

# C. Spencer Yeh Solo Voice I - X

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By Matthew Phillips

Life is breath. Before the pulse, medics check breathing to ensure the patient is still alive. Breath is so directly tied to life that humans evolved to employ it for communication, so that dying breaths may transmit valuable information even if the rest of the body fails. Every word spoken or sung is an exhalation, requiring our greatest vocalists to carefully control their breath in order to sustain a verse, creating the illusion of continuity (so much so that breath has come to shape the structure of song itself). For C. Spencer Yeh's *Solo Voice I - X*, however, the demands of the forms he employs dictate the preservation of the illusion of continuity in spite of an absence of rests or pauses to breathe. It's Yeh's editing of the sounds that emerge from his extended vocal technique into single, continuous streams that makes *Solo Voice I - X* possible, fooling the audience's ear into an appreciation forgetful of the biological processes at play, at once concealing life and the strangeness of our vocal apparatus and rendering every vital breath musical and fully aesthetic.

Although the title *Solo Voice* is apt as a mere descriptor, it's also a deception. Yeh's range proceeds far beyond the typical function of the voice, even more so than traditional methods such as throat singing (which appears in non-traditional form here). These are not vocal solos, in the classical sense (imagine an opera voice stepping out for a solo and instead blowing out a lengthy raspberry). The ridiculous sounds here employed find their primary exhibition in comedy; where words fail to communicate absurdity, the imitation of bodily functions reaches into the void and pulls out laughter. But while *Solo Voice I - X* briefly plays with comedy, it also questions the laughter in our response. Although children and comedians may seize on non-voiced mouth sounds out of pure novelty or playful absurdity, nothing prevents their form, abstracted from the process of respiration, from achieving the same beauty so often associated with the musical voice.

Yeh's flapping lips in the first moments of "I" might provoke laughter, but it will fade as soon as the length of the sustained sound stretches far past human capability. At this point, the unique sonority of this technique becomes apparent, revealing an additional tone that had been concealed in the lips' modulation of the main tone. Without the elision of Yeh's respiration, the organic source of the sound would constantly assert itself, closing the ear to the sonic texture and introducing readable moments of unintentional silence into the pieces, obscuring the role silence already plays in the latter half of the work. Thus, the title distracts from the content of the album on a pure sonic level, and yet the mind's constant dithering between aesthetic appreciation and awareness of Yeh's conceptual approach becomes central to the experience of the work.

This constant rebuilding and shattering of the aesthetic illusion occurs throughout *Solo Voice I - X*. Yeh's use of the lips and teeth as membranes creates complex patterns of noise just slightly in the performer's control, and yet their complexity is only apparent due to their amplification, their capture by a microphone (so many of the sounds the body makes are audible only to its occupant). This would be a trivial point for so many vocal albums, but amplification is crucial to Yeh's project that it often asserts itself in the recording, both in its tracing of the space of the studio and as pops of contact with Yeh's breath. Although moments of *Solo Voice I - X* mimic the filtered static of, for instance, Merzbow's most austere work, the presence of the microphone shields the listener from the potentially overwhelming force of the sound, re-positing Yeh's mouth as the source of the chaos. Therefore, as the listener reaches the plane of appreciation, process interrupts the pure aesthetics of the sound with conceptual and physical limitations.

Life dirties music with ideas and limits. But although the avant-garde has often sought to purify sound through technical innovation, meaning still reaches the listener via process and the conceptual basis of a work. Yeh exerts control over the biological life-elements inherent in his design, allowing only enough process-awareness to destabilize the listening experience. Deleting phrasal markers allows Yeh to communicate the physicality of his process through the presence of the microphone and the sounds themselves, confining these moments to winks and nods while the listener immerses in the strange textures of each track — textures that, in their abstraction from language and physicality, simultaneously access the comic and the sublime.

This combination is perhaps the most innovative and successful aspect of *Solo Voice I - X*. The sheer chaos of Side B is made all the more hilarious when one realizes that this chaos is erupting out of Yeh's mouth, that though vocal apparatuses vary, we are all walking synthesizers. And yet, this chaos so outstrips any attempt to make sense of it that it provokes a kind of terror, preventing any meaningful explanation. Yeh's ultimate abandonment of *Solo Voice I - X* as a merely conceptual project or a showcase of extended vocal technique is what gives life back to the project even after the excision of the breath phrases inherent in the raw material. These sounds have their own life in the aesthetic illusion, and it's this life that makes them music.

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