<u>Talking Timbre: Vocal Timbre and Narrative in Florence + the Machine's *Ceremonials*</u>

Madison Stepherson

University of Minnesota

One of the most striking qualities in Florence + the Machine's music is the sonic

soundscape and vocal timbre. This paper provides a close reading of a cross-section of three

songs from the album *Ceremonials* while considering the timbres employed and connecting

those timbres to narrative implications. This presentation will begin with a brief overview of

Florence + the Machine, followed by an explanation of the methodology employed. After

identifying and classifying timbre types present in the selected songs, I will address how Kate

Heidemann's 2016 system can be used "to conceptualiz[e] the meaning of timbre," (2016). I

posit that Florence Welch employs specific timbre types to represent Renaissance ideas and to

offer deeper insight to the narratives unfolding. Finally, I will conclude with remarks on possible

future scholarship.

Florence + the Machine is a British indie-pop-rock band that consists of lead singer

Florence Welch, back-up singers, and supporting instrumentalists, including a harpist, guitarist,

and keyboardist. Since their formation in 2007, Florence + the Machine has released four studio

albums, and Florence Welch has collaborated with many well-known contemporary pop artists,

as well as produced music for films and video games.

Ceremonials (2011) has been described as a more cohesive and representative album of

the sonic soundscape than the group's first album *Lungs* (2009), and as such offers an

opportunity to begin to examine Florence + the Machine's compositional techniques and

intricacies, specifically regarding one of the most distinctive features of the group – that of the

voice and vocal timbre. This paper will analyze three songs from the album *Ceremonials*, which will include: "Seven Devils," "What the Water Gave Me," and "All This and Heaven, Too," while considering the timbres employed by Welch and connecting those timbres to narrative implications.

Musicologist Zachary Wallmark states, "By connecting the contingencies of the sensing body with the broader material and cultural environment, embodied cognition offers an expansive framework for understanding the role of human perceptual systems in the process of producing, hearing, and making sense of timbre," (2014, 15). Perception is a subjective object, requiring an adequate subjective analytical lens from which to consider it and its related musical parameters.

The recent work of Kate Heidemann has shown that a full timbral analysis can occur through the employment of mimesis and embodiment (2016). Heidemann's system for describing vocal timbre can be used, "[…] to trace the path from perceiving the sound of vocal timbre and experiencing its affect," (2016). Example 1 shows the four elements of vocal production Heidemann considered in mimetic timbral analysis. This paper will draw on three of those elements to identify common "timbre types" present in Florence + the Machine's *Ceremonials*, identifying both the timbre types employed by lead singer Florence Welch, and those employed by the back-up singers. Because some of the timbre types identified shared similar elements of vocal production while having different sonic effects, Heidemann's system has been adapted to include verbal descriptors for more precise differentiation between each timbre type.

As this project provides a close narrative reading of three songs and relates the timbral analysis to meaning, I will employ the human capability for mimesis and embodiment in my

analysis. Due to the subjective nature of mimetic analysis, it should be noted that the timbre types identified here are based on my personal experience and attempts to recreate them. Heidemann notes, "The embodied parameters of vocal timbre […] can be graphically visualized according to any number of timbre dimension "scales" the analyst may want to emphasize: modal to breathy phonation, regular to aperiodic vocal fold vibration, constricted to expanded vocal tract area, sympathetic vibration location (ranging from the front of the face to the chest), or degree of tension and anchoring" (2016, 4.7). For the present analyses, I chose to examine three of these timbral dimensions to differentiate the various vocal timbres employed by both Welch and the back-up singers, and thus I have modified Heidemann's system to focus on these dimensions.

The first timbral dimension I considered was sympathetic vibration location. While Heidemann offers the choices of head, face/nasal passages, and neck/chest for location, in mimetic experiences with Florence + the Machine, I experienced a difference between nasal and face resonance. Nasal has often been associated with 'twang' or 'country' timbres, but those are absent in Welch's singing style. Rather, she changes her timbre types based on placement in the body. For example, when comparing my mimetic experience with the following two excerpts, I noticed a difference in placement of resonance. In the first excerpt from "What the Water Gave Me", I feel the resonance in both the mask area and in the chest, which produces a darker tone. In the second, from "All This and Heaven, Too," I feel the resonance primarily in the mask area and nasal passages, producing a bright and more forceful tone. A sympathetic vibration location in the head, however, creates a lighter tone.

The second timbral dimension considered was phonation, or the degree to which the vocal folds are closed. This category is adapted from the first row in Heidemann's table, which

considers movement and vibration of the vocal folds. For ease of analysis, I rated each timbre type on a numerical scale from 1-5, 1 being completely modal where the vocal folds are closed and no air escapes through them. This is much like the desired action in a classically trained singer, where the combination of fully closed folds and proper breath support create a fuller tone that carries farther in a concert hall. On the other end of the scale, 5 is breathy phonation. This requires an almost intentional resistance to closure of the vocal folds and results in a large amount of air escaping simultaneously with the sung pitches. Here is a sample from "What the Water Gave Me." An example of moderate phonation, receiving a score of 3, can be heard in "Seven Devils."

The third parameter considered when determining the timbre types was the degree of tension and anchoring, the final row in Heidemann's table. This was the trickiest to determine and is also likely the most subjective. To determine the degree of tension and anchoring, I drew upon my background as a classically trained singer and assessed the physical involvement of my body in an upright position, as if on a stage. I scored each type on a 1-5 scale again, with 1 being fully anchored with a high degree of tension, and 5 being minimally anchored or requiring slim to no tension. A score of 1 involved a significant degree of pressure and intentionality throughout my abdomen as well as requiring the most tension during mimesis, particularly grounding through my legs. An example can be heard in the chorus of "What the Water Gave Me." A score of 5 indicates that my body could produce those sounds even without proper posture or grounding. An example can be heard in the pre-chorus of "All This and Heaven, Too" in the backup singers. It should be noted that register and dynamics were not considered for this dimension, and these results are based on an embodied and mimetic experience with the songs.

Many of the timbre types received similar scores for both phonation and degree of tension and anchoring. However, timbre types do not have descriptive elements based on the numerical scores alone. Thus, I needed one more element to accurately describe and differentiate the different timbre types. Megan Lavengood states, "a study of timbre should deal with a specific property of an instrument's sound, such as the *bright/dark* opposition," (2017, 60). In this analysis, I employed the concept of timbral opposition, and borrowed opposing terms such as "bright/dark, full/hollow, rich/sparse" to create the final parameter to determine timbre types. These terms, borrowed from Lavengood, along with other common timbral descriptors, are listed in the final columns of Examples 3 and 4, which show the five timbre types that Welch uses, as well as the three employed by the back-up singers in this cross-section of songs.

Timbre's unique subjective nature offers a personalized interaction with narrative. However, the nature of the topics explored within *Ceremonials* poses an issue that Simon Zagorski-Thomas addresses as, "A further complication [that] arises when we enter the world of representational art forms such as painting, photography, film, and recorded music: it is possible to create a representation of something that cannot exist" (2018, 277), such as those Renaissance ideas of love, death, heaven, and hell. Indeed, Welch herself states, "A lot of the songs on [*Ceremonials*] are about imaginary things, things that you can't touch - ghosts and rumors, my dead grandmother, things visiting you in a dream," (Corner 2011). In this paper, I posit that Welch employs specific timbre types to represent that which "you can't touch" and to offer deeper insight to the narratives unfolding. The perspective of timbre as a vehicle for narrative is also important due to Welch's poetic, almost 'stream of consciousness,' lyrical writing style, which often features incomplete thoughts, unrhymed and oddly accented words, and cryptic

meanings. As with the subjective nature of embodiment and mimesis, narrative interpretation can also be subjective. The readings presented here are those which, to me, seem most plausible.

Florence Welch has spoken widely about her obsession with demons and witchcraft (Thorn 2014; Grigoriadis 2011), so "Seven Devils" was topically relevant for her interests. She has openly admitted to "suffer[ing] hallucinations about demons sitting on [her] chest," (Copsey 2011) and "[…] suffers from dyslexia, anxiety and dyspraxia (a neurological disorder that impairs motor, memory, judgment and other cognitive skills)," (Benjamin 2015).

The first two iterations of the chorus can each be seen as a repeated unit, with the repeated section changing from /Seven devils all around me/ Seven devils in my house/ to /Seven devils all around you/ Seven devils in your house/. Both employ timbre types B and D. The final chorus, however, features a timbral change. This chorus employs type C, an almost middle ground timbre between B and D, and the most relaxed of Welch's timbres. Additionally, Welch sings the higher melodic line (which the back-up singers sang in earlier iterations), rather than the lower one from the previous choruses. It is as if Welch has come to terms with the devils that surround her, and by the end of the song, the back-up singer's absence reaffirms that her demons will remain her only company.

Allan Moore states that "[…] more common, is the stasis found in so many verse–chorus songs. Here, while the verse may suggest some developing narrative, the role of the chorus tends to be to bring us back to the point of origin, to demonstrate that nothing has 'really' changed," (2012, 110). Though Moore would expect that the "Seven Devils" narrative would be static, the bridge allows for narrative action, and the telos of the song. With the utterance of "/For what has been done/cannot be undone/", we might expect a deviance from the verse-chorus form to parallel the narrative idea that something has fundamentally changed. However, in an almost *too*

normative fashion, the bridge is followed by a final chorus. The literal devastation of her heart that occurs in the bridge allows the for the acceptance of the devils in the final chorus. While the first two choruses are restrained to timbre types B and D, with the telos of the bridge, the final chorus's timbre type C shows the evolution of the narrative and timbre working in tandem.

The lyrics of "What the Water Gave Me" reveal a darker implication in contrast to the overwhelming, though not malicious, soundscape (Varga 2015). Welch has stated that she is most afraid of "death, or the death of a loved one," (Grier 2009) and that "living is dealing with the everyday and the notion that you're going to die," (Gunderson 2011). Welch witnessed her grandmother's suicide at a young age and fostered a curiosity around death into her adult life (Benjamin 2015). "What the Water Gave Me" has been described as having, "[…] imagery that explicitly compares suicide to falling in love," (Grigoriadis 2011). Welch's lyrics allude to the pleasure that British author Virginia Woolf experienced when committing suicide in the manner described in "What the Water Gave Me." For the purpose of this paper, I will address the notion of falling in love, rather than that of suicide by drowning, because though Welch was fascinated with Woolf's experience, Welch herself did not commit suicide, but she has fallen in love and given in to love the same way that Woolf gave in to the water. It may also be noted that many of the same stages that occur in love also occur in suicide (such as the surrender of control that occurs when contemplating a suicide attempt, fight for control, and eventual surrender to death in a successful suicide attempt).

The post chorus presents an interesting use of multiple, individual timbres, and features a change from a normative, high energy post chorus to a transition that slowly decreases sonic energy before finally beginning the third verse. The final verse begins with timbre type A, rather than the Verse 1 and 2's type C, but quickly moves through both timbre types C and B. These

timbral changes occur with the lyrics /But oh my love don't forget me/when I let the water take me/ and seem to present a moment of change for Welch. Whatever control over her love story she had previously freely given (via the use of timbre types A and C) or struggled for (via the brief use of timbre type E in the chorus) has changed, and in tandem with an alteration of the titular lyric.

Thus, in the penultimate chorus, the softer, relaxed timbre types A and C from the first two iterations of the chorus are gone. Now, Welch moves through timbre types B and D, before ending with a triumphant and forceful timbre type E on /Yeah/ in the outro. The drastic change from the beginning of the songs' easy and relaxed timbre types A and C to timbre types B, D, and E by the end represent Welch's love story. By the end of the song, she has given into love, and has accepted that she has fallen, and there is no getting out.

The final song considered in this paper combines two almost complementary narrative ideas: heaven and love. However, rather than attaining heaven in a traditionally positive manner, Welch sings the titular lyric in the chorus, /And I would give all this and heaven, too/, as if heaven were less important to her than love. The song features a rather straightforward verse-chorus form, including an introduction. I have not discussed yet the instances of combining multiple, juxtaposed or complementary timbres simultaneously. However, "All This and Heaven, Too" provides an opportune moment for this at both the pre-chorus and the bridge. The pre-chorus features complementary timbre types B and X in Welch and the back-up singers, respectively. Both share the same sympathetic vibration location, both score closely on phonation and degree of tension, and both have similar timbral descriptors.

An example of juxtaposed timbres occurs at the bridge. While some scholars have posited that multiple, simultaneous timbres can create a single, composite timbre, I perceive three

distinct timbres occurring in tandem (McAdams 1989, 190). Welch's entrance with the most forceful of her timbre types, type E, sounds almost out of place against the lower humming and the oscillating, almost ethereal "oohs" in the backup singers' types X and Y. From a narrative perspective, then, when Welch enters with a completely opposite timbre (type E, rather than a complementary type A or C), we are brought back to Earth, reminded that *love*, the center of this song, is beyond our comprehension and the boundaries of language, before being launched back into the chorus.

After timbral consistency and complementarity in the first two VPC units, the complete timbral change that begins at the bridge seems to suggest that Welch has shifted her perspective. The calmer, relaxed timbre type C from the verses is gone, and with its absence comes the acceptance that Welch cannot hope to comprehend that complex language that the heart speaks. The outro almost acts as if to provide her "shouting from the rooftop" moment, while simultaneously acknowledging that in this case, words have failed her.

In this paper, I have discussed timbral analysis through mimesis and embodiment. I employed Kate Heidemann's 2016 system for describing vocal timbre to identify timbre types based on five point scales of vocal production methods that were mimetically analyzed, and connected those types to narrative readings. The purpose of this paper was to provide an example of how timbre might influence and inform other parameters of analysis, particularly narrative.

In the future, I plan to continue this research and explore how personae relate to the timbre types and if those personae might influence my readings here. Additionally, future research might consider the instrumental timbres present on these tracks and how those timbres complement or juxtapose those of the vocal timbres present. A further exploration of the roles of timbre, embodiment and mimesis as fundamental pillars of analysis in other popular music may

also contribute to the growing body of subjective, sensationally based analysis. I hope to continue my research on Florence + the Machine through these and other analytical means to contribute to the ever-growing field of popular music scholarship.

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