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Training as Vocal Archaeology?

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Ed. Note: The following entry is part of a series of posts marking the 1-year anniversary of the Special Issue 'What is New in Voice Training?'

Over the last decade, I have been developing the project *Listening Back: Towards a Vocal Archaeology of Greek Theatre*. The project seeks to uncover the materiality of the voice in 5th century BCE theatre and to design a methodology for conducting vocal archaeology.¹ From oratory to musical competitions and from symposia to religious ceremony, voice was practised, conceptualised and trained in plural ways in 5th century BCE Athens. Foundational ideas around selfhood and citizenship that emerged in classical antiquity and still resonate today centre on voice: the inner voice of conscience, the voice of the people, God's voice, the voice of the Law. Theatre played out, reflected and debated these ideas through a wide range of vocal performances. Yet, in discussions of Greek classical theatre, voice is routinely considered irretrievably lost and most research focuses on the surviving literature or visual depictions instead.²

Listening Back: Towards an Archaeology of Greek Theatre tackles the challenge of upturning such established attitudes and asks:

- Which social, political, philosophical and aesthetic trainings shaped the production and reception of theatre voice in the 5th century BCE?
- How can the sound qualities of the performed voice be retraced through pioneering methodologies?
- Can we listen back to such on-stage voices not only through the philological, visual and musical evidence but also through the work of theatre practitioners engaged in reconstructing the classical voice?
- How can this 'listening-back' lead to new understandings and performances of the links between voice, self and collectivity?
- How can we examine, more broadly, the embodied sound of voices past?
- Which approaches can be pioneered to overturn the widely-circulated assumption that such voices have been irrevocably lost?

In response to this set of questions, the project proposes a conceptual shift and a new methodology. Rather than considering vocal practice from the past as irretrievable, this research advances an understanding of *voice as an in-between* not exclusively defined by either production (speaking/singing) or reception (listening). In this sense, voice is jointly constructed by aesthetic production and ideological environment, and voice training is a process that materializes both at a bodily level. To deploy an example perhaps more immediately graspable: the emergence of the operatic voice was the outcome of the increase in size of accompanying orchestras and the construction of larger auditoria (vocal volume), neoclassical aesthetics (*appoggio* breathing and the immobile torso of the 'noble posture'), the use of colour in 17th- and 18th-century painting and first experiments in photography

(*chiaroscuro* vocal onset), the scientific examination of vocal physiology (Garcia created both the [laryngoscope](#) and techniques for operatic training) and the genesis of the Romantic individual (notion of the operatic feat through melismas, pitch and duration). Even if operatic vocal performance was not an unbroken tradition, researching the music and texts it performed, the spaces in which it sounded and the aesthetics or ideas privileged at the time, alongside testing ways of voicing the repertoire within these spaces, could generate strong indications, if not certainties, about how the operatic voice functioned.

To return to 5th century BCE, this project radically departs from previous studies in suggesting that, although Greek vocal performance is not an uninterrupted tradition, if voice is examined as an in-between, then its material practice must not be treated as irreversibly vanished. Gathering information about how voice was perceived and aesthetically appreciated, the texts which it communicated and the spaces within which it reverberated can generate information about specific ways and techniques of voicing. Reversely, experimenting with vocal practice within the sites of its original production and using texts in the original, while receiving consultation from experts in 5th century antiquity, can unearth novel findings about embodied vocality in Greek theatre from the past.

In this sense, voice pedagogy can act as a practice-research methodology of primary importance for understanding the bodily processes through which aesthetic modes of voicing instantiate, amplify or contest ideological discourses on vocality. To this day, my PaR has taken the form of:

- (1) performance ethnography: this included training with (a) theatre and music practitioners that reconstruct and perform Greek texts, including Polish company [Gardzienice](#) (2009, 2011) and actor-musician [Anna-Helena McLean](#) (2010) (see Thomaidis [2014](#)); and (b) directors-researchers that have developed unique methodologies of actor training also concerned with the sounding body and/or the aural qualities of surviving texts ([ATTIS Theatre/Theodoros Terzopoulos](#), 2017; National Theatre of Greece Lab/[Mikhail Marmarinos](#), 2017, 2019);
- (2) upon conducting transdisciplinary readings (from poetics, politics, anthropology, psychology, drama, archaeology, sound studies, music, physiology, architecture, rhetoric, philosophy) and analysis of non-textual evidence (music fragments, visual archive), teaching ancient Greek text and existing musical fragments in the original (BA Vocal and Choral Studies, University of Winchester, UK, 2012-2013; MA Physical Theatre, Estonian Academy of Music and Drama, Estonia, 2017; BA Drama, University of Exeter, UK, 2016-2020);
- (3) acting as voice consultant and sound dramaturg for the development of professional Greek theatre productions (*Trackers* by Sophocles, Epidaurus, 2020/21; *Ajax* by Sophocles, Athens Festival 2021);
- (4) leading embodied experimentation with professional actors in an archaeological theatre site based on vocal techniques I developed (Ancient Theatre of Dodoni/[Therino Manteio](#) Workshop, 2018 & 2019). This stage was particularly concerned with a concept I created around *voice as cognitive space*: voice encapsulates ideological and aesthetic spaces, materially resounds in given architectures, and brings forth imagined spatialities/social and political spaces-yet-to-be. In this light, I reworked findings from previous stages of this artistic research to investigate vocal directionality, physio-vocal proxemics, emergent vocal relationalities, and the co-devising of voice quality by bodies, props and sites.



Voice as cognitive space explorations, Therino Manteio Workshop, 2018 & 2019, photos by (and courtesy of) Aristoula Beti and Katerina Kourou.

This summer I enter a new phase of the project (further fieldwork with artists working with reconstruction and re-enactment; transdisciplinary collaborations with archaeologists, philologists, musicians and mask-makers; systematization, documentation and dissemination of the training). The hope is to dismantle the belief that voices from the distant past remain essentially unknowable, to challenge the presentist views of predominant voice trainings, and to reclaim vocal practice as central to an epistemic move beyond a (conceptual, archival, logocentric) voice historiography and towards an (embodied, material, sonorous) vocal archaeology.

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Bio

Konstantinos Thomaidis is Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre & Performance at the University of Exeter. His books include *Voice Studies: Critical Approaches to Process, Performance and Experience* (Routledge 2015, with Ben Macpherson), *Theatre & Voice* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017) and *Time and Performer Training* (Routledge 2019, with Mark Evans and Libby Worth). He co-founded the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies*, the Routledge Voice Studies book series, and the Sound, Voice & Music Working Group at TaPRA. He is Artistic Director of Adrift Performance Makers.

¹ I first proposed the term 'vocal archaeology' in Thomaidis 2015: 215 and outlined it as a methodology in Thomaidis 2018a and 2018b.

² Localized studies in classics and musicology have illuminated aspects of vocal phenomena in antiquity but without a sustained focus on vocal practice or, more specifically, the aural aspects of theatre performance. Comotti (1991), West (1992), Pöhlmann (2001) and D'Angour (2017), among others, have provided close insights into the modes, melodies, rhythms and instruments used in Greek music from the period. Hall (2002) has gleaned information from classical and Hellenistic literature about singing in antiquity, and Vovolis (2009) has drawn on vase iconography to construct masks similar to those worn by performers at the time. Within studies about performance in antiquity, the general problem of lacking immediate access to theatre voices from pre-technological eras has led to

the exclusion of vocal production from analyses of Greek theatre (Wiles 2001), to emphasizing subsequent periods and other genres (Butler 2015) or to redirecting attention towards contemporary speaking and voicing of this repertoire (Ley 2015). In many ways, Greek theatre vocal practice in 5th century BCE is a problem yet to be explored.