

Time to Document

Voicing Authorship on Björk: Sonic Symbolism

ABSTRACT In recent years, Björk has defied pop music criticism's persistent myth of male genius by asserting her authorship as a singer, songwriter, composer, and producer. She expressed these concerns during a 2015 *Pitchfork* interview with Jessica Hopper by reflecting on the press's minimization of her production work throughout her career and her desire to reclaim her creative authority as a model for younger female-identified artists. During this portion of the conversation, she mused, "I've sometimes thought about releasing a map of all my albums and just making it clear who did what." Her impulse to challenge masculinist creation myths through documentation became the catalyst for *Björk: Sonic Symbolism*, a 2022 podcast miniseries sponsored by Mailchimp in which she discussed her albums' creative processes with friends Oddný Eir and Ásmundur Jónson in a series of interviews. The title, which Björk defines as "a visual shortcut to describe sound," provides the podcast's framework for her articulation of authorial control, which she examines through album art that illustrates each cover's mood and character; poetic synopses of each album's unique audiovisual language; and references to her various studio, video, and stage collaborators. By using close listening to examine Björk's conversations with Eir and Jónson and the episodes' illustrative song segments, this article posits that Björk's engagement with podcasting as an audio storytelling medium allows her to foreground her distinct speaking and singing voice as both a feminist intervention upon the recording industry and as a sonic metaphor for authorial control.

KEYWORDS podcasting, feminism, authorship, creative labor, voice

In the first half of the 2000s, Björk discussed her work in music videos as part of Palm Pictures' Directors Label series. The DVD collection showcased the videographies of seven male filmmakers associated with what Roger Beebe identifies as "MTV auteurism."¹ This generation was celebrated for pushing music video's formal boundaries after the channel added director credits to its music video chyrons in the early 1990s.² Despite the series' focus on individual filmmakers, all of them collaborated with musicians who helped cultivate their aesthetic. Björk worked with four of them. She made eight videos

1. Roger Beebe, "Paradoxes of Pastiche: Spike Jonze, Hype Williams, and the Race of the Postmodern Auteur," in *Medium Cool: Music Videos From Soundies to Cellphones*, ed. Roger Beebe and Jason Middleton (Durham: Duke University Press), 309.

2. Stephen M. Deusner, "Direct to Video," *Pitchfork*, October 3, 2005, <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/6158-direct-to-video/>.

with Michel Gondry. She collaborated with Spike Jonze on “It’s Oh So Quiet,” a Busby-Berkeley-in-the-Valley number that briefly catapulted her to alt-pop stardom. She teamed up with Chris Cunningham on “All Is Full of Love,” a state-of-the-art erotic union between robots. And she made vivid performance clips for “Big Time Sensuality” and “Possibly Maybe” with Stéphane Sednaoui.

Björk’s contributions to the Directors Label series problematize the project’s masculine authorial framework. She enhances her sustained presence as a video star by defining each collaborative partnership on the DVDs’ documentary featurettes. She describes Gondry as “a little bit neurotic and worried that the world might collapse in five minutes. And what if? Which I thought was kind of cute because it’s sort of a problem that’s easy to talk people out of.”³ She shares that she rejected Jonze’s original 1950s treatment for “It’s Oh So Quiet” and recalls how excited he was to get Bert and Ernie’s puppeteer to play a dancing mailbox before revealing that Icelandic television did not broadcast *Sesame Street* when she was growing up.⁴ She mutters “How am I gonna get out of this one?” before admitting that “Possibly Maybe” was about her breakup with Sednaoui.⁵ Furthermore, each director confirms that Björk invited them to work with her in their interviews for the series and Gondry admits that “[w]hen I work with Björk, she’ll come up with 60% or more of the ideas. I don’t care. I would be stupid to refuse all of this amazing stuff coming into my head.”⁶

Despite these attributions, Björk is not the subject of this collection. At the time, her willingness to vouch for her male colleagues may have reflected her efforts to untether art from gender. In a 2007 interview with *Bust*, she distanced herself from feminism because “[i]t’s important to collaborate with both males and females and to be positive.”⁷ But in the intervening years, she grew more assertive about her authorship as a singer, songwriter, composer, and producer to challenge music criticism’s persistent deference to male genius. While promoting her eighth album, *Vulnicura*, she reflected on critics’ sexist diminishment of her musicianship. In one interview, she mused, “I’ve sometimes thought about releasing a map of all my albums and just making it clear who did what.”⁸

Björk’s impulse to document became the catalyst for *Björk: Sonic Symbolism*, a 2022 podcast miniseries in which she shared her albums’ distinct creative processes with friends Oddný Eir and Ásmundur Jónsson. The title, which Björk defines as “a visual shortcut to describe sound,” provides the podcast’s framework for using the voice as a sonic metaphor for authorial control.⁹ This article posits that Björk’s engagement with podcasting as an audio storytelling medium allows her to foreground her distinct speaking and singing voice as a multivocal feminist intervention upon the recording industry’s silencing of

3. The Work of Director Michel Gondry (New York: Palm Pictures, 2003), DVD.

4. The Work of Director Spike Jonze (New York: Palm Pictures, 2003), DVD.

5. The Work of Director Stéphane Sednaoui (New York: Palm Pictures, 2005), DVD.

6. The Work of Director Michel Gondry, 2003.

7. Emily Rems, “Big Time Personality,” *Bust* (February/March 2005), 51.

8. Jessica Hopper, “The Invisible Woman: A Conversation With Björk,” *Pitchfork*, January 21, 2015, <https://pitchfork.com/features/interview/9582-the-invisible-woman-a-conversation-with-bjork/>.

9. Björk: Sonic Symbolism, “Biophilia,” podcast audio, September 22, 2022, <https://mailchimp.com/presents/podcast/sonic-symbolism/biophilia/>.

female-identified musicians' creative authority. To demonstrate how Björk's voices extend a dialogue with her albums' compositions and the podcast's interlocutors, I will outline her poetic use of album synopses and engage in close listening of the *Vespertine*, *Medúlla*, and *Vulnicura* episodes.

DISSECTING MUSIC PODCASTS' MULTIVOCALITY

Sonic Symbolism is part of a wave of music interview podcasts that focus on the creation of individual pieces of music and/or their reception and cultural legacy. Some of these podcasts focus on critics, scholars, and musicians' perspectives on other artists, albums, and songs. Some of these programs have an extensive catalog of music that can be incorporated into episodes. This is particularly true of music podcasts produced by the Ringer Podcast Network, which is owned by Spotify and therefore has access to the streaming platform's vast library.¹⁰ There are also several music podcasts dedicated to individual songs and albums. For example, Liz Guiffre situates *Song Exploder* within a broader lineage of radio programs like BBC's *Desert Island Discs*, television programs like VH1's *Classic Albums*, and the "rockumentary" genre and notes how the podcast's emphasis on artists' voices minimizes the production team's contributions to the interviewing, recording, and editing processes.¹¹ Unlike *Song Exploder*, *Sonic Symbolism* frames Björk's disclosures about her creative process as part of a dialogue with Eir and Jónsson. But it is connected to *Song Exploder*, both because it shares Mailchimp as a sponsor and because Björk's 2015 episode for "Stonemilker" ostensibly doubled as *Sonic Symbolism*'s backdoor pilot.

Sonic Symbolism best adheres to what Amy Skjerseth refers to as a "song-dissection podcast" as a distinct genre dedicated to compositional breakdowns. She cites *Song Exploder* and *Dissect* as two examples and highlights their shared tendency "to offer one or two narratives about a particular song rather than aiming to attend to a song's many references and possible listener responses."¹² The song-dissection podcast also tends to reinforce individual artists' lore through their privileged perspective, even if songs are inherently collaborative endeavors and listeners bring their own interpretations to a song's significance. Skjerseth distinguishes certain song-dissection podcasts by their ability to facilitate what she refers to as "ride-along listening," a mode of engagement built into programs like *Switched On Pop* that showcase the hosts' professional knowledge through their engagement with guests on individual pieces of music that "makes popular music criticism a practice of listening *alongside* rather than listening *into*" by guiding "listeners with different levels of musical knowledge to experience songs' emotional and cultural

10. Katie Robertson and Noam Scheiber, "Spotify Is Buying The Ringer," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/business/media/spotify-the-ringer-bill-simmons.html>.

11. Liz Guiffre, "Lessons on Popular Music Form, Creation, and Reception Through the Song Exploder Podcast," *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 20, no. 1 (April 2022), 49–64.

12. Amy Skjerseth, "Ride-Along Listening: Inclusive Modes of Musical Analysis in Switched on Pop," *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 20, no. 1 (April 2022), 37.

messages in context.”¹³ Eir and Jónsson ask Björk clarification and contextual questions about intent and inspiration. But *Sonic Symbolism* functions more like Björk’s aural liner notes in which she bestows attribution upon her collaborators rather than oral histories for each album that weave together a polyphony of creative voices and affective registers. In other words, *Sonic Symbolism* affirms Skjerseth’s claim that song-dissection podcasts are “a prime format for hosts to explore the extensive collaborations in popular music between songwriters, musicians, technicians, and listeners,” but primarily on Björk’s terms.¹⁴

Sonic Symbolism also showcases Björk’s singular, expressive voice. In the prologue for the podcast’s first episode, Björk talks about developing her singing style while navigating Iceland’s arctic climate on long solitary walks to school:

I think I started to sing as a companion. Like, if the weather was crazy, you just sing loudly, and then you are somehow like: “okay, you’re not taking on me. I’m gonna like, make friends with you, and this is my space here,” and claiming space. After doing this for ten years or whatever, your music starts taking shape. I wasn’t thinking that at all at that time. Not at all. It was my survival mechanism.¹⁵

Björk frames herself as industrious and resourceful. But this recollection also highlights the importance she places on duration as an artist. At several points during *Sonic Symbolism*, she emphasizes how long it took her to work on something. She claims to have pursued a capella compositions for *Medúlla* because she was “just done” with beat-making after spending two years refining *Homogenic*’s propulsive rhythms and three years crafting intricate beats from found objects for *Vespertine*.¹⁶ Her characterization of her voice as “a companion” and singing as a “survival mechanism” also informs how she approaches the creative process as a form of endurance shaped by prolonged solitude while navigating complex emotional terrain. Finally, it clarifies how her voice was misheard during her commercial peak. As Sasha Geffen surmised in their *Fossora* review, Björk “sang with a fearlessness that many read as childlike—a little too raw and earnest for the world of adults, too prone to spurts of glossolalia.”¹⁷

Björk’s vocal performances on record and in the podcast illustrate Amanda Weidman’s claim that the voice is “both a sonic and material phenomenon and a powerful metaphor” for “truth and self-presence” in Western culture.¹⁸ Weidman posits that the voice is best understood as a site of cultural production. She outlines the relationship between a voice’s sonic and bodily dimensions, the tools that reproduce and amplify it, the vocalist’s

13. Skjerseth, “Ride-Along Listening,” 41.

14. *Ibid.*, 42.

15. Björk: *Sonic Symbolism*, “Debut,” podcast audio, September 1, 2022, <https://mailchimp.com/presents/podcast/sonic-symbolism/debut/>.

16. Björk: *Sonic Symbolism*, “Medúlla,” podcast audio, September 15, 2022, <https://mailchimp.com/presents/podcast/sonic-symbolism/medulla/>.

17. Sasha Geffen, “The Woman Who Fell to Earth,” NPR, November 21, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/21/1137413928/bjork-fossora-voice-career-celebrity>.

18. Amanda Weidman, “Voice,” in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 233–45.

creative expressions of social and cultural identity, and the voice's collective production through industrial and reception practices. Drawing upon her work on Indian playback singers, Weidman claims that these primarily female recording/film industry professionals problematize the voice's Eurocentric, masculinist associations with authority because their mediating technologies "not only disrupt expected relationships between sound and image, voice and body, and person and presence but help to constitute other, less familiar ways of conceiving voice and subjectivity."¹⁹ These dynamics reverberate throughout *Sonic Symbolism* through the interplay between Björk's singing and speaking voice, the recording equipment she uses to capture and treat it, her synthesis of Icelandic musical traditions with other wide-ranging influences, and Eir and Jónsson's engagement with her claims and observations during their conversations.

The podcast also illustrates the voice's associations with subjectivity and agency, which Weidman identifies in her history of upper-caste South Indian women's emergence as concert performers in the early twentieth century and posits its broader impact on female vocalists. She concludes that Western musicology and colonial modernity advanced symbiotic relationships between the voice as a metonym for creative individuality and the artist as an avatar for respectable womanhood "that were central to the formation of new conceptions of public and private."²⁰ While these configurations of the voice and the female vocalist inform Björk's cultural reception as a conservatory prodigy turned punk iconoclast turned conceptual singer-songwriter, she frequently distances herself from colonialism and commercial music's oppressive forces and exploitative labor practices. Thus, Björk's disavowal of racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism, particularly after her early commercial success, recalls Robin James's critique of the circulation of resilience discourse as a "normative economy of noisemaking" that "ties contemporary pop music aesthetics to neoliberal capitalism and racism/sexism" through a cycle of damage, overcoming, reward, and boosting societal resilience.²¹ While James posits melancholy as a resistive alternative to resilience, Björk balances solitude with collaboration as a strategy for making meaningful art in community.

Thus, for Björk, the podcast is another medium for exploring the voice's capacity for personal expression and collective action. Her engagement with podcasting allows her to contextualize her recorded vocal performances through her speaking voice. In particular, it allows her to use humor to mock music critics' sexist infantilization of her. When Eir asks her to comment on how her press coverage informed *Homogenic*'s confrontational tone, Björk deadpans, "I've never seen an elf."²² Such self-awareness recalls Raechel Tiffe's and Melody Hoffman's claim that female podcasters' voices "reflect the exact qualities

19. Weidman, "Voice," 240–41.

20. Amanda Weidman, "Gender and the Politics of Voice in South India," *Cultural Anthropology*, 18, no. 2 (May 2003), 222.

21. Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Alresford, UK: Zero Books, 2015), 6.

22. Björk: *Sonic Symbolism*, "Homogenic," podcast audio, September 1, 2022, <https://mailchimp.com/presents/podcast/sonic-symbolism/homogenic/>.

that are policed and criticized by contemporary society.”²³ Björk punctuates her conversational speech with distinct vocal flourishes. She says certain words in Icelandic. She uses her voice to mimic musical passages. She employs a singsong cadence to mock conventions and practices that stifle her creativity. She uses abstract phrases to describe particular songs’ timbres or vocal performances. And she frequently highlights the comedic aspects of her work that are often misinterpreted as “quirky,” a loaded word that has often been used to frame her discursively as strange or childlike.²⁴ For example, when “Bachelorette”’s jilted protagonist describes herself as “a fountain of blood,” Björk claimed the overwrought lyric and delivery was meant to parody breakup songs’ “ridiculous” excess.²⁵

These distinct vocal flourishes also demonstrate Andrew Bottomley’s claim that the voice enhances audio storytelling because “sound gives us access to *what* was said as well as *how* it was said. Audio captures communicative aspects of the speaker’s voice, such as tone, stress, volume, speed, pitch, accent, dialect, and other subtle speech dynamics and rhythms, which carry a whole subject of meaning.”²⁶ The medium also emphasizes intimacy as both a necessary condition of the creative process and an affordance that multiple podcast scholars identify as a distinct hallmark of the medium.²⁷ Eric Torres picked up on this characteristic in his *Pitchfork* review by claiming that “[t]his particular format, limited to just two other voices, provides intimacy and allows Björk to recall invigorating anecdotes and memories.”²⁸ Furthermore, Björk’s relationship to the voice has evolved from an instrument of individual artistry to a shared resource for creative collaboration. As Geffen observes, Björk eventually approached the voice as “an ecosystem” by creating choral arrangements and inviting featured vocalists to challenge myths perpetuated in pop music about celebrity and human exceptionalism.²⁹ *Sonic Symbolism* brings those voices to the surface by allowing Björk to attribute collaborators and influences, to reflect on her various challenges and innovations, and to exchange information and ideas with Eir and Jónsson. They also stand in for Björk’s musical collaborators to help give *Sonic Symbolism* shape, dynamism, and momentum.

Thus, *Sonic Symbolism*’s balance of oral communication and musical recordings supports Jennifer O’Meara’s claim that Björk is “a multimodal artist and technological pioneer” whose “digital innovations can thus be harnessed to provide a rendering of the

23. Raechel Tiffé and Melody Hoffman, “Taking Up Sonic Space: Feminized Vocality and Podcasting as Resistance,” *Feminist Media Studies*, 17, no. 1 (February 2017), 115–18.

24. Lorraine Ali, “The Secret Life of Pop Stars,” *Newsweek*, 138, no. 11 (September 10, 2001): 65; Richard Cromelin, “Björk’s Land of Fire and Ice,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 2001, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-oct-24-ca-60904-story.html>; Kitty Empire, “Björk to the Future,” *The Observer* (June 1, 2003), 11.

25. Björk: *Sonic Symbolism*, “Homogenic,” 2022.

26. Andrew Bottomley, “Voices From Below: Storytelling Podcasts and the Politics of Everyday Life,” *Flow Journal*, October 2, 2017, <https://www.flowjournal.org/2017/10/voices-from-below/>.

27. Andrew Bottomley, “Podcasting, Welcome to Night Vale, and the Revival of Radio Drama,” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 22, no. 2 (November 2015), 179–89; Richard Berry, “Podcasting: Considering the Evolution of the Medium and its Association with the Word ‘Radio,’” *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 14, no. 1 (April 2016), 7–21.

28. Eric Torres, “Björk’s Podcast Is an Intimate, Worthy Deep Dive,” *Pitchfork*, November 10, 2022, <https://pitchfork.com/the-pitch/bjorks-podcast-is-an-intimate-worthy-deep-dive/>.

29. Geffen, “The Woman Who Fell to Earth,” 2022.

source of a female voice that is, quite literally, well rounded.”³⁰ It also affirms Katherine Meizel’s definition of “multivocality” as the “multiple ways of being and acting in the world through voice, and of applying the intersubjectivity and interstitially of voice to navigate the in-betweens and border crossings of twenty-first-century identities.”³¹ According to Meizel, multivocality serves as a directive for singers to approach their voices as “sites of struggle and becoming, negotiating material and sonic borders between musical genres, between ideologies, between cultures.”³² It is particularly useful as “a sonic negotiation of intersectionality” among solo artists like Björk who play multiple instruments to create an expansive sound and who navigate various cultural boundaries around gender and ethnicity.³³ *Sonic Symbolism* examines Björk’s multivocality throughout the series, starting with the album synopses that open each episode.

BJÖRK’S VISUAL LANGUAGE

Björk has always been a multimedia artist. She uses sleeve art, music videos, and live performances to embody the various characters she creates for her songs and albums. Her character-based approach to songwriting and self-presentation challenges women’s objectification by imagining new forms of feminine self-expression. Björk once mused that men “can be silly, fat, funny, intelligent, hardcore, sensual, philosophical. But with women, they always have to be feminine.”³⁴ Such gendered expectations inform how artists are expected to present themselves. As Steve Jones and Martin Sorger note in their formal analysis of sleeve art, “face shots” emerged during rock ‘n’ roll’s advent because of the genre’s emphasis on individual stardom.³⁵ Portraiture also makes sexist demands upon women. Geffen identifies the “naked, anonymous, sexualized woman” as a feminine archetype that privileges the male gaze by objectifying models who pose suggestively alone or with clothed male artists.³⁶

While female artists are frequently encouraged to objectify themselves, Björk uses portraiture to visualize each album’s thematic and sonic elements. In the *Debut* episode, she likens her album covers to “homemade tarot cards” designed to evoke particular moods from listeners through her and her collaborators’ attention toward each tableau’s production design.³⁷ Like album art, tarot cards use portraiture to present archetypes through symbolic communication. Thus, while each Björk album cover is a self-portrait, she transforms herself into various characters inspired by but distanced from her personal

30. Jennifer O’Meara, *Women’s Voices in Digital Media: The Sonic Screen From Film to Memes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022), 10.

31. Katherine Meizel, *Multivocality: Singing on the Borders of Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 7.

32. *Ibid.*, 17.

33. *Ibid.*, 14, 17.

34. Björk Special, Spain TV, February 1, 1994, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uqhC_3Zmvs&t=3s.

35. Steve Jones and Martin Sorger, “Covering Music: A Brief History and Analysis of Album Cover Design,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 11-12, no. 1 (March 1999), 75.

36. Sasha Geffen, “How Torres and St. Vincent Are Subverting Sexualized Rock-Star Archetypes,” *Vulture*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2017/09/st-vincent-and-torres-are-subverting-rock-archetypes.html>.

37. Björk: *Sonic Symbolism*, “Debut,” 2022.

life, like *Post*'s urban transplant, *Homogenic*'s transnational ambassador, and *Biophilia*'s frizzy-haired teacher. Emily Mackay reads these characters as Björk's creative strategy to "slip the constraints of gender norms" by expressing herself through humor, eroticism, and advocacy as a multi-faceted subject.³⁸

Furthermore, each episode begins with a poetic synopsis that distills the album's tonal palette into a list of colors, archetypes, sonic and thematic motifs, timbres, and affective registers. For example, *Volta*'s synopsis is "justice, fire, anthropology, wanderlust, activist, brass, boats, feminist, red, neon green, electric blue, flags, trumpets, tribal beats, bombastic."³⁹ Though abstract, this synopsis describes the album's cover art and signposts its featured instruments. It also hints at Björk's itinerant production process and evolving political consciousness, which she discusses in greater detail in the episode. For example, she wrote much of the album's song cycle during a family boat trip because she wanted to travel after raising her infant daughter at home. Her voyage gave her time to reflect on her frustration with the United States' militarization and Islamophobia during the second Bush administration's war on terror.

While these episode synopses appear as written text on podcast platforms, they are incorporated into the soundscape through narrator Duna Hrólfsdóttir's recitations that open each episode. At the beginning of the *Volta* episode, Hrólfsdóttir delivers the album's keywords in English-language clusters that are reinforced by specific passages from Björk's catalog. Hrólfsdóttir begins with "justice, fire" and Björk responds with a breathless performance of the first verse to "Earth Intruders," *Volta*'s propulsive lead single. Hrólfsdóttir continues with "anthropology, wanderlust" before the chorus to "Wanderlust" fades in. Hrólfsdóttir's recitation of "activist, brass" prompts the horn arrangement for "Vertebræ by Vertebræ," a song about a mother's struggle to shield her child from racist violence. When Hrólfsdóttir utters "boats, feminist," the chorus to "Hope" fades in as Björk reflects on a pregnant Sri Lankan suicide bomber's political conviction. Hrólfsdóttir's evocation of the album's bright color palette is paired with the chorus to "Pneumonia," a meditative song about the psychological impact of isolation during medical care. When Hrólfsdóttir says "flags, trumpets," Björk sings with Anohni on "The Dull Flame of Desire." Finally, Hrólfsdóttir concludes with "tribal beats, bombastic" as the propulsive chorus to "Declare Independence," a noisy anti-colonialist anthem, kicks in.

Hrólfsdóttir's utterances are significant for a few reasons. First, her accented speech reinforces Björk's identification with Iceland through her music and her conversations with Eir and Jónson, which are primarily conducted in English but occasionally dip into Icelandic when they are making cultural references or translations. Second, Hrólfsdóttir's dispassionate voice provides an affective contrast with Björk's emotive singing style. Furthermore, she delivers the personnel credits that end each episode. Thus, her voice

38. Emily Mackay, "From Ingenue to Strap-On Dildo: Björk's Adventures in Gender," Pop Conference, April 27, 2018.

39. Björk: Sonic Symbolism, "Volta," podcast audio, September 22, 2022, <https://mailchimp.com/presents/podcast/sonic-symbolism/volta/>.

calls attention to the work that went into each episode and, to borrow Björk's turn of phrase, "who did what."⁴⁰ Finally, she is not Björk. Even though she is articulating the colors, archetypes, and sounds Björk assigned to each album, she does so in her own voice. Thus, her inclusion in the podcast's soundscape signposts Björk's interest in intergenerational collaboration as well as Eir and Jónsson's function as interlocutors for Björk's various musical collaborators, whom she credits by name but whose voices are conspicuously absent from the podcast's soundscape to foreground her authorship. I will now analyze Björk's conversations about the making of *Vespertine*, *Medúlla*, and *Vulnicura* to delve further into the sonic dimensions of these interpersonal dynamics.

VESPERTINE'S MOMENTS OF SHINE

The *Vespertine* episode functions as a turning point for the miniseries and Björk's discography. Björk identifies her fourth album, originally titled *Domestika*, as an artistic breakthrough defined by unlearning celebrity's imposed and self-inflicted violence. In the prelude, she reflects on the exhaustion and isolation she felt while touring her first three albums. Her speech is quiet and considered. "I *really* wanted a home," she surmises emphatically before explicating her eventual course of action.⁴¹ "I would first have to sort of create it sonically," she recalls, drawing out each syllable of "sonically" to convey the challenge of constructing a domestic soundscape. She then meditates on the word "bed" as a metonym for sanctuary before clarifying her interest in making "a *digital* bed" unbound by childhood nostalgia. Instead, she wanted to "make a home" with her new laptop, which she purchased in 1999 and saw as a refuge for unhurried creativity and emotional connection. The episode foregrounds *Vespertine*'s use of digital technology to facilitate productive intimacy by including footage of Björk testing her audio levels by singing "hello, hello, hello" to Eir before she starts the interview, which she frames as a continuation of their previous conversation about *Homogenic*.

As she articulates her pivot from *Homogenic*'s "confrontational" tone toward a more "feminine" and "celestial" sound, *Vespertine*'s "An Echo, A Stain" fades in and her speaking voice is joined by a choir faintly singing bright diminished F-sharp chords within a cloud of strings and above an aqueous bassline before Björk quietly sings the song's cryptic first line, "She touched my arm and smiled."⁴² This song is an interesting choice to underscore Björk's personal breakthrough on an album with several triumphal and tender moments. But "An Echo" is a tone poem adapted from Sarah Kane's *Crave*, a one-act play about four characters' violent dynamic that premiered shortly before the playwright's suicide in 1999. Björk inhabits the perspective of A, an abuser who fantasizes about sexually coercing a woman. While Björk does not explain the origins or meaning of "An Echo," its malevolent confusion of seduction with stalking gestures toward the violence Björk survived while making *Homogenic*, which emerged from a difficult breakup with

40. Hopper, "The Invisible Woman," 2015.

41. Björk: Sonic Symbolism, "Medúlla," podcast audio, September 8, 2022, <https://mailchimp.com/presents/podcast/sonic-symbolism/vespertine/>.

42. Björk, "An Echo, A Stain," *Vespertine*, One Little Independent/Elektra, 2001.

electronic producer Goldie and a traumatic experience with a stalker who mailed her a bomb and a video in which he killed himself.⁴³

Björk's conversation with Eir reemerges in the episode's soundscape when she explains how buying a laptop allowed her to work from home for the first time. She recalls that prior to the laptop's domestication, musicians usually "ha[d] to go into a studio and it's very expensive. And then you have to also go into the patriarchy system and work with the engineers and producers."⁴⁴ She draws out "studio" and "expensive" to express her frustration with exclusionary workspaces as sites for toxic, masculine-coded creative practices that constrain women's musicianship. She emphasizes the cultural significance of this technological innovation by relating to Eir as a fellow author by noting that "you can always write wherever you are, but musicians couldn't really do this" before laptops were embraced as recording equipment. Eir affirms Björk's observation by responding with "yeah, yeah, yeah," as a vocal nod of mutual recognition.⁴⁵ Using a laptop allowed Björk to record her vocals at home, which freed her up to sing whenever she was ready to record a take instead of having to rehearse and perform in the studio. It also allowed her to collect "found sounds" like ambient noises that she recorded into a microphone from their original environment and shaped into beats. She demonstrates these found sounds within the interview by tapping on her desk and mimicking a buzzing insect. An instrumental version of the outro to "Echo," which feature snaps and celeste glissandos brought forward in the mix, underscores her discussion of this time- and labor-intensive process.

The album's laptop-based production and motivic use of microbeats also led Björk to synthesize digital recording techniques with classical instruments. While Björk combined electronic and orchestral instruments on her previous three records, she wanted *Vespertine* to resonate from the rudimentary computer speakers that she used when she was making the album and that listeners might use to play it at home. She reasoned that "plucky" instruments like harps, glockenspiel, and music boxes "sound very, very beautiful in this kind of compressed digital world."⁴⁶ As she explains this realization, the first verse and chorus to "Aurora" serves as a sonic bridge, while "Frosti," a brief music box instrumental, fades in as she posits that musicians are responsible for putting "soul" into their music, not the instruments they choose to play. The song continues in full as she explains how she fed the songs' glockenspiel and harp arrangements into Sibelius and commissioned a custom music box with the tracks carved into copper plates.

Björk's evolving approach to merging classical and electronic music on *Vespertine* also led her to establish choral arrangements as a new motif that allowed her to put her voice in dialogue with others. This section of the podcast is accompanied by "Hidden Place," *Vespertine*'s opening track that employed a mixed ensemble from Greenland. But it is the soprano and alto parts that weave in and out of Björk's solo during the verses and deliver

43. Emily Mackay, *Homogenic* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 14.

44. Björk: Sonic Symbolism, "Vespertine," 2022.

45. Björk: Sonic Symbolism, "Vespertine," 2022.

46. Ibid.

the cirrus-like pre-chorus. These voices accompany Eir's question about the album's juxtaposition of chilly instrumentation with Björk's erotic lyricism, which Björk responds to by saying:

Yeah, I think something about having the whole album in my laptop, gave me freedom, and also liberated me as an author and as a producer to weave together all the songs so that it became one whole thing. The craft of that is quite feminine. Because it's kind of like when you are doing embroidery, your intention is just as strong as when you do bold, big strokes, but it does have like some kind of trance element, or like a hidden power in it, because you have to rely on your patience.⁴⁷

Björk compares her beat-making to both tile work and embroidery, two ancient folk arts that are often feminized because of their association with feminized domestic "crafts" instead of the masculinized fine arts. She also attributes her deftness with microbeats to her mother, who was a knitter and a furniture maker. Her mother is one of the few people she identifies in this episode. The only other reference she makes to a collaborator in this episode is when she compares constructing and sequencing microbeats to tiling a cathedral ceiling and notes that Arca, the Chilean composer who co-produced 2015's *Vulnicura* and 2017's *Utopia*, likens such arduous composition work to prayer. Thus, Björk reclaims her authorship of *Vespertine* by describing its creation as a largely solitary process, even though the liner notes list more than 30 musicians and technicians. This is a notable omission, as she signposts various contributors on her previous three albums. But she does not mention any of *Vespertine*'s collaborators by name, particularly composers Guy Sigisworth and Matmos. This scans as a deliberate reclamation, as she had previously explained to *Pitchfork*'s Jessica Hopper that "Matmos came in the last two weeks and added percussion on top of the songs, but they didn't do any of the main parts, and they are credited *everywhere* as having done the whole album."⁴⁸

Björk's deemphasis of *Vespertine*'s male collaborators inform her efforts to reframe the album's interest in sexual desire as a meditation on autoeroticism. This reassessment recasts the album's critical reception as a "sex" record that informs Eir's various questions about its eroticism.⁴⁹ Toward the end of the episode, Björk reveals that "Cocoon," an amorous lullaby about sharing a bed with a lover, was the last song she composed for *Vespertine*. Three years into the album's production, Björk noticed its lyrical and sonic preoccupation with quiet and felt she needed to write a "whisper song" to reinforce its thematic interest in intimacy. The song's melody came to her on a walk that she emphasizes was a *solitary* walk. She clarifies the motivation for this distinction at the end of the episode by responding to Eir's question about the melancholic quality of the album's eroticism thusly: "I would like to say, on a more romantic note, personally, most of the songs in *Vespertine* [were] written before I met the father of my child."⁵⁰ She is referring

47. Björk: Sonic Symbolism, "Vespertine," 2022.

48. Hopper, "The Invisible Woman," 2015.

49. See Robert Christgau, "Vespertine," Consumer Guide, March 12, 2002, https://www.robertchristgau.com/get_album.php?id=11086.

50. Björk: Sonic Symbolism, "Vespertine," 2022.

to artist Matthew Barney, with whom she had a daughter a year after *Vespertine*'s release. This distinction is important for a few reasons. First, Björk documents their severance on *Vulnicura*. Furthermore, some assumed Barney inspired *Vespertine*'s sexual explicitness on "Cocoon" and the video for "Pagan Poetry," which features distorted video footage of sexual acts from Björk's personal collection.⁵¹ Excising Barney from *Vespertine*'s narrative helps Björk reclaim creative authority, a discursive omission she signals first by mimicking the formality of a press release by briefly departing from her friendly rapport with Eir with "I would like to say" before returning to it by audibly smiling through her euphemistic evocation of "the father of my child."

It is also notable, then, that the man she perhaps most closely aligns with *Vespertine* is Lars Von Trier. It is necessary to qualify this claim because while it sounds like she mentions him once by first name when discussing the violence that she withstood "with the film, with Lars" at the beginning of the episode, the podcast transcript interprets her accented speech as "with the fame, with loss."⁵² Later in the episode, however, she recalls needing recovery time after coming home from the shoot for Von Trier's 2000 film *Dancer in the Dark*, which she made between *Homogenic* and *Vespertine* and later claimed to withstand his sexual harassment during production.⁵³ "I had to just understand with my essence, process it" she recalls as the marching beat for *Vespertine*'s closer "Unison" accompanies her thoughts. "And then, writing songs while I was doing that, and then coming out the other end to some sort of . . . as much salvation as I could create for myself. *Vespertine* was also the ideal. It definitely was a case of first you write your future, and then you move into it."⁵⁴ On *Vespertine*, Björk moved beyond the framework of toxic masculinity's singular male genius and forged new ways to approach the album as a creative medium that she applied to subsequent output.

MEDÚLLA'S NETWORK OF OXYGEN

Björk discusses her albums in relation to each other, so it makes sense that she periodically references *Vespertine* throughout *Sonic Symbolism*'s *Medúlla* episode. Her fifth album, released three years after *Vespertine*, examines her creative life after giving birth to her daughter. Björk wanted to capture the sonic dimensions of her playful bond with a pre-verbal infant who needs care and sustenance. For example, she describes "Mouth's Cradle" as a "*Tom and Jerry* song" that likens breastfeeding to a cat-and-mouse game.⁵⁵ As she unpacks her inspiration, "The Pleasure Is All Mine" fades in. "Pleasure" establishes *Medúlla*'s preoccupation with motherhood as an a capella song that uses panting and burbling as rhythmic elements to mimic childbirth and infant speech as a choir enhances

51. Randy Kennedy, "The Bjork-Barney Enigma Machine," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/09/movies/09kenn.html>.

52. Björk: *Sonic Symbolism*, "Vespertine," 2022.

53. Björk, "in the spirit of #metoo," *Facebook*, October 17, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/bjork/posts/10155782628166460?ref=embed_post.

54. Björk: *Sonic Symbolism*, "Vespertine," 2022.

55. Björk: *Sonic Symbolism*, "Medúlla," 2022.

Björk's recitative. The episode's soundscape highlights Björk's preoccupation with babble and child's play by highlighting her own sense of humor through frequent laughter and clever wordplay.

Unlike with her previous albums, Björk did not tour *Medúlla* because she wanted to take care of her child. Thus, *Medúlla* relied upon *Vespertine's* innovations with home recording even if it focused on a capella compositions as a reaction against its predecessor's painstaking construction of microbeats. It was easier for her to make voice-based music while caring for a small child, and she used SuperCollider, a programming language that helped her build loops to flesh out the vocal tracks that she recorded quietly in short bursts between naps and feedings. Such practices also allowed her to incorporate collaborators remotely and during the end of production process while reclaiming technologies that are culturally associated with masculinist tinkering to articulate childbirth and parenting as creative labor. *Medúlla* features several vocalists, including beatboxer Rahzel, Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq, Japanese mouth musician Dokaka, Faith No More frontman Mike Patton, Soft Machine's Robert Wyatt, The London Choir, and The Icelandic Choir. Björk observes that this was her first album where most of the featured guests contributed their parts during the last month of recording.

Though *Medúlla* incorporates a wide range of vocal performance styles, Björk's a capella compositions synthesize metal, hip hop, and classical influences into a unified statement about creative motherhood. When asked by Eir about the importance of the voice as the album's central instrument, Björk recalls, "I was playing in the studio, and I had several songs, and I just couldn't make them work. And then I would just mute one thing, mute something else, mute something else, adjust the vocals to the left. So, the first instinct came that I was just bored with instruments."⁵⁶ Notably, this is one of the few moments in the miniseries where Björk discusses her process without any musical accompaniment. Such purposeful silence reinforces the album's motivic use of vocal music and allows Björk to present this origin story without having to share the soundscape with her singing voice. But the a capella choral arrangement that opens "Mouth's Cradle" fades in as she elaborates to Jónsson that "obviously, my original instrument is the voice. And for me it was time to go back home to my own voice and to voice music and with the same intense fanatical fervor as I did with the beats."⁵⁷

Her preoccupation with the voice led her to experiment with beatboxing, a type of vocal performance associated with early hip hop that had fallen out of fashion by the mid-2000s. She fused it with metal on "Where Is the Line," a "finger" song she describes as a way to joke about her tendency to boss around her siblings as the oldest child. Featuring guttural vocals from Patton and a propulsive breakbeat from Rahzel, Björk imagined the song as "metal by the bonfire with the family."⁵⁸ She drew inspiration from her friends' poor attempt at beatboxing, recalling that "we were *crying* with laughter. They were just

56. Björk: Sonic Symbolism, "Medúlla," 2022.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

hysterical” and stretching the last word for comedic effect.⁵⁹ She takes care to explain, however, that she did not intend to mock or appropriate beatboxing as an African American cultural innovation. When Eir asks, “[B]ut you’re not making fun of anyone,” Björk responds, “*No*, not at *all*,” elongating the stressed words and pitching them in her upper register for effect before complimenting Rahzel’s virtuosity, recognizing beatboxing as an invention of necessity, and clarifying she intended to use humor as a self-deprecating rejoinder to the seriousness of her last two albums.⁶⁰

While Björk may not have publicly identified as a feminist when she was making *Medúlla*, she reflects on how two songs helped shift her perspective. She identifies “The Pleasure Is All Mine” as “maybe the first feminist lyric” she wrote as an ode to women’s generosity that doubled as sly commentary on mothers’ performative selflessness within patriarchal societies.⁶¹ During this segment, Eir and Björk riff on the comedy of women’s competitive caregiving and their complicity by joking about throwing the best parties or producing the most breast milk. She also discusses her version of “Vökuró,” an Icelandic choral piece composed by Jónna Viðar that was her first cover since *Post*’s “It’s Oh So Quiet.” In the early to mid-90s, Björk’s interpretations of jazz vocal standards were perceived as characteristic of alternative music’s postmodern eclecticism. But, as Björk clarifies on those episodes, she prefers free jazz to what she describes as “cocktail” music and purposefully infused “Quiet” with punk shrieks to mock the song’s lovesick lyrics and Betty Hutton’s comparably more submissive performance.⁶² Of course, Björk had previously sung in her original language. She sings in English and Icelandic on *Post*’s “The Modern Things,” which incorporates Icelandic singing with trance. However, “Vökuró” is a faithful arrangement born out of her aversion to Americanized representations of Icelandic folk culture, which she describes to Jónsson as “hippie songs” she likens to “hamburgers and Coca-Cola.”⁶³

Thus, “Vökuró” is a choral art song derived from Iceland’s folk music traditions and not the U.S. post-war lexicon. A passage of her singing “Vökuró” with the Icelandic Choir is bookended by two anecdotes about what this song meant to her as an Icelander and a mother. First, she notes that the song’s chord structure “is based more on fifths and it doesn’t have the sort of three-chord rock thing.”⁶⁴ The composition’s chord structure also supports its lyrics, which are one of *Medúlla*’s three Icelandic-language songs. Björk also reveals that she chose this song as a lullaby for her daughter. This episode passage puts Björk in dialogue with herself as a vocalist and audio storyteller. But it is also Björk’s feminist reclamation of Viðar’s work as a musical influence. In this moment, Björk is at once connecting herself and her daughter to Icelandic culture while honoring its lineage of female composers. Such careful attention toward both her musical forebearers and successors also informed her approach to making *Vulnicura*.

59. Björk: Sonic Symbolism, “Medúlla,” 2022.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Björk: Sonic Symbolism, “Medúlla,” 2022.

64. Ibid.

VULNICURA'S WONDROUS TIME LAPSE

If Björk's eighth album has a reputation for being her "Matthew Barney breakup record," it is notable that she never mentions him by name nor does she explain why their relationship ended. In keeping with her resistance to talk about her relationship with filmmaker Stéphane Sednaoui for the Directors Label series, Björk begins the *Vulnicura* episode by foregrounding her reservations about making such a transparently vulnerable album both as a private person and as an artist who prefers to use symbolic language. As "Lionsong" fades into the mix, Björk recalls her hesitance to record the album in the first place by thinking, "[O]hhh, we have a heartbreak album here and it's really obvious."⁶⁵ She claims to have written the songs very quickly, was deeply embarrassed by their emotional honesty, and sequenced them chronologically to replicate the structure of a self-help book her friend gave her. She was especially uncomfortable with playing "the heartbroken woman" because she felt that "the world I was living in wanted me to make [this album]."⁶⁶ The album's struggles with emotional honesty are reflected in Björk's guarded candor as an interview subject. This is the episode where she is most audibly careful with her words out of an articulated desire to shield her family. Furthermore, Eir and Jónsson do not ask Björk to elaborate on her oblique references to insomnia and depression, perhaps because they witnessed them firsthand. But she also tries to think past her own personal struggles by reflecting on the universality of her situation. Early in the episode, she adopts the formal tone she used at the end of the *Vespertine* episode to state, "I don't want this podcast to be full of me feeling sorry for myself, but I—hopefully, this is just helpful for people who go through the same thing."⁶⁷

Despite her conscientiousness, her comment that "the world I was living in wanted me to make [this album]" is a bracingly honest moment of self-reflection that reveals Björk's deeper frustrations with art worlds' heteropatriarchal orthodoxy. Though she does not directly indict Barney or his network on the podcast, she criticizes a Maria Callas documentary that diminished the opera singer's illustrative career in order to focus on her doomed affair with Aristotle Onassis as a stand-in for her grievances. This reference accords with Björk's identification with other female artists in the miniseries, particularly Kate Bush. During the *Debut* and *Post* episodes, Björk celebrates Bush's innovative work with the Fairlight synthesizer and reflects on her skillful dramatization of women's inner lives as a songwriter while also pointing out how male rock critics pathologized or dismissed her. Björk also compares Callas to Pablo Picasso, a heralded genius despite his reputation as an abuser and philanderer, to posit that while "everybody has love problems," male artists' improprieties are excused and enabled while their female counterparts "have to explode and self-destruct, and then leave, exit the stage. Right, bye. See you later, smoke."⁶⁸ It is one of the few moments when she lets us hear her indignation.

65. Björk: Sonic Symbolism, "Vulnicura," podcast audio, October 6, 2022, <https://mailchimp.com/presents/podcast/sonic-symbolism/vulnicura/>.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Björk: Sonic Symbolism, "Vulnicura," 2022.

A new collaborator helped Björk steer away from the breakup album's misogynistic trappings. During a conversation with Jónsson, Björk reveals that she finished recording *Vulnicura*'s string arrangements and began composing the beats when Arca asked if they could work together on a project. The album's string arrangements were a crucial but painful compositional element for Björk. As she explains while discussing "Stonemilker," the strings were there to "express the beauty and what was refined about [my] 13-year relationship."⁶⁹ While the album's elegiac opener used strings to evoke romance, Björk's arrangement for "Family" had five violins, five violas, and five cellos play the same monotonous melodic line to represent her catatonia at the end of her relationship with Barney.

Arca helped Björk embrace many of *Vulnicura*'s compositional contradictions. Björk reflects on the album's duality by talking about the making of "Atom Dance," a cyclical piece of trance music that was originally written for *Biophilia* and inspired by Vikivaki, an Icelandic circle dance. The song was arranged for organ and gameleste, but the string arrangement helped the song by "slow and fast at the same time."⁷⁰ Arca's lighthearted attitude in the studio helped Björk get through the arduous process of recording her vocals, in which she would often cry between takes. Their collaboration helped Björk establish a mentorship bond with a younger, female-identified musician who grew up listening to her music. For example, Arca identified with Björk's circumstances as a child of divorce whose parents separated when she was roughly the same age as Björk's daughter. Björk's queer partnership with Arca was also reinforced by Anohni's contributions to "Atom Dance" as a featured vocalist. In the years since they worked together on *Volta*, Anohni came out publicly as a trans woman. Furthermore, *Vulnicura* was the first of two recordings that Anohni released under her name. A year later, she made her solo debut with *Hopelessness*, which fused synth pop with torch balladry to voice a poignant feminist critique against ecocide. Thus, *Vulnicura* helped Björk forge a queer kinship network that challenged patriarchy's limited imagination.

YOU DID WELL

Sonic Symbolism is vexingly unfinished for Björk completists. Its final episode focuses on *Utopia*, her ninth studio album from 2017. But the miniseries was timed to the release of Björk's tenth album, *Fossora*, which lacked a corresponding podcast episode. Perhaps one will materialize after the release of her next album. Perhaps Björk wanted to give listeners time to process *Fossora*'s meditation on aging and maternal grief and read the interviews she gave for its promotion cycle. And perhaps bemoaning *Sonic Symbolism*'s missing *Fossora* episode misses the point. In her 2015 *Pitchfork* interview, Björk reflected on her refusal to cede creative authority to her male collaborators as a way to set an example for younger female-identified artists by saying that "[i]f whatever I'm saying to you now helps women, I'm up for saying it."⁷¹ One artist's principled critique of the music business cannot fully

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid.

71. Hopper, "The Invisible Woman," 2015.

address, much less fix, its systemic sexism and misogyny. But Björk's music has undeniably guided subsequent generations of femme and queer musicians to insist upon their own authorial control, a contribution that Robyn acknowledged at the 2010 Polar Music Prize ceremony by covering "Hyperballad" in front of her. Karin Dreijer has applied Björk's interest in erotic post-humanism to their own thrillingly genderqueer multivocal electronic music. Björk's influence also crosses the color line. Michelle Zauner and Mitski Miyawaki reclaim Björk's avant-garde style as biracial Asian-American women. serpentwithfeet composes hymns about the splendor of queer Black masculinities. Kelela is a cartographer of desire, vulnerability, and dislocation's emotional landscapes. FKA twigs makes unsettling pop music about women's trauma. SZA closed *SOS* with "Forgiveless," a beyond-the-grave duet with Ol' Dirty Bastard that samples "Hidden Place."

In other ways, Björk followed the example of other female-identified solo artists to harness podcasting's multivocal potential. In late 2018, British balladeer Jessie Ware and her mother launched *Table Manners*, a podcast that uses the dining room table as a space for creative community. A few years later, Norah Jones started *Playing Along*, a song-dissection podcast in which the singer-songwriter performs and discusses various musical compositions. *Sonic Symbolism* also debuted between Dua Lipa's *At Your Service* and St. Vincent's *History Listen*. Most of these podcasts are digital remediations of the talk show, a staple of broadcast television and working musicians' promotional cycles. They also co-exist alongside a current wave of portrait documentaries about individual artists that provide buzzy content for streaming platforms. But they all capture the immediate particularities of musicians' speech—the audible pauses, accents, false starts, digressions, minor epiphanies, and conversational repartee that are often excised from recordings and magazine profiles. They also seize on seriality's duration by allowing artists the time to elaborate on particular topics or return to them from different perspectives. They also tend to focus on the finer points of creative labor, like the emergence and refinement of an idea, the mundane details of a musician's life, and the complex motivations behind artistic intention. Gender often informs these finer points, but podcasting allows artists like Björk to articulate their negotiations with patriarchal forces rather than let those forces define them. *Sonic Symbolism* demonstrates music podcasting's multivocal potential by letting its subject sing, speak up, talk back, be heard, and be understood. ■

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