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THE VOCAL BODY

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Abstract

In current understandings of voicing, especially in long-standing training formulae for actors and singers, the body is considered as a supporting *mechanism*. Good, healthy and aesthetically pleasing voice is produced when all the relevant body parts function efficiently. Still, this chapter asks: is the mechanistic paradigm the only option? Can we decisively map our physiology into apparatuses that contribute to sound-making and parts that resist participation in voice or stay unaffected by sounding? What are the consequences of such a paradigm for both the extra-daily and the everyday voicers?

Drawing on my work as a movement specialist and director with experimental opera groups which seek to challenge the body-voice dichotomy (Experience Vocal Dance Company and Opera in Space) as well as my doctorate project on the physicality of the voice in vocal dance, post-Grotowskian practitioners and Korean *pansori* singers, I wish to share my observations on the possibilities of physiovoical unity. Using a practical session with my opera singers as a case study, I will attempt to foreground an integrative perspective, which moves beyond understandings of the body as a mere facilitator or homebase of vocal emission.

“...voice training should always be preceded by integrated body training ...
Voice and speech training is body training ...”
(Lessac, 1997: 17)

The ephemerality and contingency of the voice has instigated two main tendencies in its theorisation. Since linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s “phonic but incorporeal” signifiers (1959: 118), logocentrism, founded on a model whereby signifiers effect the communication between signifieds, has seen voice as a tool-to-be-forgotten in favour of the transmitted meaning. Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, on the other hand, connected voice to the drives and, in particular, to the invocatory drive, suggesting voice as one of the paramount incarnations of his *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, that which is a void and at the same time that which can fill the void (Harari, 2004: 110-11; Žižek, 1992: 4). The voice, as something always-already missing, is at the centre of Michel Chion’s analysis of the *acousmêtre*, the outside-the-frame cinematic voicer (1999: 129). Similarly, critic Steve Connor formed an analysis of the ‘vocalic body’ as the body source to which a voice is attributed. This source is reconstructed and/or produced by the listener, as it is already absent when the voice is perceived (2001: 35-43).

Theatrical performance, however, provides a unique vantage point for a discussion of vocal presence. Few theorists have worked in this direction: Barthes applied Kristeva’s distinction between the geno-text and the pheno-text to his understanding of singing; he thus refers to the

pheno-song (the ‘surface’ of the song, its notational codes and particular style) and the *geno-song* (the production and articulation of sounds that reveal the direct connection of the voice to the material, bodily mechanisms which give birth to it). It is here, in the realm of the *geno-song*, that Barthes discovers the possibility that the voice can achieve a corpo-real presence, what he names “the grain of the voice” (1977: 181). This ‘grain’ is the manifestation of the aspects of physicality engaged in the production of spoken or sung utterances, the bodily trace that seals each voiced emission in such an unrepeatable way that the voice becomes a direct allusion to the unique body that made its genesis possible in the first place. The ‘grain’ is what allows the listener to distinguish between this or that singer. More recently, Cavarero criticised the strategies with which Western philosophy has deprived *logos* (\approx discourse or reason) of its voice, turning it into an abstract, non-audible contemplation, and reclaimed the “uniqueness of the voice” (2005: 11).

Building on my case study, I will examine the workings of this bodily anchor of the voice. More specifically, I will trace how the body is shaped through systematised voice pedagogies. My attempt will be to scrutinise not only the ‘unique voice’ or ‘grain’ of each particular performer, but also the collectively aspired/imagined/cultivated uses of the body/voice promoted within systems or traditions, a concept and praxis for which I employ the term ‘vocal body’.¹ In other words, I will not focus on G. and D. as individual singers only but also as trained opera singers. Similarly, J. will be seen as an example of a trained actor/voicer too.

This is the first day of work with a collective of young professional opera singers. They are rehearsing towards a modern staging of a Baroque oratorio. Their concept involves choreographed movement, development of characters through stylised physicality and audience immersion. As their experience in movement-based acting is rather limited, I have been invited by G., the company’s soprano, to lead a series of related workshops with them. My briefing before the session is short but informative: “Feel free to explore movement ideas, but do not try to mess with our voices”.

The training of the operatic vocal body can be seen as a case of objectification. In the world of *bel canto*, the voice needs to exhibit defining characteristics (the *chiaroscuro* or ‘light-and-dark’ quality of harmonics and the seamless blend of registers), which are achieved through scientifically informed strategies (*appoggio* breathing and stroke of the glottis). Similarly, opera singers are trained less as voicing subjects and more as voice types, each one of which is expected to guarantee maximum efficiency in performance and optimal quality of the vocal instrument for a long-spanning career.

The training of *bel canto* acquired its original shaping and formulaic codification between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. According to theoretical physicist Basarab Nicolescu, this is the period when the split originated between subject and object in the first formulations of modern science (2008: 13). In fact, the training of the classical singer grew hand in hand with advances in the study of anatomy and physiology. It thus comes as no surprise that the most celebrated voice teacher of the heyday of nineteenth-century *bel canto*, Manuel Garcia II (1805-1906), is also credited with the invention of the laryngoscope (1855). Mathilde Marchesi (1821-1913), another well-known voice tutor, used to declare that “...scientific knowledge is indispensable to professors of singing, because it enables them to treat the vocal instrument in a natural and rational manner” (1970: xiv). Elsewhere she goes as far as to claim that “there are only two Vocal Schools in the whole world: the good, from which the best results are obtained, and the bad, in which the reverse is the case” (Marchesi, 1970: xviii). From Marchesi’s oft-quoted maxim to James Stark’s recent affirmation that “[v]oice scientists, too, recognize that classical singing techniques offer the most elegant and sophisticated use of the voice’ (1999: xii), the pedagogy of *bel canto* has revolved around the postulate that its methodologies and aesthetics are corroborated by hard science. It is precisely this belief that makes opera singers, such as G. or D., experience alternative routes to voicing as ‘messing’ with a tool that has been scrupulously harnessed over a long training period.

When I arrive at the rehearsal space, G. and D., the company's alto, are warming up. I decide to observe for a while. They are both standing almost immobile next to the piano, each with palms placed on their lower ribcage, which hardly seems to move even though they sing rather long and intricate passages. From time to time, D. places her index finger in front of her lips and repeats a phrase if she judges that too much out-breath has been expedited. G. uses her palm to ensure that either there is vibration on the top of her cranial structure or that her jaw and back of the neck remain unaffected in the higher register.

Soon J. arrives. He is the actor who will perform the role of the narrator, but will also sing the bass line in the choruses. After a series of yoga- and t'ai chi-inspired sequences designed to unite movement and breath, I invite all three to pick their favourite part of the space and to stand, sit or lie in a comfortable position. With their eyes closed, I guide them through a body scan. The purpose is simply to bring their mind's eye to each body part, starting from the toes and moving slowly all the way to the top of the head, while imagining that breath happens in every area of the body. "How does your left heel breathe? Can you inhale and breathe out through your right armpit? Now, can you allow each out-coming breath to translate into sound?"

Optimal breathing for the opera singer invites the practice of *appoggio*. The word derives from the Italian verb *appoggiare*, meaning 'to lean on'. The term refers to the control of the antagonistic functions of the inhalatory and exhalatory muscles. After a quiet inhalation, the singer engages the intercostals and lateral abdominal muscles and maintains them in the shape they have acquired during inhalation (lowering and expansion) even during voicing. The resistance against the upward and inside recoil of the breathing muscles is a deliberate manipulation of the physiology so "that all notes, from the lowest to the highest, are produced by a column of air over which the singer has *perfect command*" (Lamperti: 22; emphasis added). The maintained expansion of the lower ribcage and the *rectus abdominis*, commonly tested through tactile observations as with G.'s 'hugging' palms, requires from the singers "the greatest degree of torso stability" (Miller, 2004: 3). This is why D. and G. stood in perfect alignment while warming up or felt more confident when their torso was relatively intact when moving. The resulting immobility of the torso, which also bears the imprint of neo-classical aesthetics (exemplified in the Greek sculptures of *kouroi*) in the genesis of opera, is known in the operatic world as the 'noble posture' (Jacocks, 2007: 64; Striny, 2007: 20).

Yet another core concern of *bel canto* pedagogy is the forceless, imperceptible use of the notes that lay in the points of transition between the registers – the points, commonly called 'breaks', where for a non-trained singer, such as J., the voice quality alters drastically (Stark, 1999: 58-73). Traditional *bel canto* training categorises performers in specific voice/character types and addresses the 'problem' of the breaks in a manner specifically targeted at each voice-type (Knapp, 1972: 83-88; Miller, 2004: 129-68). This categorisation is known as *Fach*, from the German word that translates as 'pocket' or 'case'. In a sense, the operatic singer is 'pigeon-holed' in terms of their range, timbre, volume and even character. However, recent research reveals that *Fach* is more of a cultural precept than an anatomical fact. While it is true that "the predominant range of an individual's voice is predetermined by the anatomy of the vocal mechanism" (Davies and Jahn, 2004: 9), the same laryngologists forewarn that "such classifications should only be regarded as a guide and are artificial" (2004: 13). It is then the pedagogical environment and choices made by the teacher(s), as well as the trainee's individual aesthetics and aspirations, that contribute considerably to the final range employed by the voicer. Put differently, even the customary division between soprano (G.), alto (D.), tenor, baritone and bass (J.) voices is, to a certain extent, an outcome of the disciplinary workings of *bel canto* pedagogy upon the vocal body rather than a physiological given.

The exercise runs for a short while. J. is quite at ease with my instructions. He lies on the floor and seems to experience joy in turning each of his body parts into a distinct vocal character. His voice constantly changes

and, while exploring breathing into his right shoulder blade, it glides upwards and breaks, making a squeaking sound. G. looks comfortable in producing sound. There is, however, an apparent disconnection between her imagination and voicing; she indicates to me that she is breathing in/to different body parts by slightly tensing them, but her attention is on her diaphragm. She is still standing with her hands 'hugging' her lower ribs and her voice remains unchanged throughout the exploration. "Watch your voice, J.", whispers D., who has rather unwillingly followed his example and tries lying on the floor. D. seems confused about the exercise. She starts in a vein similar to G.'s. She even opens her eyes and takes swift looks at her different body parts. At a certain point, she looks around and quickly drops her hands to the sides of her body in response to G.'s stiff stance and begins imitating J.'s sounds.

In comparison to the two opera singers, who have absorbed and embodied the operatic vocal body and its fixed, advocated-as-optimal mechanics, J. is more willing to experiment and discover. Does this mean, however, that he breaks free from any notion of a collectively trained vocal body? J., as an actor trained in a highly acclaimed UK drama school, exhibits the vocal body practised by such advocates of the 'natural' voice as twentieth-century speech trainers Cicely Berry, Michael McCallion or Patsy Rodenburg. Anatomically, this is a development of the normal breathing cycle, relying on the downward movement of the diaphragm for increased capacity of inhalation and the upward movement of the abdominal wall and the intercostals for relaxed out-breath.

In this strand of work, the voice is understood as being affected by the intimate connection between the trainees' physicality and their psyche (Berry, 1997: 26; Linklater, 2006: 7-11; Lessac, 1997: 13-17; Rodenburg, 1997: 38-40). The pedagogues' task is to facilitate a process of *deconstruction*. In other words, they work having this basic principle in mind: growing up in the West is a process of dis-connection from one's body and of accumulation of psychological traumas and cultural influences, a process of disengagement with the self, which becomes obvious in the limits and tensions one thinks of as inherent in the voice. Speech training therefore becomes a process of doing away with the cultural encrustations. The tool to achieve this is the well-respected remedy of relaxation and effortlessness. First, especially when assimilating new breathing experiences, the student relaxes and attempts to work without unwanted effort, locating tensions and consciously experiencing the sensation of relaxation in the body (Berry, 2000: 52; McCallion, 1988: 22). The suggested internal scan in the working session is something J. is likely to have experienced as part of his training, which can account for his eagerness to perceive and explore his vocal body from the inside out. The trainee is subsequently taught the right balance between relaxation and "energy in the muscles [of articulation] themselves" (Berry, 2000: 22) and, finally, s/he must get used to performing without the usual effort. The right combination of precise muscularity and relaxation can act as a safety net for the voicing performer, leaving space for both conscious control and artistic flexibility—what McCallion would describe as "the good use of the self" (1988: 125)

On one hand, the 'natural' vocal body contrasts with the operatic one in that it encourages a subjective approach to the voice, rooted in a somatic rediscovery of the body-self. Linklater acknowledges as the ultimate objective of her training that the acting students should "become very good, very exciting, very idiosyncratic actors" (1997: 11). This justifies J.'s apparent ease in creating surprising, characteristic, idiosyncratic sounds. 'Idiosyncrasy' is key in understanding what the 'natural' voice pedagogy aims at when encompassing aspects of the performer's bodily, psychic and emotional resources. 'Good performer' equals 'unique (therefore employable) performer'.

Still, even a pedagogy that promotes a 'naturally' free vocal body and produces idiosyncratic/individual/unique voices, is a well-defined, ideologically charged disciplinary training. Berry, McCallion and Linklater have worked for educational institutions and

vocational programmes that prepare actors for the needs of the UK/USA market (CSSD and RSC, RADA, LAMDA and Columbia University, respectively). Their training activities can be seen as pertaining to the ‘atomist’ or ‘individualist naturalism’ which prevailed in the UK/USA social sciences in the period after the Second World War. According to historian and philosopher Ronald Inden, ‘atomist’ or ‘individualist’ are the theoretical systems that privilege the individual over the collective, while approaches that claim that knowledge in social sciences can and should resemble knowledge in natural sciences are ‘naturalist’ (1995: 2-3). In light of Inden’s analysis, pedagogues of the ‘natural’ voice, who also provide the student with anatomical/physiological ‘data’ and aim at the ‘maximisation’ of the trainee’s potential, may nurture personal development but still adhere to a scientifically fixated vocal body, that is, not insignificantly, a marketable one.

In other words, while the operatic vocal body may be a product of demanding construction (objectification of the voice) and the natural vocal body may emerge through deconstruction (experience of the voice as subject), their underlying training principles are still inspired by an aspiration to optimal efficiency. The methodology employed in describing the vocal apparatus in both instances favours the distinction between three of its functions: breathing (frequently encountered as support), sound-producing mechanism, and voicing (speaking or singing, with a minor interest in other vocal phenomena). This tripartite structure reproduces a systemic understanding of the vocal body as a mechanical apparatus that can be disaggregated and later reassembled in order to function more efficiently. This understanding is closely linked to the prioritisation of reason promulgated by the Enlightenment and the subsequent functionalist ideologies with which the Industrial Revolution and the spread of capitalism surrounded the (measured, routinised and controlled) body.ⁱⁱ

Is there then a way out of the paradigm of efficiency, either subjectively or objectively obtained? My suggested warm up, inspired by yogic and t’ai chi techniques, comes from my encounter with Asian perspectives on the vocal body, in particular the training of Korean *pansori* singers. In this codified genre, singers are trained to breathe through their lower *danjeon*, the part of the torso situated underneath the navel, by tensing their abdominal muscles and canalising the strength inwards. “[P]*aetsim*, ‘abdominal force,’” connects the singer to “the fountain of life’s primary energy (*ki*)” (Park, 2003: 198). *Ki* (or *Qi*) in traditional Asian philosophies is understood as much more than energy exerted on the musculature. It is rather regarded and lived as a cosmic force, a source of vitality that connects the body-mind with the world in a present-oriented manner. *Qi* is seen as flowing or travelling either through meridians (*tao*), *chakras* (*tantra*) or *danjeons* (*t’ai chi*).ⁱⁱⁱ Through this flow, the breath does not merely support voicing; rather, it becomes a concrete locus where the body, the voice and the cosmos are yoked together.

Moreover, the vocal body of *pansori* transcends the obsession with the healthy or ‘good’ use of the self. Contrary to the natural/free or operatic techniques where breath support meets a non-tensed larynx and produces relaxed voicing, in *pansori* the flow from the *danjeon* upwards is fiercely obstructed at the level of the glottis and the larynx tenses and rises. The anatomical components of the laryngeal box are trained to resist breath, before allowing it to escape violently towards the resonators. This results in a ‘sorrowful’, highly forced and muscular sound production, which has been widely related to the Korean ideology of *han*, a sentiment of grief developed through historical experiences of war, occupation and migration (Kim, 1996: 114; Pihl, 1994: 6). The vocal body in this instance does away with preconceptions of the natural or physiologically optimal and embraces permanent modification in accordance with the ‘grieving’ aesthetics of the genre.

When I sense that they have all completed a full-body 'breath and voice scan', I decide to play a game. G. is to mould D.'s body into different positions, while J. moves freely in the room. As he is confident enough with his physicality, I encourage him to play with jumps on the spot, slow melt-downs towards the floor, turns, huge leaps, walking or caressing the walls with his body. D.'s focus is double: she has to surrender to G. and adopt each position, but at the same time mimic with her voice J.'s movement. D. seems bewildered at the beginning, but gradually discovers a broad range of sighs, groans and shouts as well as fully sung phrases. For the short duration of the exercise, she eases into not controlling her sound. She even smiles while voicing.

Of course, G. is crucial in helping D.; being a singer herself, she avoids putting D. into positions where her torso is twisted or her diaphragm suppressed. I then move to the final stage of exploration for D.: I ask J. to 'mould' D., making it clear that he needs to avoid too much pressure on the lower ribcage, and G. to move around, while making shapes with her hands, fingers and wrists. Now D. is to sing her aria from the second act, following G.'s hand choreography. J. is boldly imaginative and playful while sculpting D.'s body; he makes her balance, roll backwards on the floor or even handstand against a wall. G., knowing the aria and its demands, creates visual stimuli for D.'s breaths. Her hands shape suspensions, dramatic punctuations and uninterrupted flows in the air. D. is much more confident this time. In the multiplicity of bodily stances she adopts and in the use of her voice as a means of constant communication with a partner, emerge moments that could be potentially useful for her character. Just before we take a break, she turns to me and says: "This is so much easier when you are not checking on your body all the time".

The final exercises, especially D.'s discovery of fresh vocal possibilities whilst relating her sound-making to her partners, bring yet another paradigm to the fore: the vocal body cultivated through the post-Grotowskian line of Polish practitioners. For example, the singing pedagogy in the Polish company Gardzienice (founded by Włodzimierz Staniewski in 1976) is heavily influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque, unfinished body, which celebrates its materiality and is in constant connection to the Other and the world (1984: 316-43). In the basic stance adopted by the body in training, the lower part is grounded, with the knees bent, while the upper part is malleable, succumbing to the slightest impulses travelling through a relaxed and flexible spine (Staniewski and Hodge, 2004: 87). The pelvic area, understood in Polish as the cross, is slightly tilted forwards so that the small of the back is more easily 'offered' to partners in acrobatic sessions and, consequently, the weight shifts to the front, allowing more space for the downwards release of the abdominals. The mouth hangs open and, as a result, sound is mostly shaped in the resonating chamber of the mouth cavity. In singing, the larynx is lifted, not only because of the extreme openness of the jaw, but also because of the 'exhaustive' use of breath and the slight tilting of the head upwards I have observed in many of the Gardzienice actors. The excessive use of the musculature of the throat is evident in the sounding inhalations and exhalations, which, at the same time, function as a realisation of the Bakhtinian concept of the interrelated body (which, for the Russian philosopher, is mostly exemplified in the actions of devouring and defecating).

All training activities of the company, underpinned by the principle of mutuality (connection and interdependence), unfold as choral encounters within the ensemble and the slightest vocal or bodily impulse of one actor affects the others. In this sense, D.'s playfulness in the final section of the workshop did not derive from a different perspective on her mechanics of voicing, but from a solid focus outside herself. In Gardzienice, the musical depository of the company comprises mostly folk and liturgical songs and the score is very much open in rehearsals before any decisions are made about the final composition. Given that in our rehearsal/workshop G., D. and J. were working with a canonical score and that this was a taster session in a new methodology, the most important step was the shift in the vocal body paradigm that D. experienced: a first glimpse that voice need not emanate from a strategically organised, but hermetically closed, voicing apparatus, but can be rooted in the live interactions with other voicing bodies.

In this chapter, in dissecting the worldview crystallised *in* the voice (phenomenology of voicing), rather than the worldview communicated *through* the voice (semiotics of the voice), I attempted to challenge the certainty with which exponents of the predominant pedagogy advocate that “[i]t is shortsighted to say that differences in technical approach are all of equal merit. Some manoeuvres simply work better than others” (Miller, 2004: 210). A closer look at, and critical investigation of, voicing practices reveal that both practitioners and scientists tend to draw on their body-related findings with an aesthetic agenda at hand. This agenda is not as obvious as it may seem in many cases, especially for reasons of marketing the relevant publications or foregrounding a particular use of the voice within a given performance discipline. In Davies and Jahn’s words, “structure and function are inextricably interrelated in the vocal performer’s larynx” (2004: 31).

The vocal body is a lens through which the physio-vocal tendencies promulgated by distinct performance practices can be linked to their historical contours and aesthetic objectives.^{iv} As I have shown, the optimal efficiency of *bel canto* and the naturalised UK/USA voice trainings are indeed culturally defined and attempts can be made to transcend their methodologies. My brief discussion of *pansori* foregrounded a pedagogical approach that privileges aesthetics over concerns with nature or science. At the same time, the vocal body cultivated in the practices of Gardzienice introduced a concept of radical novelty: vocal inter-corporeality. The shaping of the body that participates in the genesis of voicing is the indicator *par excellence* of which parameter has been the prioritised element in each system: the physio-vocal self, the object body/voice, the aesthetic result or the lived encounter. The examples could be innumerable, depending on the lens used to analyse the (trained) body that produces the voice.

In our session, the usual point of entry, the self, was not denied, but slightly shifted. The *Qi*-based practice of breath claimed the voice as yet another way to integrate with the (training) environment. Similarly, the Gardzienice-inspired games saw other bodies, tactile or visual communication, movement and space as partners, as impulses impacting on or generating the voice. This approach avoided the fixation of the voice and embraced its ever-changing character. As I left the room, with detailed notes on the workings of the operatic or ‘natural’ vocal body in rehearsal, I felt that this was the direction I should explore further in upcoming sessions with the group. Since I realised that, however illuminating and body-anchored the very category of the vocal body may be, ultimately I have to succumb to the resistance of my subject matter to conclusive definitions. Any voice, exhibiting the dialogue between its individual and collectively aspired vocal bodies, is never a *fait accompli*. It is a work in progress.

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ⁱ To my knowledge, the term ‘vocal body’ has been used interchangeably with the term ‘breath body’ by Experience Bryon in her rehearsals with Vocal Dance Company to allude to the connection of the voice and movement through the pelvic girdle and the isolated use of the iliopsoas muscle. I deliberately see this as *one* of the possibilities of breath/body integration and apply the term more widely to the (discursive and practised) unity of physicality and voice in other training systems too.

ⁱⁱ For recent works that expand on the interrelation between the body and the ‘project of Enlightenment’, refer to the work of Burt, Foster, Gould and, for the formation of an overarching discourse on the trained and in-performance body, to the latest publications by Conroy and Evans.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a detailed discussion of *Qi* in performer training, see Barba and Savarese.

^{iv} Of course, the vocal body is presented here as a point of departure, as a category-to-be-used. A more nuanced and rounded analysis of my working session could be obtained if there was space to fully answer such questions as the following: How is one to treat J.’s ‘natural’ vocal body in subsequent rehearsals, when he will sing the operatic score of the choruses? Even if D. enjoys her new findings now, how will she later balance the operatic needs of the score with her willingness to be influenced by the group? Can anyone ‘measure’ beyond doubt whether D. and G. embody the operatic vocal body to the same extent?