to the Phantom's demand ('Pitiful creature/of darkness/what kind of life/have you known?/God give me courage/to show you/you are not/alone') ultimately cause him to do an about-face: he frees both Raoul and Christine. As they flee together, the Phantom sobbing his love for the latter, he musters enough strength to sing the final lines before vanishing from sight beneath the protection of his cloak: 'You alone/can make my song take flight – it's over now, the music of the night'. As Peter Vogt observed in the *L.A. Review* of the Los Angeles production of *Phantom*, 'It is a contained, even restrained performance of a larger-than-life character who is not fully revealed until the very last moments of the play. With a passionate cry of need and loss, Crawford will simply break your heart' (Vogt in *The Phantom of the Opera* website n.d.). What Vogt describes here – in terms of both performance and the affect it generates – is, in fact, the pure essence of melodrama.

If erotic reciprocity is never struck between the Phantom and Christine (ultimately she leaves him for the younger, richer, titled and handsome Raoul), compassionate parity nevertheless is, as each demonstrates to the other the profundity of what Barthes has termed 'the non-will-to-possess' or 'NWP' (1978: 232). For a brief moment, Christine is willing to renounce Raoul; for a brief moment, the Phantom is willing to renounce Christine: 'The lover's constant thought: *the other owes me what I need*. Yet, for the first time I am really afraid [...] and I decide: from now on, I will not make any attempt to possess the other' (Barthes 1978: 232, original emphasis). It is in this empathetic reciprocity that the true love story of the Phantom and Christine persists, then, rather than in the realm of the erotic or romantic, for it is the only zone in which they achieve simultaneous equality and share it in the same narrative moment.

### **'HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN YOUR ANGEL?'**

I have chosen to discuss ways in which the Prince/Lloyd Webber megamusical *The Phantom of the Opera* combines sound, voice, gesture and technology in a unique melodramatic amalgam that occasionally masks over a technological audio/visual split that has particular resonances and implications for critical readings of *The Phantom of the Opera*. However, I have also occasionally invoked Crawford's original performance of the titular role as a matter of historical significance to the theatre and certainly to the history of this particular megamusical. His Phantom now exists only in memory, the tangible traces of which remain in contemporary critical reviews and surreptitiously videotaped audience footage posted to YouTube. Hence this piece is also intended as a scholarly acknowledgement of Crawford's original performance of that part, which recedes further each year into the annals of theatre history.

*The Phantom of the Opera* continues to play in multiple cities around the world and now in different incarnations (i.e., as I stated earlier, there exists the original production of the show that debuted in 1986 and the newer UK touring production revamped by Cameron Mackintosh in 2012, which is now playing in the United States). As fragile and tenuous as the relationship between technologically amplified voice and performing bodies may be in the megamusical and in *The Phantom of the Opera* specifically, then, so, too is the nature of live performance itself, whatever its ilk. Fleeting, ephemeral, it

can only ever be fully appreciated, in the moment of its own unfolding, as a mutually shared experience and creation in that fragile, shared space between actor and audience.

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