

Voicings

Voice in devising/devising through voice: A conversation with Mikhail Karikis, Elaine Mitchener and Jessica Walker

Mikhail Karikis

Elaine Mitchener

Jessica Walker

with Konstantinos Thomaidis

Abstract

How is voice used in devising practices? What is the interplay between structure, freedom and improvisation in such compositional practices? In what ways is voice conceived and practised as material? In providing answers to such questions, this multi-vocal interview/roundtable transcript is composed around the responses of three contemporary vocal artists based in the United Kingdom, Mikhail Karikis, Elaine Mitchener and Jessica Walker. Their work ranges from audio-visual installations and solo shows to immersive performance and site-responsive work, and their deployment of vocalicity ranges from jazz and Victorian music hall repertoires to extended vocal techniques and experimentations across the speech–song continuum. In conversation with practitioner-scholar Konstantinos Thomaidis, their responses offer valuable insights into current vocal experimentation but are also an invitation to expand discussions around devising in the field of interdisciplinary voice studies.

Keywords

devising

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Mikhail Karikis

Elaine Mitchener

Jessica Walker

Practices of vocal devising

Between 2011 and 2013, mezzo-soprano Jessica Walker toured *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, a one-woman show co-created with Neil Bartlett, in the United Kingdom and the United States.¹ The piece drew its material from the tradition of the male impersonator – from the Victorian era up to the 1950s – and interwove in its musico-dramatic structure popular songs and snippets of (auto)biographical text, employing tactics of vocal androgyny designed ‘to add to the tease, rather than immediately to break the illusion’ of visual cross-dressing (Walker 2012: 111). Around the same time period, visual and vocal artist Mikhail Karikis developed a quartet of audio-visual installations, exploring sonic aspects of extra- or non-linguistic vocalization in South Korea, Italy and the United Kingdom.² The four projects, *Xenon: An Exploded Opera* (2010–2011), *Sounds from Beneath* (2010–2012), *SeaWomen* (2012–2015) and *Children of Unquiet* (2013–2015), foregrounded an interrogation of how localized means of voice production ‘relate to specific work communities, echoing their particular marginalized histories and cultures, and have the power to resist official language and challenge the political forces that institute it’ (Karikis 2015: 80). Following a long string

of experimental music work, *Industrialising Intimacy* (Brighton Dome, November 2015), the latest project by vocal artist Elaine Mitchener, combined ‘structured notational form, vocal improvisation, and movement that has been developed in R&D’ (Mitchener and Wadsworth 2015). Created in collaboration with choreographer Dam Van Huynh, composer George Lewis and musician/scholar David Toop, the immersive piece offered an almost meditative physio-vocal exploration of contemporary intimacies and alienations.³

Insert Figure 1 here

Figure 1: Jessica Walker in *Pat Kirkwood is Angry*, New York, 2014. Photograph by Carol Rosegg.

Disparate as they may initially sound in their embracing of heterogeneous media, conceptualizations and stylistic approaches, the above projects inter-resonate in their exploration of devising as a compositional praxis. Voice is not considered here solely as acoustic outcome but – perhaps predominantly – as productive material, source of inspiration and co-creative agent in the process of development. Crucially, this emphasis on process – or what David Roesner has described in the case of Composed Theatre as ‘a perception that is allowed to be less concerned with “what it means” and more with “how it is done”’ (2012: 357) – is central in rethinking voice less as static, fixed or finalized, and more as processual, unruly, always-in-the-making. But, how is this indeterminacy treated in each case? How do elements of structure, freedom, improvisation and materiality inform each artist’s approach? At which points do strategies converge and/or divert?

In an attempt to answer such questions, the main body of this text employs the structural format of an interview or a roundtable transcript, allowing the artists to share self-reflexive

insights into their practice.⁴ In recent academic writing, the interview format, apart from its direct correlation with ethnographic methodologies, recurs as one of the multiple strategies to resist a logocentric prioritization of the written over the phonic *from within*; the personal, I-thou, perhaps less structured but not less rigorous tone of this style resists the exnomination of analytical discourse by disrupting its seeming conceptual self-sufficiency in otherwise monographic/monologic texts (see, e.g., Stromajer and Neumark 2013: 140–57; or, Young 2015: 32–42, 67–74, 105–23, 145–53, 163–76). Similarly, the multiple interview or roundtable format (Norderval 2014: 185–203; Neumark 2015: 132–45; Thomaidis and Macpherson 2015: 203–16) extends the scope of such tactics to invite multi-vocal engagement and challenge a single or privileged entry point to academic debate. It is in this spirit to search ‘non-hierarchical, less predictable models of engaging with voice’ (Thomaidis 2015: 11) that Karikis, Mitchener and Walker have composed their thoughts on devising with voice and generously allowed for the written outcome to be improvised, restructured and presented as a polyphonic transcript. Heard collectively, their voices capture something of the dynamic shifts in working through vocality in the contemporary acoustic landscape of the UK arts scene.

Vocal processes

Konstantinos Thomaidis (KT): *Devising has emerged as a key methodology in performance work and increasingly in experimental voice work. What does the term ‘devising’ mean in your own work?*

Elaine Mitchener (EM): In my current practice, devising is used to develop an idea or concept through the act of free creation, using careful thought and openness. There is no set way of beginning the process or rules, as inspiration can come from anywhere and I do not

wish to confine myself to one method. I often work and collaborate with other artists as a way of opening up the process. Devising allows me to build confidence to trust my instincts and experiences whilst using the instruments of exploration, improvisation, experimentation, collaboration, absorption, observation, listening.

Mikhail Karikis (MK): Devising means coming to the studio with questions rather than answers. It also means allowing others to come up with answers which may be very different from mine. For example, I devised a project in 2010, called *Xenon*. I invited for a few days to a huge converted barn in the middle of nowhere a group of performers whose work I was very interested in; we had no Internet, phone signal or other distractions. I distributed the same series of questions and instructions to each of the performers and gave them a set amount of time to come up with a performative response to each of the questions. For example, one of the instructions was, ‘You open your mouth and suddenly you have no voice – sing’. The responses to this were vastly different but equally important for me to understand the emotional make-up of each performer, their ability to improvise, their limits and their willingness to take risks. These responses were the seeds to develop a character for each performer based on who they were and what their abilities were. We tested and developed the material over a year and we created a work that is specifically devised with these performers, their personalities and ways of thinking.

Jessica Walker (JW): Experientially, devising for performance-making has involved a number of stages in my work. Firstly, there is the research phase, in which material is chosen, from which the devising process can begin. Secondly, one or more members of the creative and/or performance teams initiates a starting point for the exploration of that material. From this seemingly random starting point, form gradually emerges from the disorder. The starting

point is not crucial, but what becomes crucial is a sympathetic collaboration, in which the partners gravitate towards a common creative goal. Without this synergy, devising can become a protracted and frustrating process. In terms of voice work, I would not say that vocal improvising equals devising, but, rather, that it can represent an integral part of the devising process. Vocal choices are experimented with, then either discarded, or refined through repetition, and integrated into the final performance piece.

KT: *In recent discussions of voice in compositional or performance-making processes, there is a tendency to understand voice as material. Does this understanding play a role in your practice? How?*

JW: I certainly think there is a danger with regarding the voice as *disembodied* material. In my practice, I view the voice as inextricably linked to the personality, physiognomy and intention of the individual performer. Of course, it is material, inasmuch as any constituent agent in performance-making is material, but it is the interrelationships between the materials at play that inform the creative process. With regard to the voice in this process, its materiality is embedded within the materiality of the person embodying that voice, from which the unique ‘vocal personality’ is emergent. So, I would prefer to say, it is not the voice per se that is material, but the embodied ‘vocal personality’.

MK: Until the turn of the twentieth century, the realms of language and music dominated our understanding of the voice, but the electrification of sound and voice recording technologies turned the voice into electrical waves or fixed it onto pieces of wax or vinyl. They transformed fundamentally the way we understand the voice – the voice became matter. These technologies became part of our domestic environment decades later. I am a child of

the 1980s' 'cassette player' generation, growing up playing with domestic audio tapes and early answering machines, recording, cutting, overdubbing, unwinding and gluing together pieces of magnetic tape. From a young age, the voice was material to me and detached from the body.

It was only in my early 20s when I started thinking more seriously and politically, that I began to understand the consequences of voice *as material*. On the one hand, voice *as material* gave me the freedom to work with the voice free from musical methodologies and linguistic rules, and to approach it in a way a sculptor may work with clay, wood or rubber – i.e., plastically. On the other hand, I reconsidered the political significance of the relationship between body and voice, and I am focusing on studying and promoting the voice as *embodied material*. It is precisely the relationship between voice and the body that allows me to examine not only *what* is being voiced but also *who* is doing the voicing – of what gender and in what cultural and sociopolitical context. I think of the voice as *plastic* and *embodied political material*.

Insert Figure 2 here

Figure 2: Elaine Mitchener. Photograph by Jana Chiellino.

Improvisation and freedom

KT: *Reflecting on devising in theatre contexts, Govan, Nicholson and Normington write that emphasizing the creativity of the performer is 'a way of thinking about human subjectivity which drew inspiration from the newly emergent field of psychology, where freedom of expression and self-exploration was considered both personally and socially enriching' (2007: 16). In what ways do you see this notion of freedom as playing a part when you devise*

with voice? Do you think of it in relation to your personal process or the audience as well?

JW: If freedom here means free vocal improvisation and experimentation, then this does not form a key part of my current practice. However, freedom of expression as a result of involvement in the creative process is at the heart of my practice. I have recently completed a thesis expounding the benefits of singers self-creating music theatre work in order to experience a greater level of creative and personal agency, which could be seen as contiguous with freedom of expression. A singer's involvement in the creative process can lead to a more thoroughly embedded performance, because of its emergence from autobiography and individual skills. This more embedded – or embodied – performance can give access to a greater freedom of expression in the act of singing. The new freedom is the result of a rigorous process; it is the combination of personal agency (which in itself has evolved through involvement in the creative-collaborative process) with surety of 'technique', acquired through repetition and refinement in rehearsal of the material. Experientially, freedom of expression in a performance situation will always be dependent, to a degree, on how the audience receives the expressive gesture. If I, as the performer, develop awareness that my performance is not being 'enjoyed', however embedded the role vocally, this awareness can lead to exterior thinking. Any exterior thinking while 'doing' takes the performer away from phenomenological, free-flowing expressivity.

EM: Devising would not work effectively if it were not born from a confidence and freedom to self-explore. As a performer, I have learnt not to be afraid of where that may take me. However, it is not an open therapy session (although some may think so for themselves) and I certainly try to steer away from self-indulgence; at the same time, I feel it is my responsibility to communicate ideas or concepts. This is certainly a personal process to which an audience

has been invited to experience. I cannot and will not second-guess an audience. The exciting thing about presenting and devising in this way is that the outcome is always unexpected. So, the act of devising is constant, although not always necessarily shared, but each time a rewarding learning experience.

KT: *In your work, how do you balance between improvisation and spontaneity, on the one hand, and more formalist compositional processes, on the other?*

MK: Form provides a way to contain and present my work, as well as practical logical tools to explore a wide range of plastic possibilities to treat my material. My approach is never centrally formal, however. For example, if the concept of a particular work determines that I use two sounds, I invent a series of formal rules to test as many different ways as possible to produce these sounds and traverse from one sound to the next. I tend to start with simple forms and progressively build complexity and variation; this also allows the listener to follow the sonic journey.

Improvisation is an essential part of my creative process – my rules provide logical tools which guide and frame my improvisations. I think I have a strong emotional drive in my work and need structure to frame my feelings. Improvisation with no rules debilitates my creative process and makes me emotionally uncontained.

Spontaneity is something I introduced in my work when I started performing more regularly. It did not come naturally to me because I habitually over-rehearsed prior to my performances – partly because I devised vocally very demanding material for myself and partly because I would not allow myself to make a ‘mistake’. I soon started feeling uninterested in going onto

the stage to reproduce something I already knew and had performed repeatedly. I would get great opportunities to perform; I would go onto the stage and feel neither stage fright nor interest. The key to this was spontaneity. I started introducing sections to my performances which required either improvisation or responsiveness to audience reactions. This keeps me alert throughout the performance, open to the possibility of discovering something new while performing, and always interested in creating a connection with the audience.

Insert Figure 3 here

Figure 3: Mikhail Karikis, *Children of Unquiet*, installation view. Photograph by Carroll Fletcher.

EM: If improvisation means ‘being in the moment’, then, for me, it is fundamental. It is important not to ‘revert’ back to tried-and-tested sounds and to be wary of regurgitating extended techniques because neither requires imagination or musicality. Being in the moment is paramount and the same applies, to some extent, to performing notated music. It is the responsibility of the performer to bring freshness, spontaneity and an almost improvisatory quality to the performance of notated works. I am surprised this question is rarely applied to the genre of jazz, which has always balanced notated and improvised music – and this is more comparable to early music performance practice rather than improv and contemporary new music.

I work hard at developing an acute awareness of knowing when improvisation or notation needs to take a backseat. And to trust in the power of silence which can work wonders.

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¹ More information on the project can be accessed through Opera North's (2010) short documentary on the process of development, the published script of the play (Bartlett and Walker 2012), Walker's self-reflexive article (2012) and her website (Walker 2016).

² Karikis' website (2016) offers extensive information on the quartet of projects. Karikis further analysed the role of voice in two of the pieces in 'Nonsense: Towards a vocal conceptual compass for art' (2015). There is also an extensive blog outlining the development of the first piece, *Xenon: An Exploded Opera* (Karikis 2010).

³ Mitchener elaborates on the creative and conceptual stimuli for the piece in recent interviews (Mitchener and Wadsworth 2015; Mitchener and Clark 2015). Detailed information on *Industrialising Intimacy* as well as other projects can be found on her website (Mitchener 2016).

⁴ Each artist chose to respond to some of the questions posed to them via e-mail over a period of two months (November 2015–January 2016). After a draft was devised by Thomaidis, the final version was consolidated as a conversation between all authors.