

***SIRÈNES, SPECTRES, OMBRES:***  
**DRAMATIC VOCALIZATION IN THE NINETEENTH**  
**AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES**

(Order No.     )

**PHILIP DANIEL NAUMAN**

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2009

Major Professor: Jeremy Yudkin, Associate Professor of Music

ABSTRACT

Dramatic vocalization—wordless singing to express extra-musical elements and signify emotive sentiments in dramatic situations—is distinguished from the pedagogical *vocalise-étude* tradition, yet its importance as a compositional device has not been investigated in the critical literature. In many cases the use of dramatic vocalization is reserved for occasions where something otherworldly is invoked.

Influenced by the early nineteenth-century phantasmagoria, a lowbrow form of entertainment, Carl Maria von Weber included an early prototype of dramatic vocalization in the “Wolf’s Glen” scene from his opera *Der Freischütz*. Later composers of the nineteenth century turned to dramatic vocalization for the representation of the supernatural, or the numinous. Subsequently, the device was used to express lamentation, exoticism, or suspense.

Claude Debussy’s contributions—first *Printemps* and then “Sirènes” from *Nocturnes*—expanded the application of dramatic vocalization to symphonic genres. Although the device continued to be used in opera, Debussy’s usages exerted an

influence that was profound and lasting, first through its direct impact on French composers and then by the adoption of his techniques by composers of other nationalities, especially those in England.

Out of the forty-six pieces that include dramatic vocalization studied in this dissertation, the majority are operas, followed by works for orchestra and chorus, and ballets. With the rise of sound-films in the late 1920s, composers for this newer medium slowly adopted the tradition of dramatic vocalization. Over time their use of this technique led to further experimentation, expansion of expression, and greater distribution through television shows and commercials. By means of this expansion, dramatic vocalization has become a widespread and widely understood signifier.

The goal of this study is to draw attention to a number of examples of a substantial and mostly unexamined compositional device; to make a preliminary compilation of the disparate works that include dramatic vocalization; and to provide an analysis of the various ways in which it has been used. The examples in this study demonstrate that the absence of text coupled with emotive vocal utterance provides composers with an elusive yet powerful means of expression.