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Vocal somaesthetics as a way to democratize the use of human voice

We have countless unspoken norms in our culture about who can use their voices, in what kind of situations, and in what ways. As human beings we have, however, a need to express our emotions and thoughts vocally. In addition, we have a great vocal potential for this kind of expression as we are capable of producing a huge variety of different vocal sounds. Nevertheless, the advanced and quite complex rules of speaking (language) and singing (music) may easily overrule the more basic bodily-vocal needs. Konstantinos Thomaidis and Ben Macpherson (2015) have even argued that the “tyrannies of understanding” dominate the human voice in our culture by restraining the voice to the fields of language and music.

In this paper I will present the vocal somaesthetics as a way to examine, conceptualize, and evaluate human vocal behaviour from the new perspectives. The aim is to reconsider the value of vocalizing from the bodily and experiential point of view, not from the perspectives of articulate communication or traditional aesthetic values of music and singing. Vocal somaesthetics is an area of study I have been developing lately on the basis of somaesthetics, voice studies, and ethnomusicology (Tarvainen 2016). The concept of democratization is based here on the ethnomusicological tradition (see e.g. Krüger 2011).

Richard Shusterman (2008) has articulated the difference between representational, performative, and experiential somaesthetics. The first one refers to the bodily techniques and manners that concentrate on the body’s external appearance. The second one is focused on building bodily power and performance, as well as developing skills. The third one is focused on the somatic experience itself.

The somaesthetics of representation is dominant in our culture. In the social sciences it has been argued, likewise, that we are living in a culture of appearances (Liimakka 2013). The culture of appearances is shown in our vocal behaviour as well. It is ruled by performance- and appearance-oriented attitudes. We reach for the external vocal ideals established by pedagogies and vocal role models (singers, actors, etc.). The main focus is often on producing a “good”, “beautiful”, and “clear” voice that can tolerate long-term strain. We have a tendency to focus on vocal sounds as heard – consequently, the bodily experience and the pleasure of vocalizing as such are far too often disregarded.

In the previous research of voice, the focus has usually been on the voice as heard or measured as an acoustic fact. In contrast to the traditional research of human vocality, vocal somaesthetics is interested in the bodily sensations of what it feels like to vocalize or to listen to another person vocalizing. Vocal sound as heard is understood here being only a part of the multimodal experience of vocalizing and listening. Therefore the vocal sound does not have to be the main criteria when evaluating for example “good singing”.

By taking the focus to the aesthetics of somatic experience we can reconsider the value of different kinds of vocalizations. For example, we can find somaesthetic value in the singing of a Deaf or a poor-pitch singer. The singing may have a great proprioceptive and aesthetic value for the singer him/herself, regardless of the individual vocal skills or musicality in the traditional sense. This way we can seek potentials to democratize vocal expression by appreciating the cultivated proprioceptive experience over the vocal sounds produced. From this starting point we can also approach the vocal practices that have remained marginal in our culture, and create new vocal practices that focus on the cultivation of the vocal somaesthetic experience.