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## **What is Voice Studies? Konstantinos Thomaidis**

*Konstantinos Thomaidis*

Every definition of voice is a working definition. A medical practitioner defines voice through its physiological characteristics so that its functions are assessed and facilitated in the case of pathologies or disorders. A casting director in opera looks for a voice that achieves a set of aesthetic standards—and in some cases, exceeds or challenges them. Writers talk about voice, meaning their idiosyncratic take on language or the way their characters arrange words in the verbal universe they inhabit (and inevitably create), or musicians might allude to their instrument's voice.

Elsewhere, politicians reflect on the *vox populi*, and rhetoricians strive for effective communication, while dialect coaches have an acute ear for vocal inflection. Even terms such as “the singing voice” would have a completely different meaning for a folk singer, a composer or a musical theatre actor. Voice in this sense is not only a series of physical and acoustic phenomena, but crucially, the assumptions that shape its making and perception. This pluralism is to be celebrated and a definitional consensus might be irrelevant.

If so, how would one go about defining voice studies? The study of voice is, like voice, a practice; its contextual pragmatics matter. Any study of voice is therefore contingent, emergent, and vested with (social, political, cultural) value. Who voices, who listens, and how they voice and listen is significant. Of equal concern are why they voice, in which context and circumstance. Likewise, if their voice is examined, what is the reason and methodology for this examination? When Polish theatre company Gardzienice traversed their communist state's borderland to save minority singing cultures from extinction, they deployed a hands-on vocal archaeology. When Korean *p'ansori* was pronounced an Intangible World Heritage by UNESCO, discography became a means to circulate the repertoire, advertise it internationally, preserve it, or—according to the “old masters”—ossify it. Reaching the apogee of *bel canto* technique was not unrelated to the (hugely debated) invention of the laryngoscope by Manuel Garcia. Forensic recognition reorganizes our perception of voice in ways that are, perhaps, at odds with the aesthetic appreciation of jazz vocalism. Methodology is the practice of the practice and determines its supposed object of study, voice—as much as voice determines the methodology of its examination.

It is for the purposes of this book, then, that I wish to outline two perspectives on voice studies that I find particularly intriguing. The first stems from my experience, the second seeds what I envision as a new direction. Having trained as an actor and classical musician in Greece, I had an almost fixed definition of what voice is and does in each respective strand of work. Differences appeared only stylistic, and therefore superficial, not affecting what voice essentially was. Embarking on a doctoral project on comparative voice studies in 2007, I soon came to realize that,

when borders are crossed, questions around voice become much more complex. Who, how and what voices express become less pertinent than who has agency in voicing, who has agency in listening, who benefits from voicing, and in what ways. More importantly, any essentialist understanding of voice seemed redundant. It wasn't that voice was performed in various stylistic ways. Voice was revealed as performative, transforming and generating the identity of its voicer. I am very aware that I speak in different tones and inflections as a Greek actor-musician and as a Greek-born-intercultural-voicer-based-in-the-UK. The muscularity of my phonemes, my vocal range, even the way I breathe or filter my harmonics, are all fundamentally different. Yet, this is not just me voicing in different ways. These different voices put me in decisively different subject positions. Each voice makes me the voicer who produces it. Voice studies is just starting to grapple with these issues.

As a coda to my thinking and this volume, I wish to share a personal inkling that has to do with methodology. In the last few years, the return to the voice has been establishing interdisciplinary bridges. My own research and practice have benefited from dialogues between performance studies, actor training, opera studies, phenomenology and ethnomusicology. Voice studies is surfacing as an inter-discipline; borrowing, rebranding and radically alternating approaches. Yet, could what appears to be our object of study—voice—also be used as a methodological tool? What could be the vocal analysis of a landscape? Urban architecture? A religious practice? What would the vocal analysis of democracy in crisis be like? I do not mean studying the role of voice in democracies in crisis; this is still seeing voice as a topic. I mean analysing the landscape or democracy *through* voice. How could such an analysis be conducted? And what would it reveal?