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SINGER'S VOICE AND EXPRESSION

A Bodily Approach to Listening to a Singer,
Using Björk as an Example

English abstract for the doctoral thesis

Laulajan ääni ja ilmaisu

– *kehollinen lähestymistapa laulajan kuuntelemiseen,*
esimerkkinä Björk (2012)

What is *singer's expression* and how can it be approached? How does a listener understand a singer's expression through his or her own body? And what is the relationship between the singer's expression and the singer's voice? These are the primary questions of this research, which is a phenomenological study of the subject. The researcher examines the phenomenon in her own bodily experience using different methods of listening. The main aim of this research is to develop a new kind of body-based method for listening and analysing a singer's performance. The other important aim is to analyse the singer's expression and voice without losing the connection to the bodily experience and to the aspects that make the singer's performance "moving" and "touching". Another aim is to find ways to describe the singer's expression in greater detail.

The basic theoretical field of this study is phenomenological ethnomusicology. The focus is on the vocal expression of a human being – and how another human being can understand this expression. The phenomenology of body and movement is also an important field of study here (Timo Klemola, Jaana Parviainen, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone). The phenomenology of music is also included (Thomas Clifton, Juha Torvinen). Some concepts and methods outside the above theoretical frames are also used. These derive from the field of psychoanalytic research (Daniel N. Stern, Julia Kristeva) and also from phonetics and vocology (Anne-Maria Laukkanen and Timo Leino, John Laver).

The difference between the experiential body and the physiological body is established (cf. lived body and object body). The first is the location of the listener's experience and the second is the source of a singer's voice as an acoustic fact (singer's physiological body). Another essential pair of concepts is the ego-awareness and the body-awareness (Klemola). The former refers to thinking, remembering and other ego-based activity, while the latter refers to focusing on the bodily experience at hand. A listener may, for example, listen to music through the knowledge he or she has about the music (e.g. musical genres) (ego-

awareness), or focus instead on the nuances of the experience itself (body-awareness). In so doing the listener has thus moved away from the symbolic and is now closer to the semiotic aspects in the process of meaning formation (Kristeva).

A listener may even move away from verbalizing and categorising the emotions he is feeling and focus instead on what is actually felt in his/her body. What kind of sensations are at the core of the feeling itself? This means that the listener is now experiencing the vitality affects (e.g. "bursting sensation") as opposed to the categorical affects (e.g. sorrow, joy) (Stern). Now the listener is sensing the aspects of the singer's expression, here called the movement qualities. At this level the nuances of the singer's expression can be discussed in greater detail. Underlying all movement qualities are the basic qualities: tensional, linear, amplitudinal and projectional (Sheets-Johnstone).

This study is based on the two following ontological starting points: (1) A listener can sense the singer's expression with his own body and understand another bodily being through the proprioceptive inner sensitivity of his own body. The listener need not always be aware of this bodily process of understanding, although he may become more aware of it. (2) The singer's expression can "move" or "touch" the listener. This "being moved" can actually be felt as a sensation of movement or change in the proprioception of the body.

Experiential listening is a starting point in the process of listening in this study. It means surrendering to the music as a whole, listening without trying to achieve anything. The experience can take shape freely without words, categorisations or knowledge beyond the experience itself. Experiences are approached through different types of verbalizations, for example fictive writing. Experiential listening is a listening position in this study but not a method in its own right.

The first methodological listening position is empathetic listening that refers to listening with the whole body. The focus is on the listener's own proprioception, "the inner sense of the body". In empathetic listening the main aim is to sense the vitality affective movement qualities in the singer's performance. This is a kind of affect attunement, where present moments may arise (Stern). Through empathetic listening it is possible to identify the key phrases of a singer's performance. These are phrases that are affectively strong in the performance experienced. The methods of imitation (singing), drawing (graphic presentation of empathetic listening) and verbalization (metaphors) are used here.

The next phase of the listening process is analytic listening, a method where musicological (rhythm, melody), phonetic (articulation) and vocological (voice quality) aspects are considered. The singer's voice is listened to on the micro level as small fragments. The last phase of the whole listening process is to connect the understanding achieved through experiential and empathetic listening to the knowledge achieved with analytic listening.

The subject of the study is illustrated with an analysis of one vocal performance, the song *Undo* by the Icelandic singer Björk from her album *Vespertine* (2001). In experiential listening the most important experienced aspects are the "sense of space" and the "feel of opening". In empathetic listening the movement qualities that may have created these sensations are examined more minutely. The main movement qualities of the singer's expression in this performance are tightness, laboriousness, striving and relaxing, resistance to change, fulfilment, opening and dissolving. These are generated in turn by the micro level vitality affects such as pushing out, tension, voiding, relaxing, jerking, brokenness, fullness, softness, flexibility, porosity, impending etc.

Traces of the movement qualities can be also found in the singer's voice. For example, the quality of fulfilment is created with the attenuated syllable, increasing the intensity of the voice and increasing the space of the oral cavity. Laboriousness, for example, is created with creaky voice and constricted and laboured articulation.

The self of the song is internally contradictory: the verbal self (semantic level of the lyrics) wants to “surrender” and “undo”, the vocal self (the singer’s voice) continues pushing, trying and resisting instead. At times the vocal self is also duplicated and dispersed. This is achieved by a studio technical manipulation of the singer’s voice. By the end of the song the vocal self has found a way from tightness and laboriousness by filling itself, opening and finally by dissolving into a bigger acoustic space. In this way the self transcends its bodily obstacles and boundaries.

The main results of this study are the following: (1) The content of the singer’s expression consists of the vitality affective movement qualities. Pressing, curling up, expansion and gliding are examples of such qualities. (2) The singer’s expression is essentially fluent and dynamic. The sense of movement and change is typical of the vitality affects. The flow of expression however may also be stopped or stagnant in nature. It is possible to sense affective micro stories (cf. Stern) in the singer’s expression. “A quick tug inside that stops suddenly, a short pause and finally carefree letting go” is an example of this kind of dynamic micro story.

(3) The content of a singer’s expression is mediated by his voice. The listener can sense what kind of movements the singer has used while singing. For example: has the singer tensed his body while singing thereby tightening the quality to his expression (cf. Theo van Leeuwen)? To sing is to move. Without movement there would be no sound. References to a certain kind of expression and movement qualities can be found in the singer’s voice (the voice may, for example, be tight). But expression cannot be explained by the parameters of the singer’s voice alone. Expression is always understood in the experience, and this process of understanding is likely to vary from one listener to another. But even though we are all unique bodily beings, we can still find some common understanding in our bodily and vocal expressions.

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