

FOREWORD

A phonotechnics of vocal somaticity: an autobiophonic note

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I am in the third month of training as a physical theatre postgraduate at a UK Higher Education institution. After an intensive 7-week workshop on post-Grotowskian practices—and parallel to our ongoing classes in choreography—we are now embarking on 7 weeks of training in the Feldenkrais Method®, under the guidance of a certified Awareness Through Movement (ATM) practitioner and member of the Voice and Text Department at the Royal Shakespeare Company. At the beginning of the class, we all stand in a circle and are asked to say our names out-loud, followed by a couple of lines we have memorized. Addressing each other comes easy as we have been working as an ensemble for a while now and we all know a bit of text because we have just come out of our first practical assessment. I feel relatively relaxed in the task, since prior to the MA, I have trained for 5 years in classical acting and worked professionally for 2.

We are then instructed to lie on the floor. We are encouraged to bring our attention to specific parts of our body—the sacrum or the soles of our feet, for example—and observe how they feel, “from the inside” and “in the present,” how they appear to our awareness as parts of the living whole that is our body. Our tutor’s voice assumes a soothing tone, and phrasings such as “please do go gently” or “force nothing” are frequently pronounced. Between each verbal prompt, we are given plenty of time to immerse ourselves in the specificity of our affective, embodied state. I have done similar exercises in the past and, in this instance, I simply enjoy connecting to my body. One brief moment seems to thwart this flow: when asked to attend to my eye sockets, I realize I don’t know what the English word means. Plus, in the Greek conservatoire setting of my previous training, I had been asked to focus on my “eyes” but never the “sockets”. Momentarily, my mind wanders to familiar meanings of the word in English and for the first time I visualize my eyes as powered by electricity. But soon enough I assume it is the small cavity where the eye nests that is of interest, so I tentatively bring attention to the left, then the right one.

For the next couple of hours, our tutor will guide us through 2 ATM lessons on breath. At the beginning of each sequence, we bring awareness to our breath, primarily grounding our attention to the sternum, ribcage and lower abdomen, noticing “the function that feels natural and comfortable to us, individually”. Then, each lesson builds towards an inversion of lower diaphragmatic breathing. The first invites puffing up the sternum (“reverse breathing”) and the second locking the in-breath inside the torso and shifting it between the abdomen and the

sternum (“see-saw breathing”). Following this, we are returned to abdominal breathing, which, by comparison, feels effortless, pleasurable even. To conclude, we stand in the circle again, repeating our names and texts. I am the last one to do so, and, upon hearing my delivery, the tutor exclaims enthusiastically: “Listen to how his voice has dropped! It is now fully in the body, isn’t it?”

Encouraged by the I-voice of phenomenological description and the avowed preference of somatic disciplines for the experiential qualities of the I-body,¹ I wish to pause for a moment and listen-back to this brief episode of personal vocal history—to engage, in other words, in what I have termed as “autobiophony” (*αὐτός* = self, the same + *βίος* = life + *φωνή* = sound, voice).² As the voicer bracketing, looping and amplifying a vocal memory from 2006, I am less concerned with presumed narrative accuracy or any opportunity to productively extrapolate first-person knowledge to other discursive domains. Rather, my attitude is *aporetic* (see Derrida 1993): I seek to linger on the question marks raised by a somatic approach to vocality, puzzle over the simultaneous possibilities and impossibilities of yoking the somatic to the vocal, or search for the conditions under which multiple physiovoical potentialities are resolved into seemingly singular answers.

Sandra Reeve identifies the conscious exploration and re-shaping of “particular movements,” the provision of “a wider choice of movement possibilities” and the release of “fixed habits” (2011, 18) as the shared aims of somatic methodologies, including Body-Mind Centering, Feldenkrais or Laban/Bartenieff. Somatics help “people to be bodily aware of how they do, *as they are doing it*, rather than retrospectively, or not at all” (Reeve, 2011, 21, emphasis in the original). The implied temporality is that past experience has been rendered habitual bodily pattern and that tuning into the present through somatic attention opens up a future which is not a mere repetition of the habit. A similar progression was built into the structure of our ATM session: from habitual voicing, through investment in the present of breath, towards new possibilities of speaking. Meanwhile, this sequential progression was imbricated into a certain circularity. At the macrostructural level, the first ATM lesson was followed by a second which built on knowledge experientially acquired through the first; the session closed by revisiting the opening task; and 6 weeks of further ATM sessions, similar in structure, were to follow. Microstructurally, the “present” of guided awareness involved sustained repetition—of reversing or “see-saw”-ing the breath, for example.

Such intermingling of the linear and the cyclic is not uncustomary in performer training (see Evans *et al.*, 2019). The inclusion of voice, however, adds further complexity. In many of the available methodologies and much writing about somaticity, the vocal ensues. The trainee undertakes body-awareness tasks and, upon cultivating an enhanced physical understanding of movement function, voicing is (expected to be) affected. This was evidently the case in the above example: we voiced at

the start, moved “in the present of exploration” and concluded with spoken text. Although other strands of somatic exploration may *also* include sounding, the norm is that voice still tends to follow, even *within* the exercises offered. Anchoring the self through movement (however subtle or minimal) is the present, while voicing through the soma may be perceived as the present but is experientially a futurity. I am asked to feel my breath, “in the present,” as of the body, and this new sensation is somehow transplanted to the (subsequent) moment of speaking.

And this is where aporias emerge, if we are to take somaphonics—the somatic co-constitution and inclination of the physical and the vocal towards each other—seriously: When both voices and bodies are of pedagogic interest, is the somatic, embedded in the conceptual nexus of the body-as-lived, always a way or means to vocality?³ If somatics in physical training can fully invest in the present of movement, does the inclusion of live sonority render the voice either *a telos for* the soma (an outcome, symptom or aspiration of the bodied self) or *a measure of* the soma (a criterion retrospectively applied to check if the body operates at the level of the somatic)? How do I train as a somatic voicer if, by definition and intentionality, body somaticity exists only in the present but vocal somaticity is relegated to a future (though often discussed as pertaining to the same present)? In the moment of physio-vocal presence, when is voicing experienced as somatically attuned, when as somatized and when as somatic? In other words: when is somaphonics and which are its implications for the trainee and their agency as vocal bodies?

If coming to voice through the soma both embraces and negates the foundational presupposition of somaticity-as-presence, how is somaphonic training achieved and who is the subject of such training? In the autobiophonic episode above, I enter the scene as a professional, previously trained actor, I voice, I experience (new) somatic training, then voice again. I have experienced similar exercises before but not in contexts where such experiences were delineated as somatic in these terms. Even if my starting point were that of no prior training, the key tenet of somatic pedagogy would still be a methodology of de-training and re-training; I am invited to go through movement patterns that (may) feel unnatural (breathing upwards in the sternum or locking the air in) and this culminates in increased functionality. The somatic at the physical level instils a move away from any blocks resulting from “kinaesthetic weakness” (Reeve, 2011, 18) or “harmful bodily manners” (Tavainen, 2019, 8). Somatic de-patterning is intended to make the body aware of its established working modalities and, as a result, reinstate alternative neurological patterns of response that have fallen out of preference and may be more accurate, helpful and efficient. The body-future after somatic training is one of increased options through a return to the body-past prior to blocks and habits.

If trainees in somatics, as is frequently the case, are also invited to sound through humming, extra-normal vocalization or improvised text, a similar “return” to a non-prohibitive vocal state—akin

perhaps to the phonic as exceeding the linguistic—can be assumed. As the autobiophonic episode indicates, however, aesthetic voicing poses a further challenge to the parallel development of somaticity and vocality. The fact that we are expected to know “some text”—against which we are to discern any improvement—is of significance: to interweave somaphonics with vocal aesthetics, a certain level of training needed to have taken place *elsewhere*. This is a recurring strategy in descriptions of somaphonic exercises: the trainee can use text or songs memorized at some point in the past or in other classes, have a printout of a script or a score within easy reach, or learn such material prior to the somatic exploration and bookend the experience with a return to it. In some cases, the trainee already partakes in advanced, postlinguistic cultures of aesthetic vocality. When, for example, Päivi Järviö (2015) or Charulatha Mani (2019) propose ground-breaking approaches to Western classical song or Karnatic singing, their turn to somaesthetics and phenomenality de-patterns abstract musicianship by foregrounding sensation and vocal materiality but can only function because a codification of the trainee’s vocal embodiment has already preceded this training. Their trainees are already singers of these respective traditions—or, at least, singers-in-the-making. In my example, too, I experience these “new” lessons as somatic, because they de-stabilize aspects of my classical training, although prior knowledge of diaphragmatic breathing and (Shakespearean) text enable this very same vocal act. How can the here-and-now of the soma and that of the aesthetic vocal body coalesce if the former de-trains and the latter operates only through previous training? How is somaticity—which re-trains established movement patterns in the present—rendered aesthetic somaphonics—which presupposes a pre-existing physiovocal skillset (even if only to de-pattern it)?

Somatics, and by extension somaphonics, assume, it seems, their generative force if experienced as interruptions, subversions or ruptures—of bodily or physiovocal habituation, of canonical pedagogy, of daily or formal trainings.⁴ In the domain of somatic philosophy, Richard Shusterman has argued for somaticity as the ground of all experience. His somaesthetics advocates for a move away from analysing somatic experience, through pragmatically re-imagining new possibilities (of somatised discourse) and applying them to practice (2012). Practice, therefore, in the philosophical tradition is proposed as a rupture. By contrast, within artistic practice and enquiry, practical engagement is in place by default. Which further opportunities for subversion are, then, afforded to artist-researchers—and, more specifically, to practitioner-scholars of the somaphonic?

If, for example, the somaphonic has emerged as an interruption and critique of the abstract, reflective and logocentric and a desire for phonocentrism, can textuality be avoided altogether? Even if I were to diminish the importance of the lines our group of trainees delivered in the circle, our tutor’s verbal cues acted as a constant script of the experience. To be “in the moment,” to experience the lesson as a somatic one, external instruction—which could be perceived as addressing my body as an object-body or instrument—encouraged individual awareness and personalized re-training. The text of the

instructions, logos-as-language, seems to operate somatically only if internally resolved: I listen to this external voice but I subsume it to my own internal voice-over; I am instructed to pay attention but, “individually,” I decide to instruct my awareness accordingly, “in my own voice”. Words, and the way they are rendered physical sensation, matter. As a foreigner, I first become aware of the distance between the external and the internal voices when new vocabulary makes it impossible to perform the externally-instructed text as internally-motivated. To conjoin the outside voice with the felt experience of my body (and, later, with my speaking voice), a linguistic con-sensus is necessary. This linguistic gap is experienced as productive at first: I search for my eye sockets and this very searching is a process anchoring my awareness; the unknown word is a chance to attach a new visual schema to the somatic experience of my cranial structure.

I sense that my tutor finds a similar chance to acknowledge the somatic in his supportive closing statement, that my voice had dropped and was more “in the body”. In this case, however, I am unmistakably reminded of the fact that words come with value judgements and encultured preferences. As a trained tenor, my vocal placement is quite high and, as a Greek, an onset with full vocal closure and less chest resonance is part of my cultural voicescape. After 2 hours on the floor, I feel slightly tired and cold and I can only achieve partial closure when formulating my text at the end of the session. My teacher—perhaps less keen on full-on laryngeal attack by training, culture-specific vocal habitus or class positionality?—hears a successful break into somaphonics in what I experience as a disconnection between my physicality and my voice. It is precisely such a moment, when I, as an autobiophonic voicer, live through my voice as overlappingly too close and too distanced, as expressing a singular identity but also exposing the self as an ongoing process, that provokes some further aporias: How are such discrepancies between the somaphonic as felt, as sensorially perceived and as culturally textualized be resolved in the trainee’s body? How does the anti-logocentric impetus behind vocal somatics foreground the experiential, when this is always-already interwoven with a multiplicity of “scripts”—when, in other words, attending to the vocal soma through awareness and sensation is in itself a *phonotechnics*: a systematized methodology and technique of experiencing, re-organizing and perceiving vocal somaticity? More importantly, in the continuum ranging from the felt, sensual and affective aspects of vocal somaticity to its *tekhne* and texts, where can we discover possibilities, not only for new articulations of the somaphonic but also for a new politics of the vocal soma?

References

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¹ For an overview of phenomenological writing, see van Manen, 1984. For the first-person perspective pursued in somatics, key points of reference are Hanna, 1973 and Eddy, 2002.

² Since 2015, I have developed a practice-research project that interrogates the ways in which a voicer understands, processes and narrates the makings of their voice. The project proposed *autobiophony*—roughly translating as vocal autobiography/narration of the vocal self/memoire of the self in voice—as its core methodology. This led to the creation of a performance lecture, used between 2016 and 2020 as part of my pedagogy at the University of Exeter, then more broadly circulated, for example at the Norwegian Theatre Academy in 2018, the University of Portsmouth in 2019 or the University of Malta in 2020 (Thomaidis, 2018

and 2019). For reflexive writing on the two possible scenaria of subjectivity-making through voice, see Cockburn and Thomaidis (2017, 217-18).

³ Both *somaphonics* and *phonotechnics* are my neologisms, and were developed as responses to research developed at the intersections of voicing and somatics (e.g. Boston and Cook, 2009; Tarvainen, 2019; Kapadocha, 2020).

⁴ It is not uncommon for the genesis of somatic methodologies to occur as such an interruption or rupture—the overcoming of his recurrent laryngeal hoarseness by Alexander or his knee injury by Feldenkrais are ubiquitous examples (see Worth, 2015, 216).