

This is the Green Open Access draft of a paper delivered as part of the annual Theatre & Performance Research Association (TaPRA) conference in September 2021 (Sound, Voice & Music Working Group).¹

Paper Title: Listening Back: Training as Vocal Archaeology

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1. AN EMPTY DISPLAY CASE

For the past 5 years, my research has been haunted by a dream.

The dream of an empty display case.

An empty display case in an archaeological museum.

Many of us in this (digital) room will have noticed the exponential increase in exhibitions of sound and voice in the last decade.

The Wellcome Trust, for example, hosted its ‘This is a Voice’ exhibition in 2016:² a curated congeries of songs, every-day, aesthetic and extra-normal vocalizations – put on acoustic display as video projections, music tracks on wall-mounted speakers, artists’ compositions on vinyl, TV screens or sound booths. This was a series of vocal vignettes charting a fragmentary history of 20th and 21st centuries vocal practice.

There is even a developing Museum of Portable Sound, whose catalogue includes a series of voice recording and performance devices – collectively unearthing, preserving and offering to the interested visitor voices passed *and* their swiftly-changing media of capture.³

But what if one wanted to dig into pre-recording-technology voices?

With no tangible voice artifacts waiting in the dirt for the archeologist’s trowel and brush -

With no surrounding ripples of chronicity preserved in observable geographical strata -

With no existing courses and systematized trainings in archeological listening -

How do we go about listening back to voices of markedly distant temporalities?

¹ See https://tapra2021.sched.com/speaker/konstantinos_thomaidis.22v5zc0v

² See: <https://wellcomecollection.org/exhibitions/W31tHikAACgAP5gi>

³ See: <https://www.facebook.com/MuseumOfPortableSound/>

What do we bring to the archeological museum of pre-modern vocality?

How do we study and exhibit 'it'?

How do fill its empty acoustic display case?

2. WHICH VOICE / WHEN VOICE?

This paper charts a possible response, however incomplete, from the localized perspective of a project which I have been – tentatively and painstakingly - developing for the past 5 years; which has only formally begun in the last couple of years; and which, as I am coming to realize, will have to extend well beyond its originally conceived timeframe.

This project is 'Listening Back: Towards a Vocal Archaeology of Greek Theatre', a research endeavour that seeks to uncover the materiality of the voice in 5th century BCE theatre.⁴

In response to our Working Group's thematic concern with methodology, I will talk from the unfolding, messy and unruly place of a project currently-in-the-making in the hope that its methodological underpinnings might be transferrable – or might provoke the vocal imaginary enough to establish dialogues, partnerships and, why not, collaborations.

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 (see the Socratic daemon), 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, 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 (e.g. Wiles 2001), to emphasizing subsequent periods and other genres (e.g. Butler 2015 – Roman antiquity) or to redirecting attention towards contemporary speaking and voicing of this repertoire (e.g. Ley 2015).

⁴ See also Thomaidis 2021: <http://theatredanceperformancetraining.org/2021/04/training-as-vocal-archaeology/>

In many ways, in discussions of Greek classical theatre, voice is routinely considered irretrievably lost and most research focuses on the surviving literatures or visual depictions instead.

It is precisely in this realm of *perceived irretrievability* that 'Listening Back: Towards an Archaeology of Greek Theatre' is situated.

It proposes to tackle the challenge of upturning such established attitudes, investigate the production and reception of voice in 5th century BCE Greek theatre as a material practice, and ask:

- 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?
- How 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 we examine, more broadly, the embodied sound of voices past?

3. 'A' (SPATIO-TEMPORAL) FIELD

Before outlining the methodological details of this particular project, I propose a brief pause, with an invitation to ponder, together-apart:

What is vocal archaeology?

What could this area be?

And which methodologies and specific interests could it entail?

The example of post-technological recording voice-centred exhibitions with which I opened this paper –with its distinctly modernist obsession with immortalization of individual vocal sound—immediately circumscribes an area and era; this is an archaeology of *technological media* designed for recording voice and of the *voices* that coincide with the availability of such recording, an era of phonographic archaeology (see, for example, Elliott 2018) within the wider **phono-cene**, the **phonographo-cene**.

There is an example from a recent BBC documentary that points to the opposite direction of the historical horizon available to vocal archaeology: here, voice pedagogue Patsy Rodenburg uses the bone structure of Neanderthal skeletons as well as replicas of reconstructed vocal folds, and trials their physiological effects on vocal resonance with one of her trainees in order to re-imagine an approximate Neanderthal vocality.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=geT6AebDQm4>

Despite its viral ‘negative’ publicity online (and my personal epistemic disagreements with the approach taken here), it might be worth simply treating this as an example of an attempt at a **vocal paleoarchaeology**, an excursion into **paleo-phonics**.

Somewhere across **the continuum from proximate phonographic archaeology to ‘deep time’ vocal paleoarchaeology**, lie examples that either engage vocal archaeology or could be treated as doing so (though I must admit I am the one coining and applying the term ‘vocal archaeology’ to these endeavours and this wasn’t always the primary intention of the researchers conducting that work).⁵

Most obvious are examples from historical musicology, for example Armand D’Angour’s project of reconstructing instruments and performing lyrics/songs from mostly Hellenistic antiquity. As a brief example: <https://youtu.be/4hOK7bU0S1Y?t=580>

Less circulated perhaps are studies in English literature, such as Judith Pascoe’s book on 18th-century stage star Sarah Siddons and Pascoe’s attempt to re-imagine the tragedienne’s voice through references to its sound found in diaries, letters and reviews from that period (Pascoe 2011).

These few and disparate examples – although not systematically talking to each other or particularly cohesive in terms of disciplinary tools– are useful in arguing that there are enough precedents that we can bring together in order to claim that vocal archaeology now exists as field, and that it is high time we treated it with fuller attention and rigour.

4. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY: INCLINING THE TRANSDISCIPLINARY ARCHIVE TOWARDS VOICE and VOCAL PRAXIS (IN-BETWEEN-NESS)

⁵ As a first attempt at working through the term, see Thomaidis 2015 (which is primarily concerned with voice studies as field and methodologies for voice-centred research at large).

To address the perceived irretrievability of 5th c. BCE voices, I have embarked on a multimodal, international series of fieldworks, research trips and workshops.

To this date:

I have

- conducted extended fieldwork and training with Gardzienice (and also undertook two workshops with actress/voice coach Anna-Helena MacLean who participated in the company's reconstruction of ancient Greek music);⁶
- have liaised with Thanos Vovolis (who has reconstructed and written extensively about masks in antiquity) and observed workshops with Martha Foka, one of the most prominent mask-makers currently working in Athens;⁷
- acted as the philologist/assistant to Mikhail Marmarinos' production of Sophocles' *Ichneutai*, a play about the invention of music and the construction of the lyre – as part of my role I created sound maps of all the voice- and music-related words in the text, compiled research on Greek music, and researched current reconstruction of the lyre on the basis of the description offered in the Sophoclean text (2020-2021);⁸
- in a similar capacity I acted as the voice coach and sound researcher for Simos Kakalás' production of *Ajax* (2020-2021);⁹
- I trained and performed with the Greek Drama Laboratory of the National Theatre in the Ancient Theatre of Delphi (2017, 2019);¹⁰
- I participated in a workshop led by Anatoly Vasiliev on *Ion*, a Platonic treatise on sung performance of epics in classical Greece;¹¹
- I have informally discussed acoustics in ancient theatre sites with archaeologists and musicians & modes of vocal delivery in these sites with several actors and directors;
- and I led two 2-week voice workshops in the Ancient Theatre of Dodoni with professional actors, primarily experimenting with the space's acoustics (and exercises on what I have termed as 'voice as cognitive space': meaning: using predominant

⁶ I have written about Gardzienice's reconstruction work in Thomaidis 2013 and Thomaidis 2014.

⁷ See Vovolis DATE

⁸ See http://aefestival.gr/festival_events/trackers/?lang=en

⁹ See http://aefestival.gr/festival_events/ajax/?lang=en

¹⁰ See <https://www.n-t.gr/en/educ/ancientdramaintlworkshop/1283> and <https://www.n-t.gr/en/educ/ancientdramaintlworkshop/1375>

¹¹ See <https://www.eccd.gr/el/nea/o-anatoli-basilief-stous-delfous/>

modes of understanding space in a specific time period as stimuli for the acoustic spaces that vocal delivery can open up) (2018, 2019).¹²

Despite the vast amount of empirical and embodied data these experiences have allowed me to collect, it is in the next, more formal phase of the project that will enable me to systematise the 2 methodological axes of the project and to report more fulsomely evidenced outputs (and I'd be happy to share 'informally' provisional findings in the Q/A)

Through these experiences: I have now developed and consolidated a twofold transdisciplinary methodology for vocal archaeology:

Its **first component (1a, 1b)** orchestrates existing knowledges from disparate fields towards re-thinking the archive through the perspective of voice.

The **second**—informed by and speaking back to 1a and 1b— foregrounds performance (2a) and training (2b) as somatic ways of excavating and experimenting with voices past.

More specifically:

(1a) 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) allow access to the conceptual and aesthetic spaces within which the classical voice reverberated (see, among others, Cavarero, Comotti, Hall, Havelock, Pöhlmann and West, West). Workshops and online reading groups have enabled (and will continue to enable) exchange of information about the values, ideologies and aesthetics embedded in vocal performance in 5th century BCE and a transdisciplinary exploration of how the self and the collective were voiced during this period.

(1b) Two international symposia have been designed to bring together experts from the above fields to debate aspects of Greek vocality and mentor the development of the practice-as-research (current partners include the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama in Oxford, the University of Exeter, and the Drama School of the Greek National Theatre – dates depending on the unfolding context of the pandemic).

Research-through-practice underpins the second component of the methodology:

¹² See <https://www.facebook.com/therinomanteio/>

(2a) performance ethnography with practitioners that reconstruct and perform Greek texts, including collectives such as Gardzienice and CHOREA (Poland) and individual artists such as Aris Retsos and Thanos Vovolis (Greece);

(2b) embodied experimentation in archaeological theatre sites with vocal techniques developed through the previous stages.

If we consider voice as solely and exclusive ‘belonging’ to the voicer, to the body that produced it, then maybe yes, pre-recorded-technology voices could be thought of as lost. But my approach is to embrace voice as co-produced and co-devised by the voicer and the listener, by the bodied manoeuvres that crystallised specific (cultural) beliefs about the body (and therefore the voice) *as well as* the ideologies, aesthetics and perceptual modes impacting the phenomenological experiencing of that voice. We may not hear any ancient voicer directly, but if we know enough about the ways the body was shaped during the time; the values and expectations placed on voice; the props and costumes affecting the voice; the acoustics of the space; the sonic qualities of the texts delivered; the predominant discourses around vocality; *and* if we experiment with live voicers in the sites of original performance using the surviving texts and musical fragments – I propose that we can begin to advance a mode of listening-back.

In other words, the locus, the topos of vocal archaeology I propose is not ‘the’ voice, but the ‘vocal in-between’.¹³

To summarise the methodological approach:

(1) the first component works through establishing transdisciplinary teams and through **inclining the transdisciplinary archive** (of texts, music fragments, treatises on rhetoric and iconography) **towards voice** – allowing us, in other words, to listen more closely to non-vocal documents, remnants and ruins for their potential effect on voice, to **glean voice-related information from this archive by moving through it with vocal curiosity**;

¹³ Conceptualising the vocal in-between as the onto-epistemic locus of voice studies has been the key tenet of my work over the past 12 years. Examples of this way of thinking around the co-production of voicing, and further discussion can be found in: Thomaidis and Macpherson 2015, Thomaidis 2017, Thomaidis 2019 and Thomaidis 2020.

and (2) inspired by recent performance studies approaches to re-enactment, re-performance and re-construction (Bratton 2003 – 1830s London theatre, Roms 2011 – Welsh performance arts in the last 50 years), I am **experimenting in situ** more extensively using original texts and reconstructed masks and instruments – **foregrounding the voice practitioner’s knowledge of physio-vocal mechanics and aesthetics as central** to this reconstruction.

5. A PARALLEL

To deploy a more recent example/parallel that can perhaps render this methodological premise 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 this repertoire,
- with professional voice practitioners,
- within these spaces,

could generate strong indications, if not some certainties, about how the operatic voice functioned and sounded.

6. LEAVING THE ACOUSTIC DISPLAY CASE EMPTY?

Greek vocal performance is not such an uninterrupted tradition, yet I propose that if voice is examined as an in-between – jointly constructed by bodily production and space-based phenomenological, aesthetic and ideological reception – then its material practice is not to be treated as irrevocably 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, professional voicers, with guidance from voice specialists, while also receiving consultation from experts in 5th century antiquity, can unearth novel findings about embodied vocality in Greek theatre from the past.

In this way, we can address voice in Greek antiquity, and by extension in other historical periods, as a generative issue rather than an outright impossibility for archaeological thinking and performance research.

If –

as Yannis Hamilakis has claimed in his *Archaeology and the Senses*,

we need to move beyond modernist archaeology,

which creates clean periodizations and taxonomized objects for distant (visual) observation,

and return to an engagement with the past as a series of sensed activities, affective experiences and flows,

then,

the acoustic display of my dreams can remain empty – for now? for a while? forever? –

but there is still much to be found in exploring voice as sensed activity & interpersonal experience and flow

– in the vocal field, and away from the museum.

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