

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

Anne Tarvainen PhD

Faculty of Communication Sciences
University of Tampere
Finland

The Soma as the Core of Aesthetics, Ethics and Politics
Szeged, Hungary, June 26-28th, 2017

Deaf Girl Singing...

Video: “Deaf Girl singing Someone like you”

- <https://youtu.be/Gb0SX9bYyTc>
- Published: 17.3.2012
- Video uploaded by: PuppetMaster415
- Singer on the video: NativeYellowOwl92
- Song: Adele’s hit “Someone Like You” (2011).

Statistics 14.2.2017

- 611 092 views
- 13 148 likes
- 901 dislikes
- 3761 comments

Attitudes found in the comments (preliminary overview)

- advising, comparing, defending the singer, abusive, feeling sorry for the singer, “realistic”, sceptical, encouraging, wondering, admiring

“I'm going to be honest and say that you aren't a great singer but I can tell that you tried your hardest and you are so brave to put this on the internet not even knowing what it sounds like and I greatly admire that. You are such an inspiration. If you love singing that keep doing it. ❤️”

“If she is really deaf, then she is very good, you cannot compare a deaf person singing with a non-deaf person singing, its not a fair comparison, just like paralympics do not compete in the normal Olympics. [...]”

“this is fucking shit. give up”

“Is this a joke? This is offensive to real deaf people you racist!!!”

(Youtube comments)

“There's something captured here in your performance that is so beautiful that most people won't understand it. Outside of the tangible concepts of music like melody, harmony, and rhythm, there lies the things that are often forgotten, for they take a keen ear and an open heart to be realized. The color, texture, soul, emotion, the reason that the music was ever brought into existence: this is what makes it beautiful. You have opened my eyes to this intangible concept in it's purest form and I thank you.” [...]

(Youtube comment)

“To many of you who discriminated me as a person who could not sing or my speech or my disabilities. Yes, it is very harsh when people discriminate someone's abilities. Yes, I am deaf but does not mean that I thought that was a "Good Singer" then. I was expressing the words and facing the reality that people would judge. [...] Please choose your words wisely. People who have tough life or struggle with their any kind of disabilities are not always open and express their feelings because we all feel in denial. During that time I was going through hard time and getting out of my comfort zone. I was doing it for myself. [...] I am very proud of myself that I put it out for the world to see that I am nowhere near perfect. If I had a stutter speech I would have sing anyways. To the people who generously support me with positive statements, I want to say thank you so much. You gave the light in my heart. So many goose bumps from head to toe. I am so touched. Please don't Judge others. Encourage them to make their lives better. <3” (Singer’s comment)

Main arguments

1. As human beings we have a need to express our emotions and thoughts vocally.
2. Vocal norms help us to communicate but at the same time they restrain our vocal expression.
3. Vocal norms are often based on the acoustic qualities of vocal sounds.
4. With vocal somaesthetics it will be possible to shift the focus from voice as heard to voice as bodily experience. The aesthetic value of singing can be found in the proprioceptive and interoceptive experience of a singer or a listener.

1. Vocal needs

- A need to express emotions and thoughts vocally
- Great vocal potential: huge variety of different vocal sounds
- Lived body has needs and potentials it strives to fulfil and organize. The body-self has an order – it structures, needs, demands, and organizes itself. (Levin 1989, 98–100.)
- Body has its own ways to organize affects, body movements, vocal expressions, and vocal experiences.

2. Vocal norms

- “Tyrannies of understanding” restrain the voice to the fields of language and music (Thomaidis & Macpherson 2015).
- Push and pull effects: the raw emotional vocalizations and the restraining effect of culture on them (Klaus R. Scherer 1994).
- Culture shapes our bodily appearance and behaviour as well as the ways we experience our bodies. The embodied actions, in turn, keep the culture animated and alive. (Shusterman 2012, 4, 27, 31.)

3. Voice as heard

- Representational, performative, and experiential somaesthetics (Shusterman 2008)
- The somaesthetics of representation is dominant in our culture.
- Culture of appearances (Liimakka 2013)
- Culture of appearances in the vocal behaviour:
 - performance- and appearance-oriented attitudes
 - aesthetic ideals and the performance capacity of voice
 - external vocal ideals
 - focus on vocal sounds as heard
 - the bodily experience of vocalizing is often disregarded

Vocal somaesthetics

- Theoretical background in Shusterman's somaesthetics, voice studies, and ethnomusicology
- Focus on the bodily and experiential dimensions of producing vocal sounds and listening to them
- Focus on the proprioception and interoception
- The aesthetic, vocal and bodily relation of a human being to other human beings (as well as to him/herself)
- Suggesting new practices for cultivating and enhancing the vocal *experience*
- Examining all kinds of vocalizations that human being is capable of producing — not limited to the established vocal arts alone
- Democratizing the vocal conventions

(Tarvainen 2016)

4. Democratizing the vocal conventions

The aims of the vocal somaesthetics is...

- a. to illuminate and make visible the vocal norms in our culture
- b. to explore how the norms effect the vocalizing body and the vocal experience
- c. to change the focus from the voice as heard to the bodily experiences of listening and vocalizing > to find out the aesthetic value of proprioceptive experience in vocalizing
- d. to appreciate the cultivated proprioceptive experience over the vocal sounds produced
- e. to develop practices for anyone to enjoy their voices

Democratization in music research and education

- Two main traditions in Finland:
 1. The pragmatic tradition based on John Dewey's thinking (e.g. Väkevä & Westerlund 2007)
 2. The ethnomusicological tradition
- Democratization is in the core of the ethnomusicological tradition (Krüger 2011)
 - universal musicality
 - questioning the western elitist believes in musical learning
 - culture of tolerance
 - “how people live in the music they make” (Bakan 1999, 17–18)

What is singing?

- What it means to hear music? How the experience of inhabiting an extraordinary body can inflect the perception and cognition of music? Autistic hearing, blind hearing, mobility-inflected hearing and deaf hearing... (Straus 2011, 158; McKay 2013, 124)
- What it means to sing? What is singing? What could be considered as singing? Is there singing without melody? Is there singing without sound?
- Instead of evaluating what is “good singing”, it could be considered in what ways singing is manifested in this kind of extraordinary body. What kind of singing this unique body produces?
- Can this, for example, be considered as singing? Sign language choir: https://youtu.be/gD1dCu_ZALg



Thank you!

www.annetarvainen.fi