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*This article is a slightly corrected version of the previous one.*

**Anne Tarvainen**

## **Empathetic Listening: Toward a Bodily-Based Understanding of a Singer's Vocal Interpretation**

In this article I will introduce a concept of *empathetic listening* and highlight some methodological considerations of the concept. The aim of my article is to bring the empathetic point of view alongside the analytical way of listening in order to study popular music singing. Almost all music listeners are able "to put their souls" into what they are listening to, but the awareness of this emotional or affective level of listening varies. The important questions here are: how to bring the affective and bodily aspects of listening into words so that this subjective level of music perception could be shared and discussed in more details (1); and how the bodily based nuances of a singing voice act as a part of meaning formation in an listening event? The starting point of my approach is phenomenological. I also use methods from phonetics and vocology to bring *the physiological body* alongside *the experiential body* in this observation (2).

### **1. The bodily experience of listening to a singing voice**

One of the main considerations in my study is that singing is motion (see Tarvainen 2004). The bodily motions of singing are the ones that give birth to the sounds of a singing voice itself; and vice versa, a singer's voice is the medium that brings his bodily movements to the listener. As a listener it is possible to *be* actually *moved* by someone else's singing. The Finnish phenomenologist, Timo Klemola, has pointed out that when one watches another person moving, one's own body starts to slightly "imitate" the body movements he has seen (2005: 100-101). These *micromovements* are kinds of impulses or "beginnings" of the movements one has just seen. (Klemola 2005: 100-101) I argue, that the same thing happens also when we listen to a person singing. When we listen to another bodily being, we experience his voice with our whole body; it is not just a matter of listening with the ears (3). The voice of another bodily being becomes meaningful to us because we, as bodily beings, can relate to the bodily aspects that a voice carries with it.

Klemola argues that with *the proprioceptive senses* we can feel the inner space of our own body, the inner movements, and also the postures of the body (2005: 85, 91). These senses are, however, quite unfamiliar to our western understanding of the body. It is not common to concentrate on developing these senses in our culture. (Klemola 2005: 85, 91.) I see, for example the athletes, dancers, and singers as an exception. They are used to relying on the proprioceptive senses in their work. Johan Sundberg has pointed out that as singers improve, they tend to rely more and more on their inner bodily perception of their own voices than to the audible aspects of their voices (1987: 160).

We can all understand another person's voice on a metaphorical and bodily meaningful level without being fully aware of our own body. But to research how these meanings are constructed in a listening event, we need to go to the point where the singer's voice "hits" us, meaning our own bodies.

## 2. Vitality affects and vocal flow

When we talk about singers' interpretations, the emotions have to be considered as well. It seems to me, though, that the classification of emotions as we know them in our everyday speech (like "sadness" or "happiness") is a very inflexible way to approach the nuances of the singing voice. The developmental psychologist Daniel Stern (1985) has brought about the concept of *vitality affects*, meaning the bodily precursors of emotions (4). He differentiates the categorical affects like happiness, sadness, and hate from the vitality affects, which are more undefined and elusive. The categorical affects are more occasional while vitality affects are a part of our being all the time.

The wide spectrum of vitality affects can be described for example with words like: "surging", "fading away", "fleeting", "explosive" and so on (Stern 1985, 54). On this level everything in the world has a quality in the way it moves or appears. I can walk or talk rapidly or slowly. This slowness for example is the common factor in my behaviour, even though the behaviour itself is different (walking or talking). This level of qualities is the level of vitality affects. These aspects are the most interesting when we look at the bodily based formation of meanings in singing. It is also a level that hasn't been debated much yet. For example, there are no specific terms to describe the vitality affective level in singing. However, there are the quite specific ways of describing singing as a physical phenomenon (5).

I use the concept of *vocal flow* to describe the vitality affective and experiential level in singing and listening. With this concept I will illuminate the aspects that are connected to the actual movements of a body as well as to the more broad metaphorical and emotional meanings that may rise from those movements. Vocal flow is found, however, somewhere between these two. It is not on the level of the actual physical movements (as vocology for example sees them). It is also not about the emotional aspects that we quite well agree on and are able to verbalize (categorical affects). However, it is connected to both of them. The pulses, pushes, pulls, pauses etc. are parts of vocal flow. A singer can sing without feeling (without sadness or joy, for example), but he cannot sing without vocal flow, which means the constantly changing (or static) state of his body made audible in his voice.

## 3. Empathetic listening as a method

Empathetic listening is a listening strategy that is emotional and intentional at the same time. This means, that it is *not* exactly the same way I listen to music as a fan. I let myself be moved by a singer's voice, but at the same time I am aware of how my body relates to the changing qualities of vocal flow – what kind of "pushes" and "fading away" it senses; what kind of bodily reality it understands that a singer's voice mediates to me. I let my body identify itself with the other singer's movements. With empathetic listening I aim to recall at least two things:

1. I try to illuminate *the level of the vitality affects / vocal flow* in the singer's performance as it appears to the listener in the event of listening.
2. I bring forward the importance of *a listener's bodily awareness* in understanding the bodily-based meanings in the event of listening to a singing voice.

I have noticed that it is way too easy to bypass the level of vitality affective understanding when listening. The mind starts to analyze quickly what exactly happens (how the singer's vocal cords may vibrate etc.). The reaction that a singer's voice raises in my own body is, therefore, easily ignored. The analytical understanding is, however, based on my bodily understanding. If I want to

understand this bodily level in the process of meaning formation, I have to let myself “live through” the listening experience and be aware of it at the same time.

The empathetic and analytic ways of listening are the two ends of a continuum of listening (see the table: Empathetic and Analytic Listening). Why do I separate the empathetic listening from the analytic one, especially when I understand that the empathetic listening is analytic in its own way as well? Empathetic listening is not only to listen with one’s body like the analytic listening is not only to listen with one’s “mind”. It is far more complex than that. These two modes of listening are two different attitudes or ways of experiencing. I cannot stop feeling with my whole body, when I’m listening analytically. The differences of these two modes of listening rises from the aspects I focus on when I’m listening. In analytic listening my focus is on the small nuances and details of the voice I listen to. The listening is concentrated in ears. The main question here is: What do I hear? In empathetic listening the focus is instead more on my whole body, in the experience of understanding a singer’s movements with my own body. The main question is: How does it feel?

With empathetic listening I can be sensitive to find out the, so called, key spots from the material. By this I mean, the keys to reading the meanings that are relevant to me as a listener in a certain moment. With analytic listening, I outline the ways in which the different details (voice qualities, sounds, song lyrics) collapse to each other in the event of listening, what the relationship of these aspects is to each other in the formation of the meaning of the song. In the empathetic listening I observe these elements in relation to my body.

Empathetic listening allows “the flowing essence” of singer’s interpretation to live without trying to capture or arrest it right away. Analytic listening enables the capturing of certain aspects from the performance heard. In the event of listening the empathetic and the analytic modes of listening may blend – and often they do. The analytic listening in my study includes methods from phonetics and vocology. It also contains the analysis of musical aspects of a song.

#### **4. A brief example of analysis**

In my study I have concentrated to the relationship of song lyrics and a singer’s voice quality, and how the relationship of these two affects the listener as a bodily being. I am interested in how the possible meanings become actualized in this process. The next brief example of analysis is from Björk’s song *Undo*, from her album “Vespertine” (2001) (see the transcription: Björk, *Undo*, verse 1, phrases 3-4) (6). I will analyze the third and the fourth phrase of the first verse, where Björk sings: “‘a’ give yourself in”. With this analysis I will give you one possible reading of her vocal interpretation. I concentrate to the flow of her voice, since it is meaningful also from the perspective of the lyrics. In this song Björk sings about relaxing and letting go.

Even though my analysis started with the empathetic listening, I start this representation from the analytical end of the process. That is, I explain the concrete aspects first and then move to the affective level. As we can see from the transcription, the third phrase of the first verse starts with a loud inhalation. After this the flow stops for a moment before the first phoneme starts. “A” here doesn’t have any grammatical meaning. This sound is quite open (as we can see from the phonetic transcription). This sound is here only to enable this movement: the block and the release from it. The vocal cords are at first tightly pressed against each other, and then opened with a burst. In the word “in” (on the second row) the blocking of the flow happens in many different ways. In the beginning, the first phoneme of the word starts to “roll on” normally. On the third eighth note of the bar the sound changes to be a little bit more narrow. And on the fourth eighth note of the bar it suddenly stops. The vocal cords snap shut and a short pause follows. After that a new phoneme

starts with effort, with the creaky voice quality. After two eighths comes a short pause before a hasty inhalation. After this the vocal cords close again, and after a while they open with a burst in the beginning of the next bar. On the third eighth of this bar the sound changes to be more narrow and nasal, but after a while it changes back to being more open again. The last phoneme of the word “in” [n] is a short one and it has a wave-like vibrato with it.

The following definitions which I have picked up from the previous chapter refer to the level of vitality affects: “release from block”, “tightly pressed”, “open with a burst”, “blocking of the flow”, “rolling of the sound”, “a change to more narrow”, “sudden stop”, “snap shut”, “start with an effort”, “hasty inhalation”, “a wave-like vibrato”. One conclusion of this analysis would be to say that what is essential in Björk’s interpretation, is a sort of clinging. This clinging is carried with the attributes that are stopped, holding tight, intimate, and narrow. This is heard and felt in Björk’s interpretation. She breathes in quickly, pulling air into her lungs. She doesn’t want to give the phonemes out, but instead shuts her vocal chords and cuts off the air from running out. She also narrows the space of her mouth during the long phoneme – just as if her body wouldn’t want to give away that phoneme in it’s proper shape, but wants to cling to it and keep it inside. The vocal self that Björk creates wants to avoid the change and letting go on the level of her bodily being. It wants to stop things from happening (the flow of the voice from running), and also perhaps to stop time. This attitude is in interesting contradiction to the semantic level of the song lyrics, where the lyrical self of the song advises one to “give herself in”.

The analysis here is about *how* something happens more than what exactly happens. What I have done here is to bind the bodily sensitive way of listening to the analytic perspectives of vocology and phonetics. When doing this kind of an analysis, it is essential to look at the way the words are used. How do you describe the bodily aspects of singing so that the reader is able to intuitively relate to them? In the transcription, there are only the analytically audible aspects of a singer’s voice. The experience of the vocal flow is, however, absent. This is because the flow itself is a living and ever-changing thing that cannot be captured. One can only outline it. All aspects presented in the transcription are a part of a vocal flow, but the vocal flow cannot be reduced to any one of those aspects. I have tried to show how certain kinds of physiological aspects of voice generate a certain kind of vocal flow. The qualities of the vocal flow are “transcribed” in the analysis text itself, and they are understood with the help of bodily awareness in listening.

## **5. In conclusion**

Ethnomusicologist John Blacking has written: “So often, the expressive purpose of a piece of music is to be found through identification with the body movements that generate it, and these in turn have had their origins in culture as much as in the peculiarities of an individual” (1973, 110). He continues: “... to feel with the body is probably as close as anyone can ever get to resonating with another person” (Blacking 1973, 111).

With empathetic listening I don’t try to know what the other person (singer) is experiencing, or which aspects in his singing are made on purpose, and which have come to his voice without him being aware of. Instead, empathetic listening is about what a listener experiences and how he makes it meaningful. With these different perspectives of empathetic and analytic listening I have illuminated the processes of possible meaning formations in listening event. As bodily beings we share the meanings that rise from our listening experiences. At the same time, we are all unique bodily beings, and thus understand each other’s expressions in our own personal way.

## Notes

1. In my work I approach affects from the perspective of an individual. Affects has been discussed earlier from the cultural point of view in the context of popular music studies (see e.g. Grossberg 1992). Philip Tagg has discussed musical affects in his work concerning popular music (1979). My observation of affects is however based on the thoughts of Daniel Stern (1985) as I later discuss in more details.
2. In my study I approach a singer's and a listener's body from three different perspectives using the concepts of *experiential*, *physiological* and *cultural body* (see Tarvainen 2006). In this article I will concentrate to the first two of these.
3. This kind of bodily sensitive experiencing (and also actual imitating) of other singers vocal expressions is an important way of learning to sing among popular music singers.
4. Stern's concept of vitality affects has been applied to the study of music before e.g. by Hallgjerd Aksnes (1998).
5. Although I think that it may be impossible, and even unnecessary, to create a certain way to talk about vitality affects in singing. Vitality affects are always connected to the listener's own bodily understanding, and by being so, there is no need to try to categorize this level.
6. I have analyzed this song more extensively in my previous article (Tarvainen 2005).

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**Table: Empathetic and analytic listening**

Empathetic listening	←continuum→	Analytic listening
“Listening” with the whole body.		Concentrating to the audible aspects in the event of listening. Focus on ears.
Experience. How does it feel?		Definition. What do I hear?
Finding the key spots from the material. (Let the focus wander to the key spots...) The aspects that moves me. Sensitivity.		How it is constructed? What kind of elements does it contain? Definition.
Presence and flow.		Linearity. Using transcription and words to make “a storyline” of what happens in the singer’s voice.

**Transcription: Björk, Undo, verse 1, phrases 3-4.**

3

*"A" give your- self*

4

Phonetic transcription is made by using IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet).  
 Explanations of the transcription symbols for voice quality (from Tarvainen 2005: 76):  
 (→) = a loud inhalation  
 ( | ) = holding up the breath  
 (< >) = a release of a glottal stop  
 (sawed line) = creak  
 (wavy line) = vibrato