

VOICESCAPES: THE (EN)CHANTING VOICE & ITS PERFORMANCE SOUNDSCAPES

By Henry Johnson

Introduction

This is an exploration of a type of chanting that is not ordinarily considered music, but through “musical” parameters such as pitch, vocal style and intensity, it is often performed in settings in a musical way in order to create a vocal soundscape that surpasses that of everyday speech, although is distant from the singing voice in terms of its context and style of performance.¹ This paper draws on Schafer’s work on soundscape in order to explore the ways the voice forms part of a meaningful sound environment (e.g., 1977, 1992, 1993). A performer who uses chanting, or a vocal style very close to this creates its soundscapes, or “voicescapes”², in order to position it within a particular social situation and context to command a position of intense affect. This exploration of the socially performed voice shows that in some contexts it clearly has musical traits—something that challenges the boundaries of what music is or is not—and that social performance is an important process allowing such vocal performances to carry meaning. The discussion presents several examples of the chanting voice as a performing instrument that is essential to many contexts of everyday life. It is an instrument that creates voicescapes in a multitude of social settings in order to, for example, capture the attention of listeners, add expression to a situation, or position the chanter vis-à-vis an audience. The contexts in which such vocal performances are found include auctions, horse races, sports commentaries, marches, and markets. In such contexts the voice is performed in a chant-like way in order to capture the attention of an audience or to express in an emotional way a scene or image. In each, the voice is usually raised in pitch, in intensity, and it chants.³

Speech and Song

Particularly fascinating about the chanting voice is the fact that it is extremely difficult to differentiate it from what is usually thought of as an everyday voice. In terms of acoustics, “the voice organ seems to be used in the same way in singing as in speech,” although “in singing . . . the possibilities inherent in the normal voice organ are used in quite special ways,” that is, through such areas as breathing, vibrato, register, and pitch (Sundberg 2001, 123–25). This division is based on the two extremes where speech is seen to be at one end of a continuum and song at the other. However, there is no mention of the performed intricacies of, for example, breathing, vibrato, register, and pitch, in many everyday utterances that bridge the continuum between speech and song. This dichotomy was taken up by List (1963, 3) who noted that “certain cultures make a distinction between what is

referred to as speech or talking and what is referred to as song or singing. Other cultures do not necessarily make this distinction. Other cultures distinguish forms other than speech or song which to us may seem to be intermediate forms.” Indeed, it is only through ethnographies of speaking that one can attempt to understand the interconnections between verbal art and social use (e.g., Bauman and Sherzer 1989). Sherzer and Wicks, for example, have done much to examine and challenge the relationships between music and speech in Kuna discourse:

The relationship between language structure and musical structure, like the relationship between speech and song, can raise issues familiar to ethnomusicologists. . . . In this way linguistic and musical precision combine toward a descriptive understanding of the totality of Kuna ethnography of communication, from the perspective of a discourse-centered approach to both language and music. (Sherzer and Wicks 1982, 163)

In the discipline of ethnomusicology (the anthropology of music) the work of List (1963) is of particular importance in terms of examining classifications of speech and song and conceptual boundaries that help in its analysis. List’s research attempted to classify the boundaries of speech and song as “two forms of human sound communication” (1963, 1). He noted that “both speech and song are 1) vocally produced, 2) linguistically meaningful, and 3) melodic.” However, one wonders why the last category was not labelled “melodically meaningful”, and why the performative aspects of the voice were not taken more into consideration. After all, surely it is through performing the voice that one can add not only expression, but also lace a spoken phrase or word with added or symbolic meaning through musical variance. List produced a classification system accompanied by various analytical charts and diagrams. The classification system moved through speech, recitation, monotone, chant, song, intonational chant, *Sprechstimme*, and intonational recitation (List 1963, 9). While important in its attempt to look at the musical aspects of the voice in its plethora of styles and social contexts, it is the classificatory aspect of the model that, while based on a logical path through different types of technique used in voice production, lacks specific recognition of the social means by which such instances of vocal utterances are produced in the first place. That is, it is the social interaction of humans in meaningful situations that provides the conceptual framework for the voice to be performed in musical ways. It is

through social performance that the voice is used as a musical instrument, which expresses literal and symbolic meaning through every style of voice production.

Any distinction between speech and song is questionable when it examines not the concepts used to define different types of vocal utterance, but the performative types of expression produced at any point between a continuum of kinds of vocal production that might place speech at one end and song at the other. In connection with liturgical drama, as Enders (1990, 49-50) notes, “given the mnemonic interplay between linguistic foundations for music and musical foundations for language, it becomes unimportant to distinguish between either performative manifestation inspired by imagistic contemplation: speaking or singing, rhetoric or music.” In other words, one can examine the human voice in all its manifestations as one performing voice.⁴ Indeed, it is in its capacity to perform anywhere between each end of this conceptual boundary in ways that include similar dynamics of voice production that allows a study such as this to stress the musical and performative traits inherent in socially significant vocal utterances.

The human voice is performed socially as a means of expression, which allows it to embody meaning through sound aesthetics in every vocal articulation. But it is the performative sound expressions that allow the voice to be communicative and musical, whether one perceives the sounds as speech or song, or indeed anywhere in between. Closer examination of such utterances can highlight the contradictory ways in which some styles of voice production are conceptualised and the ways in which they are performed as a means of social communication.

Voicescapes

The chanting voice performed socially in all its forms produces culturally meaningful vocal soundscapes. It is these contexts that provide a level of connotation beyond that of a linguistic text. Whether a conversation, an announcement or commentary, for instance, in each context the speaker/singer performs the voice by creating a voicemap in musically meaningful ways. This point has been illustrated in a study of sound alienation in Asian rituals by Gerson-Kiwi (1980, 29) who notes that “although not generally observed, every single one of us in the course of ordinary speech runs through a broad range of melodic curves or rhetorical intonations accompanying dry speech, and dividing, for the sake of clarity, its syntactical parts.” It is such “melodic curves” and “rhetorical intonations” that point to a performed, musical, chanting voice. There are many occasions in everyday verbal communication where the boundaries of speech are challenged in many cultures. Just about every expression of everyday spoken life is performed socially and musically, at least in terms of the expressive melodic contour of the vocal line.⁵ Phrasing, timbre, tone, and more importantly, creative performance using the voice allows for communicative expression through human interaction.

There are many cross-cultural comparative examples of different vocal classifications. One noted by List (1963, 5), for example, is of three types of “sound communication” of the Māori of Aotearoa/New Zealand. List points out that Māori differentiate speech (*koorero*), ritual chant (*karakia*) and song (*waiata*). Furthermore, he also compares the *haka* (warrior dance with chant) to *Sprechstimme* (List 1963, 11). While one can identify musical and performative elements in speech, List’s identification of chant and song as different types of voice pro-

duction helps show concepts and vocal styles cross-culturally. *Waiata*, according to McLean (1996, 110), are sung styles that contrast with recitation. In connection with *karakia*, or prayer, of which there are many kinds and might be called spells or incantations (McLean 1996, 35-36), McLean notes with regard to the chanting voice that they “are performed usually in a rapid monotone punctuated by sustained notes and descending glides at the end of phrases” (1996, 37). The *haka*, as McLean (1996, 44) mentions, “is a posture dance with shouted accompaniment.” However, while chanting is characteristic of the genre, many other styles of vocal accompaniment are indeed used (see McLean 1996).

In Japan, for example, I have always been struck by the spoken voice taking the form of a type of chanting in many different contexts. While I certainly heard the chanting voice—using a more common definition of the term—at Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines, it became apparent in everyday speech that the speaker was performing the voice, chanting the voice, and being creative in these utterances. One such context was found during a telephone conversation. For example, a woman in her early twenties at the receiving end would introduce herself in the context of her company; her voice would be raised in pitch significantly from everyday speech almost to a falsetto voice; and she would speak her words in a melodic, almost chanting

way and seemed apologetic in her musical response to the caller. In this context the woman is socially lowering herself, or raising the position of the caller. In doing this she creates an aesthetic soundscape and performs her voice through vocal manipulation to alter it from other social utterances.

In connection with oral performance of the Kuna people of Latin America Sherzer (1986, 175) notes parameters in the poetics and rhetoric of the voice during curing that allow dramatisation. In another ethnographic example connected to the classification of the use of the voice and its function, List (1963, 3) notes, “the Hopi Indians of north-western Arizona distinguish between speech, *lavávi*, song, *táwi*, and announcing [intonational chant], *tí:ngava*.” It is the announcing voice with its changes of vocal style that demands study of its performative social expression.

Discussing the junction between the language of the street and that of the stage, Clidière (1993, 138) comments that “all sorts of entertaining speech can be found in the town: salesmen with their smooth talk, the voices of the preacher or the propagandist, the simple drunkard insulting passer-by.” Indeed, announcements are made in many ways. For example, while watching television an advert appears on screen noting a discount at a certain store: “Up to 50% off.” The tone is loud, raised in pitch, it announces in a musical way. Or, while sitting in a plane the cabin attendants walk the aisle serving tea and coffee. The voice is raised in pitch, it is louder than it was when asked which meal one wanted, and the end of “tea” is extended. Another context might be walking through a market where the stallholders chant their latest offer. Their voices raised, they belt out their message, and they perform. Another street performance might be that of someone selling a newspaper: “*Evening Standard*” . . . “*Standard*.” Indeed, I recall a male street vendor selling one particular local paper in Shrewsbury (U.K.): “Star” . . . “Star.” But again the word was not simply spoken. This was chant; it was indeed a type of song. The chanter started the word at a low pitch; the “ar” was stretched – it seemed extremely long – and the

The human voice is performed socially as a means of expression, which allows it to embody meaning through sound aesthetics in every vocal articulation.

final “r” seemed to leap upwards in pitch and suddenly cut off. Also, while walking through Oxford recently a man was observed standing on a street corner selling magazines. He catches my eye fixedly and chants: “*The Big Issue*, sir.”⁶ His voice is raised in pitch, it is loud (in a belting style – what one might call the Martin Luther King voice).

A London soundscape that has stayed with me for a long time was on the underground. There is (or at least used to be) an announcement at many stations when one gets on or off the train: “Mind the gap.” The vocal quality is exaggerated to get the attention of the passengers. It is not everyday speech, the words are stretched and the pitch raised. In each context the speaker chants an announcement in a heightened voice. At a train station, for example, one might hear: “The next train on platform . . .” The words are spoken on the one hand, but chanted on the other. This is a performed voice beyond that of everyday speech. It is a voice that wants to be heard, one that must exaggerate sounds in order to be noticed and to give a sense of authority. The composer Steve Reich, for example, has explored the melodic soundscapes of New York in his orchestral work *City Life*. In Waffender’s (1995) film of the making of this work one can see Reich’s influences from the melodic chants of a street seller. “Check it out . . . Every item \$10, check it out. . . Excuse me young lady, check it out.” The last phrase is exaggerated with an extended “u” in “excuse” and “e” in “check.” While the written text does little to illustrate the chanting character of the voice, Reich indeed explores the melody by building a section of his work around the melody of “Check it out.”

There are many situations where one can hear a commentary. The horse race, for example, must be one of the most unique occasions where the human voice passes through a number of performed sounds. The speaker, or commentator in this case, usually introduces the race in what might be seen as an everyday voice—the spoken language of the culture. When the race begins the commentator starts to speak, which soon develops into a chant. Between now and the end of the race the chanter’s voice increases in pitch, in speed and performs for the listener a commentary full of suspense and excitement. Other sporting events too often produce similar effects at moments of excitement. The commentary of a soccer match, for example, produces a fairly steady soundscape that is interrupted momentarily at points of excitement preceding a goal. Another context that highlights the chanting voice is the auction. Here, the chanter is both announcing and commentating. The auctioneer performs a solo in front of an audience and interacts to create an aesthetic soundscape of the chanting voice. In connection with this context List notes that:

Distinctions made according to function rather than melodic type are also common in our own society. “Auctioneering,” the form of communication used by the auctioneer, is not usually considered “song” or even “chant.” Nevertheless, “auctioneering” often takes the form of a monotonic chant in which the monotone and the few auxiliary tones used are quite stable. On occasion, types of melodic cadences are also used.

When speech is heightened in a socially structured situation, such as a dramatic production or in the telling of a tale, two opposite tendencies appear. The first is the negation or the levelling out of intonation into a plateau approaching a monotone. The second is the amplification or exaggeration of intonation, especially of the downward inflection that serves in most languages as a phrase, sentence, or paragraph final. (1963, 6)

A workers’ protest is another context where the chanting voice creates a soundscape/voicelandscape that has a particularly poignant effect on ideas of space and place. The chanting strikers, for instance, are extremely effective in creating a resonating “scape” with poetry and political meaning: “What do we want?” “More pay!” “When do we want it?” “Now!”

The (En)chanting Voice

This paper has argued for the examination of the chanting voice as a performed voice. As well as referring to several everyday contexts that show a chanting voice, it has suggested that the voice in every context could be seen as a creative and performed voice, both in the sense of the sound produced and the performative context in which it is used, socially and culturally. It is not only singing or even chanting that produce a heightened vocal expression, but also many other—if not all—forms of the socially performed and chanting voice. In the same way that Klein (1986) looks at styles of speaking in Toba (indigenous people of Latin America) discourse as a verbal art that was suppressed by Spanish domination, one might view speech in some cultures as a creative and performative art that is not always conceptualised as such in everyday discourse.

Some of the events mentioned in this paper—especially commentaries and announcements—are of particular interest in this discussion because they are performed as creative events. Several ethnographic examples help to illustrate this point. Darnell (1989, 315), while noting the social essence of narrative performance in Cree (Native American) culture, stresses that it is essentially “creative performance.” There is “a continuous interaction between context of performance, individual performer, and culture change.” (336) There are indeed many other examples that could be mentioned, but the ones chosen have been identified in order to emphasise the performative qualities of the voice in spheres of everyday life outside of what is usually referred to as singing. Through oral discourse and poetic process, therefore, the voice is frequently dramatised through rhetorical devices as a vocal art that is performed socially and culturally in an array of creative contexts to create vocal soundscapes of meaningful and creative human expression. The chanting voice in all its forms is, indeed, enchanting.

Endnotes

1. For anthropological studies of the voice see Revel and Rey Hulman (1993).
2. The term “voicelandscape” is used here to denote a setting where the chanting voice is foregrounded during oral communication in a way that distinguishes it from singing or speaking, and to emphasize the way it is used in a performative way, whether explicitly or implicitly.
3. See Graham (1986), for example, for useful ways of illustrating graphically melodic complexities in vocal expression.
4. Seeger (1986, 59) has stressed that the separation of discipline which study different aspects of “vocal and verbal art has had a disastrous effect on the development of our thinking about them.”
5. On the voice and joke telling see Sacks (1989).
6. The magazine is sold by homeless people and the income helps in their support.

References

- Bauman, Richard and Sherzer, Joel, Eds. 1989. *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*. Second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Clidière, Sylvie. 1993. Voix de Traverse: Parole et Spectacles de Rue. In Nicole Revel and Diana Rey-Hulman, Eds, *Pour une Anthropologie des Voix*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 197-207.
- Darnell, Regna. 1989. Correlates of Cree Narrative Performance. In Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, Eds, *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*. Second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 315-36.
- Enders, Jody. 1990. Visions with Voices: The Rhetoric of Memory and Music in Liturgical Drama. *Comparative Drama* 24(1): 34-54.
- Gerson-Kiwi, Edith. 1980. Melodic Patterns in Asiatic Rituals: The Quest for Sound Alienation. *Israel Studies in Musicology* 2:27-31.
- Graham, Laura. 1986. Three Modes of Shavante Vocal Expression: Wailing, Collective Singing, and Political Oratory. In Joel Sherzer and Greg Urban, Eds, *Native South American Discourse*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 83-118.
- Klein, Harriet E. Manelis. 1986. Styles of Toba Discourse. In Joel Sherzer and Greg Urban, Eds, *Native South American Discourse*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 213-35.
- List, George. 1963. The Boundaries of Speech and Song. *Ethnomusicology* 7:1-16.
- McLean, Mervyn. 1996. *Maori Music*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.
- Revel, Nicole and Diana Rey-Hulman, Eds. 1993 *Pour une Anthropologie des Voix*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Sacks, Harvey. 1989. An Analysis of the Course of a Joke's Telling in Conversation. In Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, Eds, *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*. Second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 337-53.
- Schafer, R. Murray. 1977. *The Tuning of the World*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- _____. 1992. Music, Non-Music and the Soundscape. In John Paynter, Tim Howell, Richard Orton, and Peter Seymour, Eds, *Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought* 1. London: Routledge, 34-45.
- _____. 1993. *Voices of Tyranny: Temples of Silence*. Ontario: Arcana.
- Seeger, Anthony. 1986. Oratory Is Spoken, Myth Is Told, and Song Is Sung, But They Are All Music to My Ears. In Joel Sherzer and Greg Urban, Eds, *Native South American Discourse*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 59-82.
- Sherzer, Joel. 1986. The Report of a Kuna Curing Specialist: The Poetics and Rhetoric of an Oral Performance. In Joel Sherzer and Greg Urban, Eds, *Native South American Discourse*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 169-212.
- Sherzer, Joel and Sammie Ann Wicks. 1982. The Intersection of Music and Language in Kuna Discourse. *Latin American Music Review* 3(2): 147-64.
- Sundberg, Johan. 2001. The Voice. In Stanley Sadie, ed., and John Tyrrell, executive ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Second Edition. London: Grove, 1:120-25.
- Waffender, Manfred, writer and director. 1995. City Life. ZDF.

Henry Johnson is Associate Professor at the University of Otago, New Zealand, where he teaches and undertakes research in ethnomusicology, Asian studies and performing arts studies. He lectures and performs on a number of Asian instruments, including the Japanese *koto* and *shamisen*, *gamelan* from Java and Bali, and Indian *sitar*. His book on the *koto*—*The Koto: A Traditional Instrument in Contemporary Japan*—was published in 2004 by Hotei Publishing (Amsterdam).
Email: henry.johnson@stonebow.otago.ac.nz.

CHANTING OUR WAY TO ECSTASY

By Bethany Brown

This Sound Journal was originally written as part of an assignment for Acoustic Dimensions of Communication, CMNS 259, at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada. This course is available both as a regular course taught on campus by Norbert Ruebsaat as well as through Distance Education www.sfu.ca/cde/cp/05-2/cmns/cmns259.html taught by various tutors.

This sound experience begins in a highly reverberant room called 'soccer central' at Simon Fraser University. It is constructed mainly of cement and metal. The first sound heard is the clicking of 20 pairs of cleats against the cement floor, bouncing off each wall to create a conundrum of clicks; then the rustling of each player finding a seat on the bench, which squeaks as the rubber stoppers are forced across the cement by the players' movements. We sit in silent anticipation, listening in readiness. The silence seems thick in this highly reverberant room.

We are waiting for the sound signal of the wooden door scraping against the porous cement door-well to begin the chanting. When it occurs we all, in chorus, chant "here we go, here we go, here we goooooo, here we go, here we go, here we gooooo-ooooo!..". Each of us focuses on gaining maximum resonance in our voices by utilizing the lower frequencies. The words carry no semantic meaning for us. It is the paralinguistics that resonate in and around us creating the mood and excitement. The listener cannot tell if the voice is activating the space, or if the vibration of the space is activating the resonances of the body. The sound creates a unity between self and environment. As an avid participant I contribute to the composition while also being penetrated by all the contributors around me. This unites us in a common chorus, having the same goal, and chanting ourselves into ecstasy together.

The sound of the chanting is a loud fortissimo yelling that resembles 'talk singing' in that our inflection rises as we come to the end of each phrase. We attempt to create such strong vibrations with our united voices that it shakes and rocks the opponent. In actuality it shakes and rocks every person in the room. And because of the intense amount of reverberation in the space the vibrations are amplified significantly. I am completely inside this chanting and the chanting is completely inside me until the last reverberation has died away to the point of inaudibility. I am left with the feeling of excitement, almost as if the sound energy has been transduced into neuro-electical energy stimulating my entire body.

Bethany Brown is currently in her last semester at Simon Fraser University completing her undergraduate degree in Communication Studies. This excerpt was extracted from a sound journal entry written while under the instruction of Norbert Ruebsaat in Acoustic Dimensions of Communication at SFU. With her extensive musical background she wrote "Acoustic Community Rituals: Chanting Our Way to Ecstasy" as a composition of the Simon Fraser University Women's soccer team prior to the game.