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**“Follow My Voice”:
Structure and Improvisation in Björk’s ‘Mouth’s Cradle’**

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“Instruments are so over.”¹ This bold statement from Björk in a June 2004 *Rolling Stone* interview was widely quoted at the time of its publication. It was in many ways a typical Björk utterance: a mischievous yet accurate description of her latest album, *Medúlla*, to be released two months later. On *Medúlla*, Björk almost exclusively limits herself to the human voice, creating a kaleidoscope of varied and richly textured vocal effects. Among her collaborators are the Inuk throat-singer Tanya “Tagaq” Gillis, the American human beatboxer Rahzel (Rahzel M. Brown), and two choral groups—ad-hoc ensembles referred to on the credit list as the Icelandic Choir and the London Choir. About the process of creating an all-vocal sound while also avoiding well-worn clichés, Björk remarked that the only hard rule was “for it not to sound like Manhattan Transfer or Bobby McFerrin.”²

The critical response to the album was divided. Many felt it was Björk’s most difficult album to date. “There is something fascinating about witnessing a near-catastrophe,” observed a reviewer for the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*; another Swedish critic wrote in the *Gothenburg Post* that the music was strange and ridiculous, and that he would rather listen to a CD of whale sounds.³ In the United Kingdom, the *Observer* critic Ben Thompson found *Medúlla* to be an inconsistent album, yet ambitious enough to get the listener through moments that sounded like “a cat with a hairball, a world leader having an asthma attack, ET using a voice scrambler, and a grisly head-on collision between rapper Biz Markie and the infamous [*sic*] carol-singing choir of King’s College Cambridge.”⁴ Even devoted fans

¹ Lauren Gitlin, “In the Studio,” *Rolling Stone* 952/953 (July 8–22, 2004), 18.

² James McNair, “Björk: Passions in a cold climate,” *The Independent* (13 August, 2004).

³ The reviews are quoted in “Seiðandi stórslys,” *Morgunblaðið* (13 September, 2004).

⁴ Ben Thompson, “Older and bolder,” *The Observer* (15 August, 2004).

were divided in their opinions. On a popular online review site, one member calls *Medúlla* a “monumental” album, while another insists that it is “atrocious and unlistenable.”⁵

In retrospect, *Medúlla* may be seen as one of Björk’s most original achievements, a daring attempt to create a soundscape of unusual complexity using willfully limited means. It is therefore no surprise that its music has been the subject of analysis and critical discussion. In particular, Nicola Dibben and Victoria Malawey have explored the idea of musical emergence in Björk’s sonic textures, a concept that may hold “potential for largescale patterns of growth in the medium of popular music.”⁶ The songs on *Medúlla* also offer valuable insights into other aspects of Björk’s music. In what follows, I will offer some analytical perspectives on two songs that have the themes of nature and motherhood in common, yet exemplify two very different approaches to the relationship between structure and improvisation. ‘Oceania’ has a rigid, ostinato-based structure, whereas in ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ a loosely organized melody is superimposed on a schematic but rather unorthodox formal scheme. This latter song in particular holds important clues regarding the interaction of structure and improvisation, a tension that exists between the inherent flexibility of Björk’s melodic impulse and a formal scheme that is worked out in full only during the later stages of the creative process.

Nature and Nurture: ‘Oceania’ and ‘Mouth’s Cradle’

In another *Rolling Stone* interview, Björk explained how the bodily effects of her second pregnancy were the inspiration behind *Medúlla*. “I became really physical and really aware of my muscles and bones. My body takes over and does incredible things, and it has got nothing to do with me.”⁷ The album’s title derives from the Latin word for “marrow,” the inner or deep part of an animal or plant structure, whether bones, kidney, or brain—the inner core. Björk saw *Medúlla* as a return to the core of human experience: roots, deep human connections, honoring our ancestors, nourishing our offspring. These themes are reflected in the album’s all-vocal concept—the body as instrument—but they are also made explicit in that many of the texts deal with nature, nurturing, and motherhood.

Nature has been a pervasive theme in Björk’s output from the very outset of her solo career. As Nicola Dibben has shown, each of the Icelandic musician’s recording projects has projected a specific idea of nature, including the sea, volcanic landscapes, glaciers, and mountains.⁸ *Medúlla* marked the beginning of an expanded view of nature that included the human body and involved bones, blood,

⁵ <http://www.progarchives.com/album.asp?id=31691> (accessed 1 November, 2019).

⁶ Victoria Malawey, “Musical Emergence in Björk’s *Medúlla*,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 136, no. 1 (2011), 146.

⁷ Björk, quoted in Jenny Eliscu, “Q&A: Björk,” *Rolling Stone* 957 (16 September, 2004), 36.

⁸ Nicola Dibben, *Björk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 56.

heart, kidneys, and lungs. Björk further explored this new kind of “biological music” on her eighth studio album, *Biophilia* (2011), and the two albums may be seen as complementary. *Medúlla* concerns itself with inner nature, core, and human experience, while *Biophilia* takes a more cosmic approach—it is, in a sense, the macrocosm to *Medúlla*’s microcosm. In between making these two albums, Björk emerged as an influential spokesperson for nature conservation in Iceland. In particular, she has taken a firm stance against the building of aluminium smelters, which have already caused considerable environmental damage in a country that prides itself on its pristine natural resources and scenic beauty. In 2008, she released the single ‘Náttúra’ (‘Nature’), the proceeds of which were donated to an environmental preservation campaign in Iceland. In one interview, when asked about her religious beliefs, Björk replied: “If I believe in anything, I believe in Mother Nature.”⁹

Many songs on *Medúlla* thematize motherhood and the maternal body as a biological marvel. ‘The Pleasure Is All Mine’ is an ode to womankind and pregnancy: “Women like us / We strengthen most / host-like.” ‘Triumph of a Heart’ is not the sentimental love ballad its title might suggest, but rather a celebration of the heart as a biological organ: “The stubborn trunks of these legs of mine / Serve as pathways for my favourite fuel / Heading upwards towards my kidneys. . .” A third song features Björk as the ocean-goddess Oceania, an ancient, all-encompassing maternal figure inspired by Greek mythology. The text, by Icelandic poet and lyricist Sjón, feminizes the mythological figure Okeanos, the divine (male) personification of the World Ocean. Here, instead, it is “Mother Oceania” who addresses her offspring and reminds us of her all-encompassing size and age: “You show me continents / I see the islands / You count the centuries / I blink my eyes.” In conclusion, she points out that one of mankind’s biological traits is a result of her parentage: “Your sweat is salty – I am why.” In the words of Victoria Malawey, the song “takes the personal theme of motherhood and brings it to a larger, more public level. Mother is to child as Ocean is to continents.”¹⁰

The ocean has been a recurring theme in Björk’s output, perhaps even more so than other natural phenomena mentioned above. For example, four of eleven songs on her album *Debut* (1993) mention the sea, including the well-known ‘Anchor Song.’ Nicola Dibben has observed that one feature of her characterization of the sea is its representation as a maternal character.¹¹ Björk’s embodiment of the “persona of the sea” in ‘Oceania’ was completed by the colors and textures of the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004, where the song was given its first

⁹ Biggi [Birgir Örn Steinarrson], “Hálfur pönkari, hálf amma,” *Fréttablaðið* (5 September, 2004), 15. Björk expresses the same view in a 2004 interview, “Nature is our chapel” (Dibben, *Björk*, 55).

¹⁰ Malawey, “Musical Emergence,” 142.

¹¹ Dibben, *Björk*, 63.

performance. There, the billowing blue material of her dress gradually unravelled across the entire floor of the Olympic arena as though it were flowing water.¹²

The twelfth track on *Medúlla*, ‘Mouth’s Cradle,’ is a more intimate kind of maternal ode. Its subject is breastfeeding, the act of nourishing and protecting one’s offspring, even the physical sensation of being suckled. To quote Björk: “It’s about nourishment, about the mouth and the teeth.”

[A]nd these teeth are a ladder up to his mouth
these teeth are a ladder that I walk
that you can walk too if you want
if you want up to the mouth
the Mouth’s Cradle

Björk relates that following the birth of her daughter Ísadóra in 2002, she spent most of her time indoors with the infant. “I was in my own little shell and it’s about discovering a newborn child and the joy that is part of them being so tiny; they wake up laughing and have milk and then everything in life is perfect.”¹³ The text deals mostly with the sincerity and simplicity of the child—which Björk playfully refers to as the “ghost-like beast”—and about the unconditional love between mother and offspring, connected by a bond of “infrared love:”

He always has a hope for me
always sees me when nothing else
and everyone have left
[. . .]
The simplicity of the ghost-like beast
the purity of what he wants and where it goes
always love, always loves you, always loves you [with]
infrared love¹⁴

¹² Dibben, *Björk*, 64.

¹³ Björk Guðmundsdóttir, interview by ÁHI, 27 September, 2011. When Björk recorded ‘Mouth’s Cradle,’ her daughter was already two years old but the throat-singer Tagaq had just had a daughter of her own and brought her to the studio for the sessions. Björk comments that she “didn’t need a lot of imagination to get back into that whole world” (ibid.).

¹⁴ “With” is not part of the original text, but is clearly added by Björk in both *Voltaic* and *Biophilia* live performances discussed above.

Thus, both ‘Oceania’ and ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ share an imagery of natural fluids as a connecting source between mother and offspring: water and sweat in ‘Oceania,’ milk in ‘Mouth’s Cradle.’

Yet for all its emotional intimacy, the text to ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ also makes a political statement. Until *Medúlla*, politics had not been a prominent feature of Björk’s solo albums, unlike her early band work, which often featured texts of a very political nature. (A more explicit return to political activism occurred with ‘Declare Independence’ from the 2007 album *Volta*, as well as the environmental activism discussed above.) Toward the end of ‘Mouth’s Cradle,’ the text addresses the current events of 2004 and the singer’s need to shelter her offspring from the aggression of an increasingly violent world.

I need a shelter to build an altar away
from all Osamas and Bushes

In retrospect, Björk regards this as a “very strange period. It was a year after 9/11, and I was basically a work-at-home mom, writing songs in a house in a forest outside New York City . . . of course it felt like a cocoon.”¹⁵ In her analysis of nature and the pastoral topos, Carolyn Merchant has shown how the image of nature often appears as female refuge from the ills of urban life, and this certainly seems to be the case here.¹⁶

The text and melody of ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ were composed simultaneously, and Björk remarks that for her it was an unusually easy and straightforward process. “It happens very rarely when I’m writing my songs that the entire text comes along at the same time. This was one of the exceptions, and although I guess I could have gone back and polished the lyrics and made them more consistent, I somehow thought it was just fine the way it was.”¹⁷ She did alter one small detail: her original lyrics referred to her newly born child as “she,” but she changed this to the male pronoun for the album version. Björk regards this as a protective reflex: “When I’m writing about someone so close to me, I sometimes change the gender, just to hide it.”¹⁸ When singing ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ at concerts in

¹⁵ Björk Guðmundsdóttir, interview by ÁHI, 27 September, 2011. Björk elaborated on this point in an interview done at the time of *Medúlla*’s release: “This album was supposed to be a response to 9/11 and all this rubbish and me thinking about a time before religion and patriotism. I wanted to show those gentlemen that there are still insects crawling, people jumping in swimming pools, building houses, having children, making songs and having abstract thought processes or whatever. That’s at least 98 per cent of what humans are doing out there.” Robert Sandall, “This time it’s intuition only—no brain, please.” *Daily Telegraph* (14 August, 2004).

¹⁶ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 7 and *passim*.

¹⁷ Björk Guðmundsdóttir, interview by ÁHI, 27 September, 2011.

¹⁸ Björk Guðmundsdóttir, interview by ÁHI, 27 September, 2011.

Manchester and Reykjavík in autumn 2011, she for the first time felt comfortable switching back to the female pronoun.

Structure versus Improvisation

Although they share a common theme, the two songs—‘Oceania’ and ‘Mouth’s Cradle’—could hardly be more different in terms of the extent to which they allow room for improvisation and rhythmic flexibility within a predetermined formal structure. In describing the creative process behind her songs, Björk has emphasized the spontaneous nature of composing melodies, as opposed to the process of arranging and editing that brings out her more “academic, clever side:”

I just go for a walk in nature for a while and out comes a song that I don’t understand. And I’ll sing it in one take and not really analyse it, and then afterwards I can spend five billion hours on the arrangement and that’s where I’m being maybe more clever or more technical or professional, if you want.¹⁹

Thus, many of her melodies are akin to frozen improvisations, only later worked out more fully in a professional environment. The final outcome is a combination of instinct and analysis, improvisation and structure, nature and technology.

At the studio sessions for *Medúlla*, Björk encouraged experimentation and extemporization as she brought together a number of musicians from different genres. Valgeir Sigurðsson, the album’s recording engineer, remarks that her initial ideas were quite flexible but became more focused as the work progressed. She would begin by recording her vocals on a dictaphone, and this initial idea formed the backbone of everything to come. When in the studio, she began recording harmonies for her original line; these were sometimes retained in her own voice, and sometimes arranged for other solo vocalists or for the choir. Sigurðsson recalls:

[In the beginning] I think she maybe didn’t know exactly where it was all going to go. It was very much a search, which I guess most people go through with some kind of demo phase and then go to the studio and record the song. I never recall her making a demo and then recording a song from scratch. We always began with something she had recorded herself, and then that remained as part of the structure, we were essentially going back and adding things and changing the demo, but there was always some core material left in the song.²⁰

¹⁹ Björk, interview with Robert Sandall and Mark Russell, *Mixing It*, BBC Radio 3 (London, 17 March, 2002), quoted in Dibben, 53.

²⁰ Valgeir Sigurðsson, interview by ÁHI, 10 October, 2011.

Björk continued to augment and change things right until the very end of the production process. For example, it was only in the last few weeks of production that the beatboxer Rahzel—who adds a distinctive touch of rhythm and bass to the album—was added, almost as an afterthought. Björk describes the process thus:

I was going through a huge amount of vocal effects, I’ve never really used them before and I actually think about 90% of vocal effects are completely awful, so I was basically trying to find the other 10%. It started off with my voice, the loop at the beginning; I guess that’s where it all begins. Then towards the end of the project I added the throatsinging and the beatbox. I feel like when I’ve done all that I can alone, that’s when I invite someone to come along and stitch the album together, to unite the songs. Also, when you work on your songs in ProTools, like I’ve done for the last few albums, then you get people like Rahzel or Tanya to do twenty things and you end up picking only two of them.²¹

Of the tracks on *Medúlla*, ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ features an unusually complex interaction of structural and improvisatory elements (see below). ‘Oceania,’ on the other hand, is more tightly constructed and does not allow the same kind of extemporized freedom with regard to the melody. It is based on a rigid structural background, a recurring ostinato chord sequence set to a seductive “techno tango” beat.²² The ostinato consists of a 12-bar harmonic sequence that is heard four times. It is essentially a threefold repetition of a 4-bar pattern, but with a single note altered in the bass line of the second iteration (f replaced by b b ; see Example 1).

²¹ Björk Guðmundsdóttir, interview by ÁHI, 27 September, 2011.

²² “Techno tango” is Björk’s own description, see <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/bjork/oceania> (accessed 19 November, 2019).

Oceania - ostinato

Music example 1: ‘Oceania,’ harmonic ostinato

Superimposed on these recurring harmonies are Björk’s vocals, in A-A-B-A form. The underlying ostinato is withheld in the contrasting B-section (“You show me continents”).²³ In terms of melodic and rhythmic content, the three A-sections are virtually identical. Given the restrictions of both ostinato and the regular tango beat, Björk does not vary the melody significantly, nor does her rendition vary noticeably from one live performance to another.²⁴ The only suggestion of extempore singing is provided by the free-flowing, wide-ranging *glissandi* tossed off by a women’s choir in imitation of the ancient Greek sirens. Their contribution adds an element of surprise, since each outburst is unique, non-repeating, and occurs at various points within the ostinato pattern. Thus, the unpredictability of these interjections creates an effective contrast to Björk’s patterned solo line.

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‘Mouth’s Cradle’ is not based on a harmonic ostinato, but it shares with ‘Oceania’ a multi-layered conception and a clear formal structure. As is shown in Figure 1, the main material of the song consists

²³ Each of the A-sections consists of eight melodic gestures, in groups of two. The first two are echoed in nos. 5–6, giving each A-section an internal structure of A–B–A’–C.

²⁴ A comparison of three versions of ‘Oceania’ (the Athens performance in 2004, the *Medúlla* CD, and a live performance with two pianos, broadcast on the show *Átta raddir* on Icelandic State Television [RÚV], 27 February, 2011) demonstrates an inherent melodic stability, whether in pitch or rhythm, through repeated performances of this song. This is true even when Björk performs in Icelandic, as she does in the RÚV broadcast.

of three verses, each of which is followed by a chorus or refrain. This is framed by a 35-second introduction and a 59-second coda, each of which can be divided into four parts.

<u>Intro A</u> 0:00-0:05 “sine” loop 2x (no beatbox in intro)	<u>Intro B</u> 0:05-0:15 “sine” loop + choir	<u>Intro C</u> 0:15-0:23 “sine” loop + choir + throat	<u>Intro D</u> 0:23-0:35 Björk vocalizing loop 2x (+ “sine” loop fadeout)		
<u>Verse 1</u> 0:35- (21 sec.) + Björk loop + beat	<u>Chorus 1</u> 0:56- (26 sec.) choir (+ Björk loop)	<u>Verse 2</u> 1:22- (31 sec.) throat + beatbox (+ soft Björk loop)	<u>Chorus 2</u> 1:53- (24 sec.) choir (+ Björk loop)	<u>Verse 3</u> 2:17- (21 sec.) Björk loop	<u>Chorus 3</u> 2:38 (22 sec.) choir + Björk loop
There is yet...	And these teeth...	He always has...	And you can use these teeth...	The simplicity... †	And you can use...
<u>Coda A</u> 3:00- MODULATION	<u>Coda B</u> 3:24	<u>Coda C</u> 3:30 NEW PITCH, F	<u>Coda D</u> 3:48-3:59 explosion/climax		
A major And we shall try...	A major + D# choir + throat + Björk	D \flat major	A \flat major choir + Björk melt together in final phrase		

Figure 1: ‘Mouth’s Cradle,’ formal outline.

The distinctive soundscape of ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ gradually unfolds during the song’s introduction: choir, throat-singing, and Björk’s own voice. The first 35 seconds are a prime example of musical emergence—a gradually unfolding process as sounds enter or are multi-tracked—the materialization, introduction, or filling out of texture or more complete musical idea. As Malawey has observed, musical emergence can even be understood as a musical metaphor for birth itself—the emergence of life, which is the ultimate human emergence.²⁵

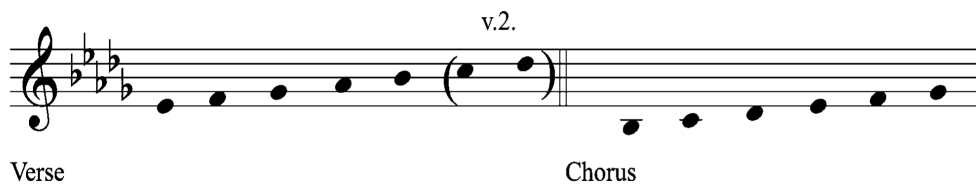
‘Mouth’s Cradle’ begins with an ostinato layer whose sonic quality is reminiscent of a sine wave, although it is actually Björk’s own voice, electronically modified (music example 2).

²⁵ Malawey, “Musical Emergence,” 142–43.



Music example 2: ‘Mouth’s Cradle’, Introduction (ostinato pattern)

The layering of sounds in the introduction becomes more complex as it proceeds, with the introduction of female choral voices and a new pattern performed by the throat-singer Tagaq, followed by the entrance of male choral voices and a polyphonic loop based on Björk’s own vocals. When the song proper begins in measure 17, its initial verse serves both as a logical continuation and climax to what has come before. While some features of the introduction recede temporarily, new ones are added: text, a clear foregrounding of Björk’s voice as soloist, and programmed bass-beats that firmly ground the song harmonically, oscillating between $E \flat$ and $B \flat$, tonic and dominant within the mode of $E \flat$ Dorian. Björk’s vocal range in the song is rather narrow, generally consisting of only an octave, from $b \flat$ to $b \flat^1$. This is extended upward by a minor third only once, in a short vocalise in verse 2 (see music example 3).



Music example 3: Vocal range in ‘Mouth’s Cradle.’

The main part of ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ consists of three verses, each followed by a refrain or chorus. These sections are clearly identifiable to the listener—they are also spelled out in the choral score of the song—yet they defy certain expectations of structure and repetition within the context of a popular song. A common definition of “refrain” or “chorus” is the part of a song that is repeated at least once (both music and text), in contrast to the verse whose every appearance differs from the others. Yet in ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ none of the three refrains is identical—they use neither the same text nor precisely the same music. Example 4 gives a transcription of the first verse.

there is yet _____ an - oth - er one that foll - ows me _____ wher - ev - er I _____ go _____

and supp - orts me ah, _____ this tooth is warmth - like, this tooth is warmth - like, this tooth is warmth - like...

Music example 4: ‘Mouth’s Cradle,’ verse 1 (Medúlla version).

In the three verses, Björk’s vocals are quite free both in terms of rhythm—much offbeat movement in relation to the 4/4 beat pattern—and melody. As in many of her other songs, the free-flowing line has a quality perhaps best described as modal improvisation. As the transcription of verse 1 demonstrates, the pitches form a small number of vocal gestures. For example, an ascending gesture (f¹-e b¹-a b¹-b b¹) is complemented three times by a descending one (a b¹-g b¹-f¹-e b¹). To conclude the verse, Björk employs a contrasting gesture in a lower register than before, built around f¹ and its lower fifth, b b¹.

In the choruses, on the other hand, rhythmic gestures tend to be more direct and on the beat. Here, the melody employs a lower vocal range, never reaching up to the b b¹ so prominent in the verse. One can interpret the f- b b¹ lower-fifth motive from the end of the verse as a linking device between the two sections, since it reappears three times in the course of the chorus (though here frequently embedded within a larger vocal gesture: e b¹-f¹-b b¹-d b¹-e b¹). Example 5 provides a comparison of all three choruses as performed on the *Medúlla* album.

Chorus 1
and these teeth are a ladd-er up to his mouth oh these teeth are a ladd-er that I walk that you can walk too if you want...

Chorus 2
you can use these teeth as a ladd-er up to the mouth's crad - le the mouth's crad - le and you can foll - ow these notes and sing ing up to...

Chorus 3
you can use those teeth as a ladd-er up to the mouth's cra - dle mouth's cra-dle you can use those teeth oh foll - ow my voice tooth tooth up to the...

Music example 5: ‘Mouth’s Cradle,’ choruses 1–3 (Medúlla version).

Although neither all three choruses nor all the verses are strictly identical, the song’s basic structural outlines are readily grasped by the listener. This is not least because each begins with a distinctive gesture: each verse starts with the pitch sequence $f^{\flat}-e^{\flat}-a^{\flat}-b^{\flat}-b^{\flat}$; the refrain uses the contrasting gesture of $e^{\flat}-f^{\flat}-b^{\flat}-d^{\flat}-e^{\flat}$. The chorus is also marked as a new section by the entry of a four-part choir that remains silent during the verses.

Like the introduction, the coda to ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ can be divided into four parts. Here the texture is more complex than at the beginning, as the song builds to an impressive climax. The coda is clearly marked off from the preceding material by new and unexpected harmonies. Up to this point, the song has been firmly anchored in E^{\flat} Dorian, with the beatbox oscillation providing a tonic/dominant underpinning. Now, the harmonies move abruptly to the sharp side of the circle of fifths: E^{\flat} minor to A major—a jarring shift of an augmented fourth. Then, a dissonant pitch is added to the A major harmony (D^{\sharp} , another augmented fourth); this chord is followed by D^{\flat} major and the song finally reaches its explosive conclusion on A^{\flat} major.

The structural crescendo of the introduction (one loop becomes two loops, two voices become three voices, etc.) continues as the coda grows in complexity right up to the very end. The voices of Rahzel and Tagaq become more prominent in the sound mix, and the choir sopranos ascend to higher tessitura. On the first beat of measure 79, the texture explodes, then dissolves into various vocal sounds of Björk and the choir on the final chord. Although Malawey has pointed out that “emergence in Björk’s music does not require a single, culminating goal or climax,” the final seconds of ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ certainly provide a satisfying—and somewhat surprising—culmination to the entire song.²⁶

Thus, ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ can be seen as defying the well-established structures of popular songwriting. The refrain is not a fixed entity; rather, it allows for constant variation and improvisation in both vocal line and text. The coda is not a tonally grounded space in which earlier harmonic tensions are resolved. In fact, it is the most tonally adventurous part of the entire song, moving through unfamiliar harmonies and concluding with a chord that has never been prominent during the song’s main section.

Getting Lost: The Limits of Flexibility

‘Mouth’s Cradle’ combines a vocal line of considerable flexibility with a carefully outlined and somewhat unusual structure. Björk lays out a groundwork of rhythmic and melodic gestures that are

²⁶ Malawey, “Musical Emergence,” 146.

treated with considerable freedom from start to finish. This raises the question of how far such flexibility can be extended. To what degree can ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ accommodate Björk’s flights of fancy without the entire structure falling apart?

In an Icelandic interview shortly after the release of *Medúlla*, Björk admitted to having what she called a “love-hate relationship with structure,” with feeling confined in her own creation:

When I began [recording *Medúlla*], I wasn’t going to have any rules. That was the first rule.²⁷

In a broad sense, what Björk means by “structure” (*rammi*, or framework, in Icelandic) has to do with her decision to limit herself to voices as a generator of sound. Yet it also seems to involve the musical structure of the songs and how they may or may not impose limits on her improvisation. In ‘Mouth’s Cradle,’ none of the main sections of the song (verse 1 compared to verse 2, for example, or chorus 2 compared to chorus 3) is precisely the same length. When asked to comment on this particular feature of the song, she gave the following remark:

I kind of enjoyed having odd-numbered phrases, so that they’re not always in patterns of 8 or 12, and I also think it’s a reflection of how little kids love to play games, they love playing pranks, and I liked that. So, suddenly you have this section and then all of a sudden you have the other one and it’s either one measure too early or half a measure too late. And because the song is like this, you can’t really change much when you’re doing it live, because then everyone is just like “Oh, but I thought that (part) was 11 and a half,” you know, then everyone just gets lost.²⁸

The extent to which everyone can “get lost” can be gauged by comparing Björk’s live performances of ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ with the original studio version. She did not tour with *Medúlla* immediately following the album’s release, but instead focused on her daughter’s upbringing for several years. As far as I have been able to establish, her first live performance of ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ was at the concluding concert of the tour for *Volta*, her next studio album, in Reykjavík in August 2008. There, she was joined by the original “Icelandic choir” for a few songs from *Medúlla* at the very end of the concert. This performance was later released as part of a four-CD collection, *Voltaic*.²⁹ A comparison of the studio recording of ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ and the 2008 live version demonstrates that Björk takes considerable

²⁷ Biggi [Birgir Örn Steinarnsson], “Hálfur pönkari.”

²⁸ Björk Guðmundsdóttir, interview by ÁHI, 27 September, 2011.

²⁹ Björk, *Voltaic* (Wellhart/One Little Indian, 2009).

liberties within the controlled structure. In the refrain sections she is more free, not less; in this song it seems as if the refrains are the places where anything can happen, where improvisation is actively encouraged.

But that is not the whole story. The version released on *Voltaic* was actually the second take of ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ at the live concert in 2008. In the middle of the first attempt, Björk cut the song off and decided to start over; she had overestimated the degree to which she could be flexible and proved unable to get back on track at each of the crucial dividing sections of the piece. This “mishap” holds an important clue to Björk’s creative process and her own internal sense of structure and improvisation, of freedom and restraint. In her live performance in 2008, she seems to have gone a step too far, weakening a crucial structural moment of the song and thus risking total collapse with respect to the other performers—particularly the choir.

In the first take at the *Voltaic* concert, Björk took considerable liberties right from the start, but the crucial moment was the entry into chorus 3. On the album, verse 3 concludes with an oscillating vocal figure (f' -a b ') that comes to an end on the downbeat of measure 57, giving her plenty of room to “breathe;” a clear rhythmic gesture in the bass is followed by a soprano lead-in to her own upbeat to the next measure. In this particular case, too much rhythmic liberty runs the risk of delaying the end of the third verse (the oscillating minor third), so that the rhythmic pattern does not register. This in turn leads to uncertainty regarding the entry of the chorus, and thereby all the elements of the song begin to unravel.

Björk also performed ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ at her *Biophilia* concerts in Manchester in July 2011 and Reykjavík in October 2011. Here, she negotiated a new way of tackling this particular problem, somewhat surprisingly by taking more liberties in the third chorus, not fewer. As she arrives at what had in 2008 been the crucial problem spot, she disregards completely the idea of a general pause leading into chorus 3. Instead of patterning this final chorus on the material and texts of the two preceding ones, she inserts a fully improvised section of new material, albeit featuring familiar Björk “licks”—ad-lib melodic passages with improvised text in semi-Icelandic—that were common in her earlier work, particularly with the Sugarcubes.

53 54 55 56 57 58

SOPRANO

of what he wants and where it goes al - ways love al - ways loves you al - ways loves it in - fra - red love and you.. can use...

Medúlla version

53 54 55 56 57

of what it wants and where it goes al - ways love al - ways loves you al - ways loves you with in - fra - red love...

Manchester live version, 2011

53 54 55 56 57 58

of what it wants and where it goes al - ways love al - ways love al - ways love al - ways loves him with in - fra - red love...

Völtic live version, 2008

Music example 6: ‘Mouth’s Cradle,’ comparison of verse 3 (*Medúlla* version; Manchester live version, 2011; *Völtic* live version, 2008).

As Nicola Dibben has observed, Björk’s music is characterized by the “relationship between the rhythmic flexibility of her vocal performances and the metrically rigid grid of beats that exist together in a kind of tension.”³⁰ In ‘Mouth’s Cradle,’ this tension is raised to a new level, due to an unusually free vocal line superimposed on a rigid structural scheme. By finding a new solution to the specific problem of how to recreate the song in performance, Björk demonstrates the extent to which the structural boundaries of her own music remain permeable. For her—as is also demonstrated by the number of authorized remixes and reworkings of her songs—the creative impulse clearly continues beyond the “final product” of a studio album. In this particular case, she recasts a substantial section of ‘Mouth’s Cradle’ in a more flexible structure that lends itself to live performance. In the song’s gently varied gestures of rhythm and pitch, we observe a seasoned performer carefully negotiating the line between fixed and improvised musical structures. As she reaches out to a live audience, Björk seems determined not to let self-imposed restrictions fetter her exuberant and unique creativity.

³⁰ Dibben, *Björk*, 117.