

Babich, Babette. *The Hallelujah Effect: Philosophical Reflections on Music, Performance Practice, and Technology*. Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013. Print.

Babette Babich is a philosopher who specialises in the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, and Hölderlin, and who lectures at Fordham University, NY. Her latest book, *The Hallelujah Effect: Philosophical Reflections on Music, Performance Practice, and Technology*, is a part of the *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series*, which claims to “present some of the best research in the field” of popular musicology, and to analyse music not only in cultural contexts, but to also “draw upon methodologies and theories developed in cultural studies, semiotics, poststructuralism, psychology and sociology.”

As it may already be guessed, this is very much an academic book employing various strategies to accomplish its fundamental aim: to portray k.d. lang’s cover of “Hallelujah,” sung at the Juno Awards, in 2005, in Winnipeg, as being in harmony with the concept of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*¹ and the highest principles of beauty proposed by Nietzsche in his book *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. The author goes further to analyse the song’s spreading through various media, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and the effect it produces upon the culture as a whole. Moreover, she links her observations with Adorno and his essays on the working of the radio, and the attention we direct to our need to be a part of the transmission process.

Music, as she suggests—backed by Nietzsche, Shopenhauer, and again, by Adorno—“demonstrates [...] that the entire world, in its multiplicity, is no longer felt as *dissonance*” (243). Thus, as a particular sound expression is capable of fusing various disharmonious fragments, so k.d. lang makes such a fusion visible in her performance of the song. Unlike Leonard Cohen,

she brings his words to life, conducting herself as an instrument: she is the embodiment of the song as he, when he sings, is not. My point here is that the only way that she can do this as a female singer is because by 2005 she is also singing as a lesbian singer (61).

This statement reveals that she is coquetting with feminism, and later adopts this perspective when judging Cohen’s work as a whole. (I will comment on this further below).

Babich’s research is also directed to the origins of various cover versions springing from John Cale’s rendition recorded for the compilation *I’m Your Fan* (1991), and the subsequent imitation among other artists that it caused. Its performance is analysed with regard to Nietzsche’s analysis of speech and singing in ancient Greece, when “there would be no difference between speech and song” (28), which may be employed when analysing Cohen himself, whose voice seems to verge somewhere between speech and singing. She calls it, together with Nietzsche, “the spirit of music” (31), which they suppose was being realised in one’s voice during a theatrical performance. Listeners, thus, faced a certain intersection of the secular and sacred. This is actually hinted upon by Cohen himself when he sings “There’s a blaze in every word; / it doesn’t matter which you heard, / the holy, or the broken Hallelujah!” Nevertheless, for Babich, this is just an “illusion: superficial as appearances always are, as Nietzsche reminds us” (20).

However funny as it may seem, Babich leads us to suppose that lang re-enacts both states of Hallelujah in her “androgynous” appearance. Why she supposes this is, *inter alia*, the outcome of lang’s clothing, walking and speaking. This is all based on the performance she saw on YouTube:

it is the full production, theatrical light set of the 2005 Juno performance that turns out to be important, of and initially, subliminally so. For k.d. lang’s performance is set against the crucial backdrop of a light show: a shifting and subtle series of slides, blue light cut-outs in religious frames, stained glass, including a blue rose window, crosses and high gothic rectangles of light. And as she sings, imperceptibly, the framed illuminations change with the music: piano, contrabass, single guitar, thus comprising what one might call an orchestra band: all cellos and strings, including a conductor, the setting clearly delineated from verse to verse, chorus to chorus, shifting from religious forms to a blue starry-night expanse at the climax (27).

¹ An ideal work of art.

The phenomenon of covering the song so often and, subsequently, spreading it on the social sites is, according to her, the manifestation of *The Hallelujah Effect*, which reveals itself, as well, when people include it in the most important events of their lives, such as marriage or funeral ceremonies, “as a kind of all-purpose life soundtrack” (36). As far as lang’s video performance is concerned, the *effect* is “[n]ot only acoustic, but visual, not only visual, but dramatic, and add to that the resonance with life, the body, God, and time, the intellect, and sex” (94). It is something that literally engulfs the singer and becomes a part of his audience’s lives.

However, what the book suffers from are the critic’s feminists’ views. One should never forget that Cohen plays with the secular and sacred qualities of the feminine in his work. And this is no “illusion.” If it happens that a female character is debased in one lyric and venerated in another, and a feminist critic picks up his/her “proof” of Cohen’s misogyny there, he/she does not analyse the whole output, but rather a particular sample. The feminine power in Cohen’s work is there to lead the singer into his innermost depths where his *muse* dwells. An artist can create, either when his *muse* is satiated or, better yet, when he is looking for something with which to feed her. It does not necessarily need to be a physical character, but the Holy Spirit, Shekhinah, or the same under a different appellation. Despite all this, Babich claims that Cohen is an exploiter, who has no relation to women as such, and she compares him to a flamboyant John Donne:

let’s not forget John Donne’s timelessly appealing erotic poetry—writing poetry to pursue women is neither new nor rare. One comes on to the ladies, one seduces them, perhaps one even marries one, but one continues to come on to other women, rinse and repeat, again and again, with the kind of justification that depends upon the absence of any real recognition, any real *relation* to women as such, apart from the collectivity that *women* are from the point of view of many men. At his best, and he seems to have been good at this, Leonard Cohen related to women as sex objects, and that also means that he related to his wife when he married as do most men (and not only Emmanuel Levinas or Martin Heidegger), that is to say, not at all directly but obliquely via his children, and eventually, so it goes with wives and first love, forgetting them altogether as he moved on (50).

She is just blowing smoke and I wonder whether one accepts these speculations. To suggest that Cohen does not have “any real relation to women” is a complete trumpery. If we accept that it is only a woman portrayed, we should be able to distinguish between the work of art and the person making it, since there is also the possibility that Cohen has constructed a persona far from his own, perceived self!

Sex in Cohen’s work is a ritual with an aim to abandon one’s earthly nature to the Divine one. The singer may use the “orifices,” maybe he will penetrate women (is there anything bad about this?), but he will do it in order to become whole, together, *with the woman!* He will not leave her somewhere in her feminist camp speculating on how to penetrate her male “oppressors.” There is nothing to prove that a particular woman serves him as a slave. There is nothing to prove that a woman is debased when the singer approaches her. Moreover, I want to inform Babette Babich that Leonard Cohen has never been married.

True it is that his songs are full of wedding imagery, but they refer to a mystical union *hieros gamos*, rather than the material consummation of longing. The Medieval troubadours flourishing in Southern France from the tenth to the end of the twelfth centuries were, and still are, often condemned for their sexual “exploitations.” However, more and more it has appeared that these had and still have another aim, and that is the unity of the mind, body, and soul through the veneration and, sometimes, apotheosis of a chosen lady. Babich regards this as an excuse for women’s violation: “To imagine—that is to say, to pretend—that women constitute the fairer, higher sex is only a way of disimagining their humanity” (50).

A committed artist never “disimagines” anyone’s humanity; on the contrary, he/she will integrate it with the Divine essence. I feel that Cohen reproaches those who refuse this with words:

Well, I’ve heard there was a secret chord
That David played, and it pleased the Lord
But you don’t really care for music, do ya?

One may remember an essay, by a too-cynical Joan Crate², which is very similar in its venomous attack on the singer. Also, Dagmar de Venster, quoted in Scobie's book, could already be considered another member of the offended women group:

‘Do you have an orifice and a pair of breasts? These are the essential if not sole requirements for a female character in a Leonard Cohen novel. Smooth skin helps, too. Intelligence and personality are of no consequence.’³

The aforementioned critics tend to be liberal in their views, or at least they want to be; but, what they appear to do, in reality, is construct their concepts out of fear that actual oppression may take place. If there is not anyone to mistreat them, they simply make *him* up.

Ariana Reines is an interesting phenomenon in this view. As a poetess, sneered at by both conventional men and women, she tries to liberate herself from her constrictions by serving her female nature. Often, in a very open pornographic fashion. In one poem, she discusses a scene in which the song “Hallelujah” is played in the background during an emotionless and too artificial love-making:

[...] Hallelujah, lounge-era Leonard Cohen
Already performs a distance from
Even a kind of irony against
Itself, enclosing as it does a Biblical grandeur within cheap atmosphere
Basically the song's a lesson
That under any vile sheen a soul or truth can move.⁴

What Ariana is saying, and what I think is valid for the whole of Cohen's output, is that seemingly cheap, erotic scenes are a disguise for higher aesthetic ideals of beauty lying dormant within them. If any feminine concept appears to be profaned, it is paradoxically only to reveal its sacredness.

Furthermore, the book suffers from unnecessary digressions and references to YouTube and various internet sites. Almost every page contains notes that are, in many cases, unnecessary and only complicate understanding. Babich also doubts everything she writes, and, instead of clarifying the matter, she ends up where she began: praising k.d. lang's performance.

But to lessen my judgment, there are also interesting insights into the music industry, beginning with Babich's having to pay the fee of \$500 to Sony Music Entertainment for quoting the lyrics of the song in her book. This leads her to quip on music production in relation to mass society, whose “taste” is shaped by the big manufacturers. She further compares this with ancient Greece, where art such as music had educational purposes unlike nowadays (230).

Other versions of “Hallelujah,” such as “Hallelujah, I'm a Bum” or Handel's, which are mentioned, make an interesting read, but one wonders whether it is the common word *hallelujah* they share or if Babich sees there something that a general reader does not.

Although the book provides some interesting insights into the music industry, and a few misconceptions about Leonard Cohen, it may shatter our own understanding of the song, and art in general, which is beneficial in the end. I recommend it to the philosophers, but I am cautious to say that this is a book Cohen enthusiasts might enjoy. In no way do I want to offend the critic with my review, for she has done her work diligently, and I believe that an experienced academic philosopher would appreciate her thesis more than a non-professional.

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² Crate, Joan. “The Mistress’ Reply to the Poet.” *Canadian Poetry* 33 (1993): 55-64. Web. 23 Jan. 2014.
<<http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/cpjr/vol33/crate.htm>>.

³ Scobie, Stephen. *Leonard Cohen*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1978. 10-11. Print.

⁴ Reines, Ariana. *Mercury*. Albany, NY: Fence, 2011, 2013. 76. Print.