

Space for Sound: Applying Vocal Music Pedagogy to Performance Art Practice

by Jocelyn Beausire

Similar to many children, my first experiences with the voice came in the form of free play, vocalizing and mimicry. My voice was a tool in its purest (and least polished) form, and it had wide applications beyond genre, style, and even the definition of “music.” For example, I vividly remember imitating (with the same dedication) my mother’s singing voice, the chirping and screaming of the great apes on Animal Planet, and the instruments in the Beatles’ “Yellow Submarine,” without recognizing any difference between the relative musicality of the sources.

“Jocelyn actively pursues innovative and creative ways to utilize a music degree that honors her unique gifts. She is extremely enterprising, which is a joy to witness. As a result of successful grant proposals, exciting travels have been a part of her musical journey. Jocelyn’s article will inspire a cultural shift in guiding singers to incorporate a music degree into something different than the traditional trajectory. Encouraging our singers to find their authentic voice is the ultimate goal.”—NATS member, Dr. Kari Ragan

The voice at this stage is untrained and psychologically unrestricted, and this freedom promotes an unfiltered and holistic approach to sound. As time goes on, and if they have an interest in applying it, the child’s voice is trained and primed. They are encouraged to focus on the technicalities of producing a particular sound, whether it be choral, music theater, or classical. The process begins with years of private training, evolving into courses and studios at a university or conservatory, and eventually (if interest and skill align) a career as a professional musician. Scientific and psychological research is ripe with specific goals for healthy and “artful” voice development as a child ages, and for many, this path is an ideal way to gradually build technique and strength. However, for others, it proves constrictive. Such a focused path can feel inconducive to a natural exploration of the voice beyond the few genres for which there are given sets of repertoire and established methods of teaching and practice.

After over a decade of training in classical voice, and almost two decades of training choral singing, I graduated from my Bachelor’s degree in music realizing the most joy I had through

singing was before I even realized my voice was an instrument. Rationally, I knew I could never again sing with the freedom I had as a child. However, my childlike conception of the voice -- as an innately flexible tool and as an extension of a larger, diverse soundscape -- I could use to reorient my practice. I began an effort to re-explore my voice’s expressive potential in a more holistic way, applying the tools I developed through training, but peeling off the constraints of genre and style, and in doing so, forged my own art practice.

Three major tenets of my education – space- and audience-based psychoacoustics, methods of music composition and sound processes, and the connectivity of my body systems to sound production and reception, – have become essential components of my own space, sound and movement-based solo performance art. My work additionally draws interdisciplinarily from my second bachelor’s degree in architecture, as well as other fields. Loosening my ties to musical genre, and even the definition of “music,” I have found a way to communicate through my voice in a trans-disciplinary, deeply personal way, which has opened doors to far-reaching opportunities.

Space and Psychoacoustics

My approach to voice-based performance art builds on research in the built environment and the interdisciplinary field of spatial psychoacoustics. Increased attention to the context around singing is an integral part of most training. Learning an aria, a singer must understand the emotional content of the libretto -- who is singing, to whom, and for what purpose. On a larger scale, the singer has to consider who their audience is, and on what stage they are singing. Through my development as a young singer, I realized that the audience fed directly into my performance, and their relative empathy and engagement could relationally either bolster or deflate my presence on stage. As a performer in my current context, the same is still true. I focus much of my performance art work around this relationship between the audience (observer) and my performing body (observed), a relationship which is even more power-based because of perceptions of my body as young, vulnerable, and female. Being first introduced to these ideas and dynamics through classical performance, I have enjoyed the liberation of being able to expose and explore them in my independent work.

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This interaction can also be magnified or minimized by the space in which the performance occurs. This variability is influenced not only by the physical, measurable acoustics, but also the connotative environmental context. A person singing alone in their bedroom produces a very different sound quality and performance than a person singing in a concert hall in front of thousands, in a foreign venue where they feel unwelcome, or in a small room in front of four jurors. The relationship between performer, audience, and space are inherently impactful to sound, no matter how much attention the performer pays to



smoothing, polishing, and professionalising. In my work, I focus intently on site and place, and the relationship between these factors and my performing body. I have done many site-specific performances, where the piece is composed specifically with the histories and connotations of a place in mind. For example, a three hour piece I performed in the Atacama Desert in Chile, titled *from: on, of*, focused on my family's history in Chile, and the way the land was currently being exploited through mining and the privatization of resources (fig 1).

Process and Repetition

Stravinsky, in his *Poetics of Music*, wrote "My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles...The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit." These constraints form the basis of Western music composition, and deeply inform the processes I use to compose and perform my art pieces.

The phrase model, chord structures, and the seven-note scale are based on the compartmentalization of sound into distinct pitches, and groups thereof, in vertical and horizontal space and time. On a larger scale, the repetitive form of a da capo aria allows space for emotional (and therefore textural, tonal, color) differentiation. My performances are based on a set of parameters which I put in place at the beginning of the piece, and which, through repetition, become increasingly obvious to the audience. Developing my vulnerability as a performer within predetermined parameters during my formal training as a classical vocalist has allowed me to access this same vulnerability in my current performances. Within my self-imposed limits and processes, my body, voice, and emotions are wholly free, reacting to stimuli naturally and organically. For example, in my piece from 2018, *pause*, I layered processes -- laying down in a single motion over the course of eight minutes, holding an egg in my mouth, and vocal droning with a gradually increasing volume and pitch, microtonally approaching a pre-recorded vocal drone a pitch a half-step higher than the live version. Within these constraints, my body and voice are free to react: shaking, cracking, buckling, gasping, and organically emoting (fig 2).

Breath and the Body

Conceiving of freedom as created and exercised within parameters also factors into the way I explore my voice technically. My formal training has given me tools to create sound and understand the limits of my voice on a level I would

Fig 1: Stills of *from, on, of*, November 2018
3-hour performance in the Atacama Desert outside Coyo, Chile

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Fig 2: Still of *pause*, February 2018
8-minute performance

never have explored otherwise. In essence, they have allowed me to explore my limits, or parameters, and understand which of them are unchangeable and which can be developed or pushed against. This understanding has allowed me to heighten my vocal expression within self-imposed parameters during performance, for example, only singing through a certain resonant space (no matter how unorthodox), droning on a single pitch, or only performing the breaths between notes. In other pieces, it has allowed my voice to truly exercise as a “free” element within a construct of parameters dictating other variables in the performance.

“Living in the mountains of Colorado, I sometimes compare my work to that of an alpine guide. My job is to ensure that singers have the skills, equipment and knowledge needed to safely and enjoyably pursue their own dreams. Whether the goal is familiar or fantastic, together we find a path that will bring the student within striking distance of their chosen peak. While I help students appreciate and develop their unique gifts, the final responsibility for realizing their goals, and thus the final achievement, is their own.”-NATS member, Dr. Bonnie Draina

My classical training’s focus on physiological mechanisms has also enabled me to understand my entire body as interconnected, in service of sound production. Even in performances where I do not vocally produce sound, I maintain focus on the connection of my body and environment through breath. In this way, I have noticed that the visceral, body-based nature of voice makes it more similar to dance than to any other sound-producing instrument. My performance work highlights the connectedness of the voice and body, often linking them within the same process, under the same parameters, for a singular purpose. In doing so, I apply the way I think about my voice to the system of my body as a whole. This widens the avenues through which my work empathetically reaches the

audience – presenting them with a visceral visual that relates to an active auditory experience, all reinforcing a singular emotional message.

Applications: Teaching and Practice

I do not see my individual experience with formal music training as an isolated event. I know many singers who grew discontent with a particularly restrictive teacher or system, and who have since left music. Much of this falls on the teacher, and I have been lucky enough to have several who have supported my holistic view of the voice, and who have given me space for exploration, and their methodologies have informed my approach to teaching. Although my focus has been performance art, the essential nature of teaching by this logic is non-prescriptive of genre or style – it is a practice of broadening and letting the student determine their desired outcome.

In my art, I have applied both technical and conceptual frameworks around the voice which I absorbed through my education. As a teacher, it is difficult to prescribe which part of training will end up being influential in the life of the student, and encouraging an open exploration of singing, emotionally, conceptually, and technically, provides a young singer license to set their own goals and draw their own conclusions. In addition, utilizing cross-cultural listening and repertoire (outside the western classical canon), incorporating the child’s interdisciplinary interests outside the voice studio, and encouraging listening, free improvisation, and collaboration as parts of training all create space for a young singer to forge a more exploratory, fulfilling relationship with their voice that will support them for years to come.

Jocelyn Beausire is a performance artist, musician and spatial researcher based in Seattle, WA. Her work functions as temporal, musical architecture, constructing and activating an emotional, multi-sensory place to reveal relations between the performer, audience, and environment. Beausire graduated Magna Cum Laude with a double Bachelor of Arts in Architecture and Vocal Performance from the University of Washington in 2017. She has performed and presented her work with Pacific MusicWorks Opera, Base Experimental Arts + Space, On The Boards, as a resident artist at La Wayaka Current residency program in the Chilean Atacama Desert (2018), and as a resident artist with ChaNorth Artist Residency in New York (2019). Beausire is also a recipient of the CBE Robin M. Towne Endowed Scholarship in Acoustic Architecture (2016) and the UW Library Research Award Grand Prize (2017) for her acoustic ecological research. To learn more about her work, visit her website: www.jocelynbeausire.com Jocelyn is grateful to NATS members Dr. Kari Ragan and Dr. Bonnie Draina for their ongoing support of her voice and artistic development.