

Dissolution and a “Universe of Solutions”: Deliberate Disruptions, Ever-Changing Repetition, and Vocal Prosody in Björk’s *Vulnicura*

La dissolution et un « univers de solutions » : perturbations délibérées, répétition en constante évolution et prosodie vocale dans *Vulnicura* de Björk

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Björk : une artiste totale

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Article abstract

Björk’s Vulnicura (2015) engages the theme of the dissolution of a long-term relationship. As with much of Björk’s music, most listeners are drawn to her voice and the interplay between lyrics and vocal delivery. This article explores vocal prosody, conceived as the pacing and flow of delivery, in three tracks—“Lionsong,” “Black Lake,” and “Family”—through aspects of discontinuous phrasing, varied metric placement, melismatic embellishment, consonantal articulation, and vocal layering. Thinking about the sonic materiality of the voice broadly—and more specifically, understanding the prosodic aspects of Björk’s delivery on Vulnicura—help us probe the album’s expressivity and grasp the specific material elements that facilitate its emotional content. Though most prosodic elements on this album reflect Björk’s singing style more broadly, some—such as discontinuous phrasing—are intensified to specifically serve this album’s emotive aims.

Dissolution and a “Universe of Solutions”: Deliberate Disruptions, Ever-Changing Repetition, and Vocal Prosody in Björk’s *Vulnicura*

Victoria Malawey

This essay explores vocal delivery in three tracks from Björk’s 2015 album, *Vulnicura* (a Latin term meaning “cure for wounds”¹), which engages the theme of the dissolution of a long-term relationship. In her own words, Björk comments, “Usually I don’t really talk about my private life, [...] [b]ut with this album, there’s no two ways about what it is. I separated during this album, ended a 13-year relationship, and it’s probably the toughest thing I’ve done.”² Critics describe the album as “heart-rending,”³ “achingly paced [...] made from searing, groaning shifts in pitch and sequence cast through jagged, cauterized wounds,”⁴ and “uncompromising, intimate and cathartic, possessed of a belief that music truly can serve as a visceral form of therapy.”⁵ As reviewer Jeff Tamarkin remarks, “How that magnificently unique voice marries her words to a cornucopia of sounds is what concerns us.”⁶

As with much of Björk’s music, most listeners of this album are drawn to her voice and the interplay between lyrics and vocal delivery. Drawing upon my conceptual model for analyzing singing voices, I focus here on vocal prosody, conceived as the pacing and flow of delivery,⁷ not only to illustrate this distinctive aspect of Björk’s artistry, but also to connect vocal delivery to the themes explored in the album. The recordings explored here feature several compelling prosodic aspects, including discontinuous phrasing, varied metric placement, melismatic embellishment, distinctive consonantal articulation, and vocal layering. Though most prosodic elements on this album reflect

1. Baker, 2016.

2. Pareles, 2015b, p. AR1.

3. Hermes, 2015, p. 52.

4. Ware, 2015, p. 44.

5. Cox, 2015, p. 47.

6. Tamarkin, 2015, p. 66.

7. Malawey, 2020, p. 69.

Björk's singing style more broadly, some—such as discontinuous phrasing—deepen to serve this album's specific emotive aims.

This essay focuses on three representative tracks—"Lionsong," "Black Lake," and "Family"—for two reasons. First, these particular tracks jumped out as the most interesting illustrations of Björk's most distinctive prosodic elements. Second, each represents a different stage in the emotional journey of the dissolution. "Lionsong," the second track of the album, presents a protagonist who is unsure of what lies ahead. "Black Lake," *Vulnicura's* midpoint, functions as its musical and emotional lynchpin, taking the listener on a ten-minute journey from the protagonist's unbearable pain to her metamorphosis, where she emerges from a literally and metaphorically suffocating cave of grief. Finally, "Family," the track following "Black Lake," deals with the aftermath of the breakup, showing concern for the daughter's healing as the protagonist mourns the dissolution of the nuclear family unit.

"Lionsong": Discontinuity, Layering, and Metric Placement

"Lionsong" presents a conundrum: the protagonist cannot predict her partner's actions, implying that the relationship may very well come to a close. In terms of vocal prosody, the most prominent feature of "Lionsong" is its heightened intra-phrase discontinuity, which I define elsewhere as a lack of connectivity *within* each phrase,⁸ here brought about by audible breaths and breaks between words and even between the syllables in single words.

Figure 1, which provides a transcription of the recording's introduction, illustrates intra-phrase discontinuity. Audible breaths and glottal stops unedited from the mix enhance such discontinuity, a trait typical of Björk's production style, yet uncommon in most recorded popular music. Nicola Dibben observes Björk's tendency to challenge vocal norms by breathing mid-phrase, among other practices.⁹ In the transcription, rests indicate the discontinuities, as the vocal breaks are substantive enough to show in this fashion.

The lyrics of the introduction comprise three lines: "Maybe he will come out of this/Maybe he won't/Somehow I'm not too bothered either way." In these three phrases, there are nine prominent breaks between words, as shown by rests in Figure 1. Furthermore, a substantial break separates the syllables *within* the very first word, "maybe." This unusual intra-word syllabic discontinuity occurs four additional times throughout the track. Figure 2 shows brief transcriptions, with track timings, for each of these occurrences. In light of the theme of the track and the album as a whole, this musical fragmentation through vocal phrasing techniques reinforces the feelings of hesitation, change, and anxiety in processing the breakup of a long-term relationship.

8. Malawey, 2020, p. 71.

9. Dibben, 2009, p. 102.

FIGURE 1 Transcription of “Lionsong,” 0:00–0:26.

Figure 1 shows a musical score for the song "Lionsong" from 0:00 to 0:26. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It features piano accompaniment and vocal lines. The lyrics are: "May - be he will come out of this [m]-May-be he won't some-how I'm not too both-ered ei-ther way". There are annotations for "audible breath" and "LINK".

FIGURE 2 Multi-syllabic words featuring discontinuity in “Lionsong.”

Figure 2 shows a musical score for the song "Lionsong" highlighting multi-syllabic words with discontinuity. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It features piano accompaniment and vocal lines. The lyrics are: "May - be", "clar - i - ty", "in com - plex - i - ty", "smell dec - la - ra - tions", "clar - i - ty". There are time stamps: 0:00, 2:20, 3:46, 0:46, 4:03.

In addition, slightly out-of-sync overdubbed vocal layers function as another type of textural fragmentation, supporting the intra-phrase discontinuity. Sections that use vocal layering include the introduction (00:00–0:26), second chorus (1:13–1:40), and third chorus through the end of the vocal sections (2:24–5:23).¹⁰ Within these passages, a few marked moments highlight this textural fragmentation. For example, at 1:28 on the word “taming,” one hears the voiced consonant [t] in rapid succession as a result of the slightly out-of-sync layering, further enhanced by the preceding ending of “not.”

10. Track timings correspond with those in the recording available on Spotify at <https://open.spotify.com/track/2hJgYSiWBbvk3zD0nYz2Cn?si=99abb5a38a6e408a> (accessed June 26, 2021).

FIGURE 3 Transcription of “Lionsong,” choruses at 0:33, 1:13, and 2:24.

0:33

May - be he will come out ___ of this ___ lov - ing ___ me ___

May - be he will come out ___ of this I

smell dec - la - ra - tions of sol - i - tude

May - be he will come out ___ of this

1:13

May - be he will come out ___ of this ___ lov - ing ___ me ___

May - be ___ he won't ___

I'm not tam - ing no an - i - mal

May - be he will come out ___ of this

2:24

May - be he will come out ___ of this ___ lov - ing ___ me ___

May - be ___ he won't ___

[n.b.] I'm not tam - ing no an - i - mal

May - be he will come out ___ of this

At 2:37, the onset of the word “I’m” is similarly slightly misaligned among the layered vocal lines. Likewise, several sections feature strings that double the vocal parts, and alignment between the strings and vocal parts is delightfully out-of-sync, as the strings generally adhere more closely to the metric grid while Björk’s vocals do not, as is characteristic of her delivery style. These include the first contrasting section through the second chorus (0:59–1:40) and the third chorus through the end of the vocal sections (2:24–5:23), adding to the vocal layering already present in this passage. In addition, contrast between the layered vocals and the solo sections, as well as between vocal treatments using varying degrees of reverb and other signal processes, heightens the sense of discontinuity on the track.¹¹

Well known for singing repeated words and phrases with subtle variations in rhythm, metric placement, and pitch, Björk’s distinctive metric placement, especially of breaths and rests, is a key component of her prosodic style. The chorus sections of “Lionsong” particularly illustrate her metric treatment of similar phrases.

Figure 3 offers transcriptions of three chorus sections. I have aligned the bar lines to compare the four-bar phrases, as each uses a similar melodic structure. The metric treatment of “maybe” varies especially; sometimes it is placed on the downbeat and other times on the second beat. Also, the treatment of the final words, “of this,” features differences in continuity, as shown in the brackets above the staff, where intra-phrase continuity is indicated with solid brackets and discontinuity with dashed brackets. These prosodic features create a delightfully unpredictable musical soundscape, which is characteristic of Björk’s established musical style,¹² and also reinforces the extramusical themes of the track at hand, suggesting the unpredictability of an unstable partner and the unknown, unsettling outcome of a failing relationship.

“Black Lake”: Form, Persona, Metric Placement, Discontinuity, Melismatic Embellishment, and Consonantal Articulation

Jon Pareles describes “Black Lake” as “the bleakest, bravest song” on the album.¹³ Will Hermes characterizes it as “the set’s most devastating number, unfurling in slow-mo, with knife-twist lyrics [...] and droning gaps that read like choked emotions.”¹⁴ Jérôme Melançon and Alexander Carpenter describe “Black Lake” as the album’s “centerpiece” marked by “its directness of expression.”¹⁵ The music video for “Black Lake,” shot in Iceland, was commissioned for and shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 2015 as part of a 20-year retrospective curated by Klaus Biesenbach. In Björk’s words:

11. I thank Martin Guerpín for suggesting these related types of discontinuity to me.

12. For example, Dibben observes unpredictability in the pacing and timing of vocal entries in Björk’s “Big Time Sensuality” (2009, p. 75).

13. Pareles, 2015b, p. AR1.

14. Hermes, 2015, p. 52.

15. Melançon and Carpenter, 2017, p. 214.

16. Guzmán, 2015, p. 61. Chinese-American writer and film director Andrew Huang directed the video for “Black Lake,” as well as other music videos by Björk. Dutch fashion designer Iris van Herpen has designed many of Björk’s elaborate dresses, including the one featured in this particular music video.

17. Baker, 2016.

18. Brozzoni, 2017, p. 116.

19. Ferrett, 2020, pp. 122–23.

20. Björk describes “the freezes” as “these moments between the verses. They’re longer than the verses, actually. It’s just that one emotion when you’re stuck. It is hard, but it’s also the only way to escape the pain, just going back and having another go, trying to make another verse” (Magnússon, 2015).

21. Melançon and Carpenter, 2017, pp. 216–17.

22. Ferrett, 2020, p. 128.

23. Ferrett, 2020, p. 129.

Andrew Huang came to Iceland, and we were looking for this scene, trying to find cliffs shaped like a wound so I could be inside the wound. Iris van Herpen designed this dress that is metallic and kind of like lava. The story is told in the landscape. And then we try for some healing and liberation.¹⁶

Critic Andrea Baker describes the video as “a relationship post-mortem and a dark, visceral love letter to her homeland.”¹⁷ Similarly, Vera Brozzoni describes “Black Lake” as “a sorrowful eulogy that illustrates how her confidence as a lover has crumbled and how she needs to find inner strength to face the death of eroticism in her life.”¹⁸

In the video, Björk first appears in a distressed and collapsed state, rocking back and forth on her knees in a cave. D Ferrett writes, “[T]he geological deep time of dark underground caves are analogous with a maternal earth and Björk shifts between a maternal and child-like body; that which gives birth, dies and is also reborn.”¹⁹ In the first verse, Björk begins to sing, but stays on her knees, trapped in the cave, which represents a container for her grief and suffering. In each verse after the first, she begins walking, more and more freely as the video progresses. In verse 6 (around 6:36), she emerges from the cave as the music speeds up from 68 bpm to 75 bpm. In the final verse (at around 7:59), she appears in a grassy landscape in a new costume, befitting the metamorphosis described in the lyrics: “I am a glowing shiny rocket/Returning home/As I enter the atmosphere/I burn off layer by layer.”

The form of “Black Lake” is loosely modified strophic, alternating solo vocal verses with long, static, sustained chords in the strings that function as instrumental interludes, which Björk calls “freezes.”²⁰ Melançon and Carpenter describe the freezes as “musical gestures—sounding gestures—of non-movement” and “moments of sustained sound, harmony bereft of melody, accompaniment to a silence that carries its own meaning.”²¹ Ferrett similarly considers the freezes as “the means by which musical space is created, providing enough space to bridge between each expressive vocal verse.”²² Figure 4 presents an overview of the song’s form. Not only does this track’s form deviate from pop norms, as Ferrett points out,²³ but it also exceeds normative practices in the length of individual sections and the length of the track as a whole, at over ten minutes in duration.

FIGURE 4 Form diagram for “Black Lake.”

Time	Section
0:00	Intro (strings)
0:28	Verse 1
1:18	“Freeze” (strings)
1:46	Verse 2
2:14	“Freeze” (strings)
2:32	Verse 3
3:00	“Freeze” (strings)
3:32	Verse 4
4:29	“Freeze” (beats & strings)
5:07	Verse 5
5:35	“Freeze” (strings)
5:46	Bridge
6:07	“Freeze” (strings)
6:36	Verse 6
7:22	“Freeze” (strings)
7:59	Verse 7
8:43	“Freeze” (strings)
9:07	Outro (strings)

The string arrangements on this album, which Björk composed,²⁴ play a significant role, especially on this track. The strings take on almost human vocal qualities, expanding Björk’s prosodic and emotional palettes. Relating the album’s “emotional immediacy” to its instrumentation, Pareles writes, “The physicality of Björk’s voice and the strings are even more striking against the impersonal electronic sounds, all the better to reveal the interior landscape of heartbreak and healing.”²⁵ On “Black Lake,” the alternating string and vocal sections create two distinct musical personas, both emotionally charged. Melançon and Carpenter similarly identify a dialectic between Björk’s vocal part and the accompaniment.²⁶ I interpret Björk’s solo singing voice as representing the grieving protagonist working through layers of pain, and the string parts as representing things outside of the protagonist, including the family (now broken), the protagonist’s world (now turned upside down), or even, simply, the relationship (now dissolved). Regardless of whether this interpretation is what Björk intended or not, both parts seem to “cry” through their respective prosodic deliveries. Furthermore, as the track unfolds, the roles of the voice and the accompaniment shift. Melançon and Carpenter describe this process:

24. Coscarelli, 2015, p. C2.

25. Pareles, 2015a, p. C5.

26. Melançon and Carpenter, 2017, p. 215.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Mackay, 2017, p. 55. Charity Marsh and Melissa West make a similar observation aligning strings with nature and beats with technology on *Homogenic* (2003, p. 194).

29. Malawey, 2020, pp. 127–30.

30. Dibben describes Björk's singing as distinctively emotive, as opposed to virtuosic (2009, p. 106). Here, I connect her emotive delivery, and the techniques of repetition with difference, as part of her type of virtuosity, described elsewhere as "motility," a critical part of a singer's prosody, which may manifest in a number of different ways (Malawey, 2020, p. 79).

Björk's voice gradually loses its privileged position as a melodic line as the song progresses, its melodic primacy challenged by the blossoming counterpoint in the strings—the vocal part is never particularly lyrical, often echoing the halting, sing-song dyads of the string accompaniment—and the gradual electronic saturation of the song's soundscape.²⁷

The fusing of the strings and beats in several non-vocal sections (for example, in the 4:29–5:07 "freeze" section) recalls what Emily Mackay describes as a reunification of "nature and technology [...] by demonstrating the continuity between the man-made and the organic" in Björk's 1997 album *Homogenic*.²⁸ Setting aside the complexity of what constitutes a technology versus what is natural,²⁹ a contrast between the warmth of the strings (as well as the vocal part when it is present) and the electronic beats is a prominent feature of this expressive track.

Focusing here on vocal delivery as it shapes the emotive qualities of the grieving protagonist, we find that while the melodic structure of each verse is similar, no two verses are identical in terms of metric placement. Hallmarks of Björk's singing style include continuous embellishment and change of the melodic structure through metric placement, emphasis, and position of breaths, usually with emotive consequences.³⁰ For example, consider the first three verses, transcribed in Figure 5, Figure 6, and Figure 7 respectively.

FIGURE 5 Transcription of "Black Lake," verse 1.

0:28

Our love [w]as my womb But our bond has bro - ken

[m] My shield is gone [m] My pro - tect - ion is ta - ken

0:56

I am one wound [m] My pul - sat - ing bo - dy

Suf - fer - ing be - ing

The first eight bars of verse 1, shown in Figure 5, reveal the basic melodic structure of all the verses: it begins with an anacrusis, embellishing the primary pitch F sharp₄, and by measure 4 it descends to C sharp₄ to complete the first phrase. Melismatic delivery punctuates syllables at the beginning and end of the phrase. Measures 5–8 comprise the second phrase, which also begins with an anacrusis, embellishing D sharp₄ before descending to A sharp₃ by its conclusion. Measures 9–15 extend the first verse for another two phrases, reiterating the same basic structure, however with slightly different metric placements.

FIGURE 6 Transcription of “Black Lake,” verse 2.

Verse 2, shown in Figure 6, is likewise built on a structure similar to the first eight bars of verse 1, but with some interesting differences. Its anacrusis further embellishes the melody with an early, longer consonantal articulation holding the consonant [m] before the release of “my” at 1:46. Similarly, an [oo] sound precedes the consonant [w] of “with” in the third measure of verse 2. Verse 3, transcribed in Figure 7, features even greater intra-phrase and intra-word discontinuity, in this case functioning also as clever word painting with the lyrics, “my soul torn apart,” placing breaks between “soul” and “torn,” “torn” and the first syllable of “apart,” and both syllables of “apart,” bringing the message home.

FIGURE 7 Transcription of “Black Lake,” verse 3.

31. Hermes, 2015, p. 52.

32. I am grateful to Martin Guerpin for bringing these ideas to my attention.

Throughout the first three verses, consonantal articulation, specifically the drawing out of the continuant consonant [m] provides a consistency of sonance on most occurrences of the word “my.” Björk also rolls the [r]s—which Hermes describes as “a scarred triumph”³¹—in her delivery of many words, and it becomes an integral part of her vocal prosody in this recording. The rolled [r]s may also suggest archaism, especially when coupled with melismatic delivery, recalling ancient chant.³² Consonantal articulation and melismas, combined with phrasing discontinuity, create a drawn-out, deliberate manner of delivery, demanding listeners’ focus and patience. The simplicity of the accompaniment and the starkness of the vocal delivery—here we do not have the lush vocal layering so common in many of her other recordings—allow the heartfelt words, signifying intense emotion associated with the breakup, to surface in their own time, at their own pace, never forced or rushed. The deliberate pacing mimics the grieving process. Grief and healing cannot be rushed. One must sit with and live through the pain to get to the other side of it.

The subsequent verses feature a basic melodic structure similar to the previous ones, however varied through differing metric placements and interesting intra-phrase and intra-word discontinuities. For example, the first eight bars of verse 4, transcribed in Figure 8, feature the greatest number of intra-word discontinuities, including a break between the last two syllables of “limitless” at 3:35, another between the first two syllables of “emotions” at 3:40, and no fewer than five breaks within the two-word succession of “apocalyptic obsessions” at 3:50, including an intra-syllable break in the second syllable of “obsessions.” These breaks appear as rests in the transcription in Figure 8. This verse also features several distinctive melismas on the words, “emotions” and “obsessions,” as shown in the transcription, as well as “broken” and “icon” later in the verse.

FIGURE 8 Transcription of “Black Lake,” verse 4, mm. 1–8.

3:32

You fear my lim - it - less e - mo - tions

I am bored of your a - po - ca - lyp - tic ob - ses - sions

The final word of verse 6—“horrors” (at 7:17)—epitomizes the most salient prosodic aspects at play in this recording, including discontinuity, melismatic delivery, and consonantal articulation. Figure 9 shows a transcription of this passage. First, Björk’s delivery of “horrors” features intra-syllabic discontinuity—a break within the first syllable, as if her will is so worn down that she can’t even wait for the break between syllables to take a breath. Second, the first syllable also features a melisma, mimicking the melodic structure of the final words of all the verses. And third, Björk emphasizes the onset of the second syllable with a rolled [r]. The combination of these techniques, as we see them play out at the ends of phrases in this verse and others may suggest a type of what Sarah Boak calls “lexical breakdown,” a vocal strategy in which “points at the end of words and phrases where language tails into sound, and language is broken turning into sound and vocalization.”³³ Finally, the delivery of this single, final word of the sixth verse seems to capture the sentiment conveyed by the final phrase, that is, not being able to reckon with “eternal pain and horrors” and indeed the sentiment of the entire song.

33. Boak, 2019, p. 198.

FIGURE 9 Transcription of “Black Lake,” 7:17–7:22.



“Family”: Consonantal Articulation, Contrast, Discontinuity, and Metric Placement

“Family” is an eight-minute track articulating grief for the now dissolved relationship, as it impacts the broken family. Keren Omry writes:

*“Family” marks a shifting point in the album with its strident, pulsating, but irregular rhythm, accompanied by the growing tension of string instruments and prolonged unwavering notes, as well as a much more complex use of electronic sound.*³⁴

34. Omry, 2016, p. 116.

The song comprises an expansive, loose AABA form, with the addition of a closing two-minute extended instrumental section, as summarized in Figure 10. The track opens with slow-moving beats, articulating a hypermetric downbeat approximately every 8½ seconds, and synthesized sounds, creating a languorous soundscape over which Björk’s solo voice enters 24 seconds into the recording. Melodically, B flat emerges as a pitch center, and the vocal melody draws upon the B flat Aeolian pitch collection. The first three

minutes of the recording, comprising the first two A sections, illustrate three different kinds of vocally driven composition technique, which impact the vocal prosody on this track:

- 1) Solo lead vocal, front and center in the mix, as in 0:24–0:45 and 1:20–1:50;
- 2) Lead vocal (centered in the mix) with another prominent solo vocal layer (panned right), alternating lines, as in 0:45–1:20 and 1:50–2:02;
- 3) Multiple, non-alternating, competing vocal layers, creating a texture somewhere between homorhythmic alignment and heterophony, as in 2:13–2:59.

FIGURE 10 Form diagram for “Family.”

Time	Section
0:00	(Sound emerges)
0:05	Intro
0:23	A
2:13	A'
3:06	B
3:52	Interlude
4:00	A''
5:25	(Vocalizing)
6:05	(Extended instrumental/synth section)

In addition to these distinctive layering strategies, other prominent features related to vocal prosody emerge, such as the drawn-out articulation of [s] at the end of the words “is,” “place,” and “respects,” as shown in the transcription in Figure 11, as well as “us” at 0:50–0:54 (not shown in the transcription), and “knees” and “flowers” at 1:40–1:52 in the following section. Attention to the articulation of [s] also occurs at around 2:38, in which the quasi-heterophonic layered vocal texture slightly displaces the onset of each [s] among the various vocal layers at the end of the word “miraculous.” The consonant [s] again plays an important role in the last three lyrical lines of the song at 5:00–5:24 as well, creating alliterative cohesion with the words “solutions” (stated three times), “universe,” and “place.”

FIGURE 11 Transcription of “Family,” 0:24–0:38.



A contrasting section emerges at 3:06, where acoustic strings play disjunct lines, over which Björk’s solo lead vocal sings, “How will I sing us out of this sorrow.” The texture is joined by beats at around 3:23, punctuating a hypermetric downbeat of sorts every $8\frac{1}{2}$ seconds, recalling the slow-moving hypermeter from the earlier sections, and morphing into a faster moving articulation every 2 seconds or so at 3:40–3:46. The section concludes with a dissonant instrumental interlude at 3:52, where the disjunct texture continues with an additional string layer using bowed tremolo.

The bowed tremolo layer provides continuity into the A” section at 4:00 (and continues through 5:02). This section features Björk’s solo lead vocal and additional accompaniment layers of synthesized voices on neutral syllables, creating a full soundscape, perhaps as word painting, as she sings, “There is a swarm of sound,” which becomes an aural blanket of healing from grief. Here the melody continues to emphasize B flat, however, often harmonized with G flat in the bass, creating a warmer, Lydian soundscape in comparison to the starker B flat Aeolian of the opening A section. As the bowed tremolo string layers recede, around 5:02, additional sustained, detuned synthesized sounds emerge and fill in musical texture, setting up an accompaniment for the final three lines of the song: “This universe of solutions/This place of solutions/This location of solutions.” The track unfolds for another $2\frac{1}{2}$ minutes, beginning at 5:25 with an extended vocalized section on neutral syllables. The voices recede at 6:05, giving way to an extended instrumental, synthesized section before the track ends at 8:02.

Like the other tracks on the album, the vocal phrasing on “Family” features intra-phrase discontinuity, reinforcing musically the fracturing of the family described in the lyrics. The discontinuity reaches its peak at the end of the B section with the line, “Out of this danger,” at 3:35, where there is a deliberate break between every word, as shown in the transcription in Figure 12, and intensified with the addition of chorus-like backing vocals displaced on the last two words of the phrase. “Family” also offers two instances of intra-word discontinuity: on “triangle,” in the lead vocal line at 2:40–2:45, shown in Figure 13 (where displaced backing vocals similarly intensify), and on “solutions,” at 5:21–5:24 (shown in the transcription in the last bar of Figure 16).

FIGURE 12 Transcription of “Family,” lead vocal, 3:35–3:45.

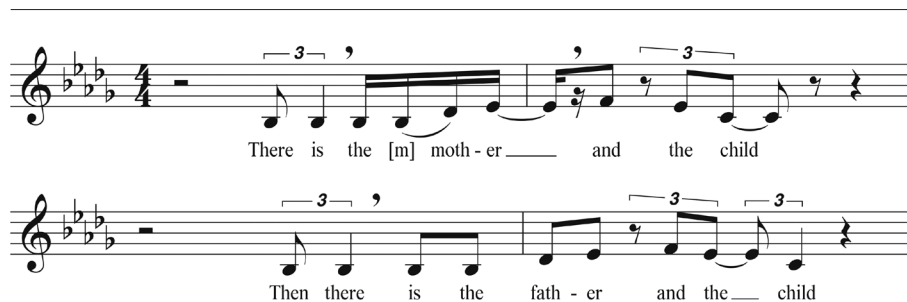


FIGURE 13 Transcription of “Family,” lead vocal, 2:40–2:45.



Although this song does not feature recurring chorus sections, it does contain restated lyrics, which provides insight into Björk’s style of ever-changing repetition, a key element to her artistic prosody. Sheila Whiteley describes a related aspect in Björk’s earlier work as “a certain indulgence in her vocal delivery which is often jagged and rhythmically erratic, and characterized by a concentration on the syllabic quality of words.”³⁵ In “Family” at 0:54–1:07, two similar lines unfold with the lyrics, “There is the mother and the child/ Then there is the father and the child.” A transcription of this passage, shown in Figure 14, reveals interesting changes in the metric placement of similar words. For example, “mother” begins on the division of the last beat of a bar, whereas its counterpart, “father,” begins on the downbeat, displaced behind “mother” by half of a beat, which shifts the rest of the phrase, drawing it out a little longer than in its first iteration.

FIGURE 14 Transcription of “Family,” vocal part panned right, 0:54–1:07.

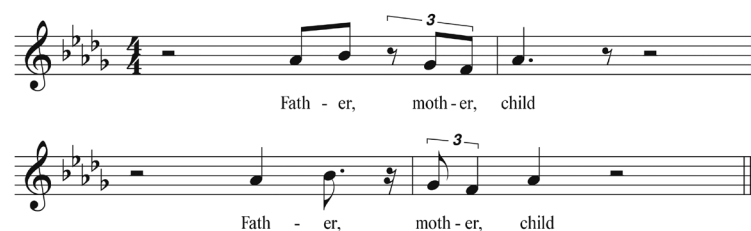


The second prominent example of this technique occurs at 2:45–2:59, which iterates and restates the lyrics, “Father, mother, child.” Figure 15 provides a transcription of the lead vocal part in this passage. As in the earlier passage,

35. Whiteley, 2005, p. 106.

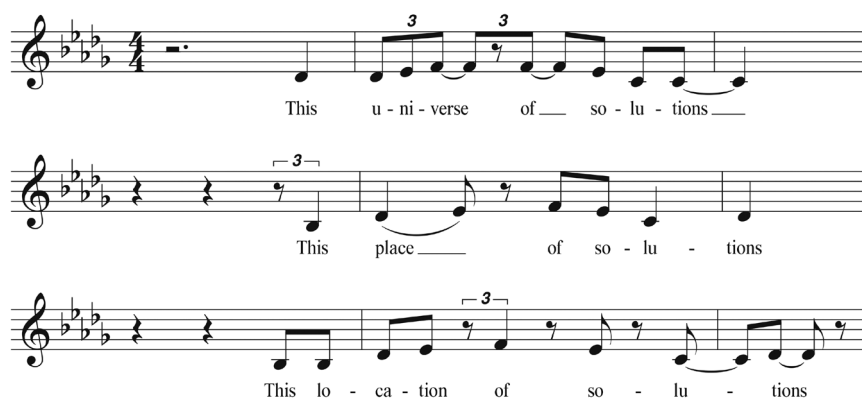
the second statement of the lyrics features a similar shift in metric placement: whereas the first statement of “mother” occurs before the downbeat, in the second instance it is delayed until the downbeat, again with the effect of drawing out the line with metric repercussions of the following word’s placement. Moreover, this passage combines metric placement techniques with intra-phrase discontinuity. Both iterations feature a distinct break between “father” and “mother,” illustrating the breakup of the parents’ partnership. In contrast, the words “mother” and “child” are connected, with no break between them, perhaps suggesting that the maternal bond will remain intact.

FIGURE 15 Transcription of “Family,” lead vocal, 2:45–2:59.



The last three intelligible lines of the song, occurring at 5:00–5:24, also illustrate repetition with difference. The transcription of this passage, provided in Figure 16, shows varying metric placement of the lyrics, “of solutions,” in each of its three iterations. The first places the last syllable prior to the downbeat, the second iteration places it directly on the downbeat, and the third iteration places it after the downbeat. Furthermore, the pitch structure changes

FIGURE 16 Transcription of “Family,” lead vocal, 5:00–5:24.



slightly. Hearing this passage with G flat now as its pitch center, the first iteration lingers on scale-degree $\hat{4}$ whereas the second and third statements resolve to scale-degree $\hat{5}$, however tentatively. Lastly, the final line features extreme fragmentation, with marked breaks before and after the first syllable of “solutions,” drawing upon both intra-phrase and intra-word discontinuity.

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Thinking about the sonic materiality of the voice broadly—and more specifically, understanding the prosodic aspects of Björk’s delivery on *Vulnicura*—help us probe the album’s expressivity and specify the material elements that facilitate its emotional content. The primary prosodic features at play on this album include discontinuity in phrasing, consonantal articulation, dynamic metric placement, melismatic embellishment, and vocal layering. In “Lionsong,” prosodic elements emphasize phrasing discontinuity, artful vocal layering, and varied metric placement. The most salient aspects of “Black Lake” relating to its emotive content include the prosodic elements of shifting metric placement, discontinuity, melismatic delivery, and emphasized consonantal articulation; beyond these, the emotive content includes form and persona. “Family” illustrates the prosodic and emotive importance of consonantal articulation, formal contrast, phrasing discontinuity, and changing metric placement.

Furthermore, while most of the prosodic elements I’ve identified on this album reflect Björk’s singing style across her prolific career, some are intensified features that serve this album’s more specific emotive aims. For example, both marked consonantal articulation and shifting metric placement of similar phrases function as hallmarks of Björk’s singing style, not only on this album, but also throughout much of her recorded music. On the other hand, the extensive intra-phrase and sometimes also intra-word or even intra-syllabic discontinuity on this album is extreme even compared to her other work, and likely relates to the album’s extramusical themes. Not only does the discontinuity temporally stretch out her vocal delivery, perhaps reflecting the slow-moving process of grief, but it may also musically represent the fragmentation of the family. In sum, prosody, supported by lyrical content and instrumentation, plays a significant role in articulating emotion in *Vulnicura*, and vocal delivery proves once again to be a primary conduit of expressivity.

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