**A diphonic editorial**

**Voicing belonging: Traditional singing in a globalized world**

**Konstantinos Thomaidis**, University of Exeter

**Virginie Magnat**, University of British Columbia

**Konstantinos Thomaidis (KT):** Why conduct scholarly and artistic research on traditional singing in the global age? Given the dominance of new communication technologies and the unprecedented commodification of world cultures, investigating vocal practices rooted in oral cultures and traditional ways of knowing may seem futile and irrelevant. Yet, traditional singing is a powerful mode of human creativity, and traditional songs comprise a significant part of what UNESCO has designated as ‘our’ shared intangible cultural heritage. Current debates on cultural diversity demonstrate that rethinking regional, national, transnational and global notions of cultural identity is becoming increasingly urgent if we are to acknowledge and value the world’s biocultural diversity beyond borders that separate and delineate nation states, whose sovereignty continues to hinge upon legitimizing constructions of national identity. If, as Caroline Bithell reminds us in *Transported by Song*, ‘the act of singing with others is clearly about far more than simply producing sound’ (2007: xxx–xxxi), how does engaging in singing practices relate to emergent, unstable and conflicting versions of belonging in times of precarity?

**Virginie Magnat (VM):** This special issue asks what is at stake today in cultural revitalization initiatives, academic research projects and artistic endeavours that seek to reawaken, restore, preserve, transmit and at times transform specific vocal traditions. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor (2003, 2008, 2016) considers song, dance and music to constitute a vital part of intangible cultural heritage, which she envisions as a repertoire of embodied memory through which cultural knowledge is created, preserved and transmitted. Cross-cultural analyses of orally transmitted vocal music practices corroborate the importance of embodied memory by showing that ‘prescribed series of sound or sound relations [are] specified by an exemplar (such as remembered performance) rather than in written notation’ (Tenzer and Roeder 2011: 11). The vitality and continuity of traditional singing hence crucially depend upon ‘remembered performance’ to transmit the sonic specificity and subtleties of interpretation pertaining to traditional music that are lost when transcribed through the standard western notation system, thereby clearly epitomizing the notion of intangible cultural heritage (Magnat 2017).

Legitimizing orality has significant politically implications, for as stated by Dwight Conquergood (1998: 30), embodied knowledge transmitted by means of performance tends to be invalidated in the academy by the ‘culture-as-text model’, which he perceives as displaying ‘a Eurocentric, print-based bias’ that excludes oral cultural traditions and practices. Building upon Conquergood’s perspective, Norman K. Denzin asserts that ‘the world is a performance, not a text’, and that ‘every performance, every identity [is] a new representation of meaning and experience, as well as a site of struggle, negotiation, and hope, a site where the performance of possibilities occurs’ (2002: 328). Most importantly for our special issue, Denzin envisions the subversive potential of performance as particularly empowering for minority groups claiming the right to self-representation as well as the right to participate in representations of the world.

This performative dimension is a core concern for our special issue since expressions of cultural identity through vocal music practices can dynamically reactivate collective cultural memory embedded in these songs, which are often the only remaining vehicle for endangered languages, thereby challenging us to consider the contemporary relevance and future potentialities of intangible cultural heritage.

**KT:** What is particularly interesting when interweaving such discussions of voice with analyses of belonging, particularly in the interdisciplinary context afforded by this journal, is a resistance to reification and essentialism. I have recently argued for the potential benefits – epistemological and methodological – of moving away from a conceptualization of voice as object towards an understanding of voice as process; thinking through (and with) *voicing* rather than *voice* opens up opportunities ‘to radically renegotiate voice, to de-naturalize conventional ideas about something seemingly so familiar and to rethink voice not as given or fixed but as the plural, in-between, challenging and generative practice of voicing’ (Thomaidis 2017: 74). When imbricating vocality in practices and discourses of belonging, such an approach can effect a radical intervention in the way concepts are imaginatively construed. What does it mean for voice to belong? Is voice a static feature in the geography of belonging? Who can assert rightful claims to ownership? Can *it* be negotiated or ‘change hands’? Doesn’t conceptualizing or metaphorizing voice in this way bring attention to the ‘owner’ or, at least, engender a polarization between giver/owner/voicer and receiver? However, if the in-between-ness and processual unfolding of voicing are the departure point, then both perspectives are entangled; negotiating, asserting and relinquishing belonging become processes open to recontextualization and we can become sceptical towards privileging a singular (‘source’ or ‘hourglass’) modality of belonging. Where does the Tamil voice, as discussed in Hornabrook’s article, belong when practised and embodied by a diverse diaspora? Is the Indian or Sri Lankan ‘homeland’ always and already the answer to this question? How is belonging practised by Berkeley-Schultz and Behrens, who have received traditional songs through embodied practice over time, but now recycle them in the new ecology of higher education classes?

**KT and VM:** Contributors to this special issue include researchers, artists and educators who reflexively address their positionality when engaging with questions of cultural identity and tradition, and critically account for processes of acculturation, identity construction and musical regionalism linked to the re-appropriation of traditional vocal practices as well as to phenomena of interculturality, hybridity and fusion.

**VM:** Matt Gillan explores the centrality of vocal technique in Okinawan music genres, from traditional music practices to the burgeoning pop music scene, arguing that discourses on vocal practice inform the way in which regional identities, lineage affiliations and other aspects of Okinawan society are negotiated. The author provides a historical overview of Okinawan theories of the voice, traces the formation of social groups and artistic lineages of vocal music practitioners, and addresses the Okinawan voice in a national Japanese context by examining its role in the development of in Okinawan pop music and by investigating how these voices have been used in the construction of Okinawan identities in Japan as a whole. The author foregrounds the relationship between vocality and cultural identity in his analysis of the ways in which Okinwan singing is both perceived as a living remnant of a primeval Japanese past overtaken by Westernization and as a source of cultural and linguistic diversity that is crucial to the construction of a more inclusive, less homogeneous version of Japanese national identity.

**KT:** Jasmine Hornabrook’s article offers a twofold perspective on current practices of South Indian singing. In examining Skype lessons of Carnatic songs and the online documentation and broadcasting of *Thevaram* songfests via websites, Hornabrook locates voice as a central (aesthetic) means of expressing belonging to the ‘homeland’ and, crucially, as an active agent in the harnessing of contemporary notions of diasporic belonging. While such practices may have to do away with aspects of shared embodiment within the teacher-singer dyad or between performers and audiences, voice still extends an intersensorial invitation to (re)connect with the music, the canon of songs, and pedagogical, religious and other South Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil cultural practices. Belonging, then, is not simply conceptualized as a vertical line of returning to the homeland but also as a horizontal connection to the multiple locales of South Indian diasporic populations; in other words, sung belonging through online communication is proposed here as rhizomatic and decidedly multilocal.

**KT:** In the following article, Yona Stamatis offers a contemporary investigation of the singing of Greek *rebetika* from a Bakhtinian perspective. The focus of the analysis is on Rebetiki Istoria, an Athenian club cultivating a dedicated commitment to early style *rebetiko*, as encapsulated in the vocal qualities of the founder and lead singer of the venue, Pavlos Vassiliou. Stamatis’s analysis, building on a four-part understanding of carnivalesque, proposes a complex intersection between voicing as phonosonic nexus and its national context. Although *rebetika* are associated with early twentieth-century outcasts and are a staple of the developing national canon of music and song, when performed in Rebetiki Istoria, they get repurposed as a critique of perceived cryptocolonialist attitudes towards Greece, also exacerbated by austerity. In this case, an attachment to an ‘authentic’ vocal stylization, Stamatis argues, does not signal a wishful return to an imagined national past but is a purposeful exercise in utopianism – rendered momentarily tangible through performative and subversive interactions between singers and patrons.

**VM:** Sitchet and Tahon contextualize their investigation of the transmission processes of vocal techniques in the Gwoka tradition of Guadeloupe by providing a historical overview linking Gwoka music to the transatlantic slave trade and to contemporary anti-assimilation and anti-colonialism movements in which Gwoka singing has been pivotal to protests and strikes. Their acoustic analysis of voicing transmission processes focuses on four songs performed by six major Gwoka performers of different generations. They argue that Gwoka singing is a practice of belonging that asserts ‘guadeloupeanity’ and that is experienced as distinct from French national identity since it is rooted in a collective history of resistance to colonial oppression expressed though the codes and metaphors of the Creole language, so that singers may be considered as memory smugglers who convey the uniqueness of Guadeloupian cultural identity through their public performances.

**VM:** Maria Gaitanidi’s Voicing provides a praxical insight into Maud Robart’s work. Robart, a former collaborator of Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski, has developed a unique strand of artistic research into songs of the Haitian tradition. Gaitanidi, emphatically positioning herself as a practitioner-scholar, presents a kaleidoscopic, highly idiosyncratic and, at times, poetic account of her encounter with the concrete strategies of integrating physicality and vocality developed by Robart. As a former student of philosophy, Gaitanidi intuitively brings into dialogue these practices (as researched from her perspective as a workshop participant) with pre-Socratic philosophical enquiry, mainly Heraclitus’s discussion of Logos, to interrogate a performative meeting of research, memory and study of Greek thought with Afro-Caribbean voicing.

**KT:** In the second Voicing of the special issue, practitioner-scholars Ditte Berkeley-Schultz and Electa Behrens reflect on their ongoing experiences of teaching traditional songs in higher education institutions, either university programmes or conservatories. Their work engages a post-Grotowskian lineage of voicing practices, centred around notions of bodily and ensemble-based interaction with sung material, expeditions and collaborations with local musicians, and a performance-oriented voice pedagogy modelled on oral transmission. When transferred to new educational settings, the ethics of this work – an ethics already deeply embedded in questions of cross-cultural practice – presents Berkeley-Schultz and Behrens with the conundrum of adaptation. In honouring the polyphonic tradition in which their pedagogy is rooted, the Voicing is presented as a duologue structured around ‘songs’/key thematic concerns – a device foregrounding the complicities but also the productive divergences in the two authors’ approaches.

**KT and VM:** The rich and varied Reviews section of the issue is also thematically aligned to the topic of voicing belonging in a globalized world, offering insights into recent publications that examine strands of work in South Asia, Colombia and Korea, among others, as well as the latest iteration of the VoicEncounters festival. Heard collectively, the voices in the articles, voicings and reviews in this issue raise urgent questions around and contribute to debates on topics such as:

* Interdisciplinary investigations of traditional singing as a source of knowledge
* Contemporary research methodologies of traditional singing
* The dis- or re-embodied voice: intersections of traditional singing and technology
* Ecologies of singing: the aesthetics of spatiality and multilocality in transmitting traditional songs to in the global age
* Re-imagining vocal traditions, producing and circulating world voices for a globalized audience, and designating vocal traditions as intangible cultural heritage
* Re-examining notions of ‘folk’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘tradition’ in singing practice
* Traditional songs as training in the conservatoire or higher education
* Traditional singing, subjectivity, the nation and ethnicity
* Intercultural, transnational, diasporic and migratory aesthetics of vocal practice
* Traditional singing as a form of spiritual, religious and/or ritual practice.

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