

HOW SOFT IS THE POWER OF VOICE?

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The voice is everywhere, infiltrating everything, making civilisation, marking out territories with infinite borders, spreading from the farthest reaches to the most intimate spaces.

Quote: Spectres #04 – A Thousand Voices

Voice like listening - is part of our bodies, much unconsidered. The human voice represents life as we don't quite understand it, don't even think about it, we aren't taught during formal education, neither do we study or develop awareness of it's power during our lives.

Voice surrounds us when we grow up. In our families, with kin and culture, while listening to the music, we are exposed to. The way any society uses voice signifies it's culture, belonging, longing, curiosity, attraction and often political formation. To a big extend the music and vocals shape what we are, want to be or like to surround us with.

Voice travels, it moves out of the body, containing language or not, it spreads into a mediated and curated space, with or without added technologies and all these layers contain politics and shades of power.

The concept of voice in music includes complex layers. It raises questions like, what is the value of voice in society? What attracts us? What is the effect of voice in music? How do musicians use it? What does it mean, when voice is absent?

To understand the conditions, philosophy and power of voice, I look at questions like, how do musicians in the global wider electronic music scenes use voices to resist? Does the voice have the strength to transform power relations? Can we say, voice is a technology in itself? Where are advancing computer voice technologies leading us to? Wich voices are missing and "not in the room"? see: [Dalit Feminist theory: Sunaina Arya](#)

Thinking through the complexity of why and how voice shapes electronic music, how music is loved, hyped, desired and curated according to we what parameters?

The music we listen and dance to is also reflected and multiplied in todays attention information age. A constant flow of voices, songs, meaning, messages, deconstructed disembodied vocal fragments, samples snippets, synthetic media, copies of voices are calling our notice.

Working and observing in the wider experimental musical context in relation to how artists and creative music & technological innovation have been exploited for corporate surveillance and and media layer in current geopolitical reality that urges to engage with care and critical analysis.

THE SOFT POWER OF THE VOICE IN MUSIC

“Voice as a process – giving an account of oneself and what affects one’s life – is an irreducible part of what it means to be human;...”

Quote: Nick Couldry: *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism*

See also: *Nick Couldry - 'Voiceblind: On Some Paradoxes of the Neoliberal State' 2013*

Soft power is a term popularised by Joseph Nye during the 90s, describing an intangible form of influence, shaping the attitudes and preferences of other countries and actors towards a territory. Soft power uses influence through culture, policies and diplomacy. Using persuasion rather than coercion, soft power, in contrast to hard power - such as military action - is never about force. It is not about pushing another entity to exercise change, but rather inspiring the relevant party to create its own change.

For the last decades (since the end of the cold war) the cultural industry of international experimental music festivals grew extensively. Supported with subsidies the scenes have expanded and are a soil for innovation, curation and reflection.

Under immense global inequalities networks extend and learn from each other, adapting.

"Soft-power-type" policies are funding by state institutions, EU collaborative culture funds and private funds. The cultural field is levelling on the playing field across (some parts of) the planet, where it is possible, to play, sing, music, discuss and dance together.

Efforts in critical analysis on structural capture by capital and hard power are undertaken. See LeGuessWho 2025: Ownership concentration "Mapping the cultural landscape" Barreira, Alers <https://leguesswho.com/lineup/ownership-concentration-mapping-the-cultural-landscape>

Maps of Ownership in European Live Music 2026: <https://live-dma.eu/live-dma-reset-network-publish-new-maps-of-ownership-in-european-live-music/>

Nick Couldry argues in his 2010 "Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism" the crisis of the voice (value) in our current democracy is severe, voice is given and then retracted, endorsed and then made empty. Couldry argues that there will be made more and more space for the voice, but it will matter less and less.

Under the current multilevel crisis of voice, it's multiplication, alienation through snippeting, editing, extracted modified sharing, stitching, social media acceleration of production - the music scenes are participating in democracy, is loud, noisy and voiceful.

The democratic voices of artist communities meet, present, discuss, scream, study, listen, critique, reach across the gap, argue, correct mistakes, create diverse realities, often from the underground to festival-level visibility.

While our planet was shaped by migration and is now locked into nation states and borders, passport dependencies, and language hierarchies, artists are not equal to travel and show work.

Considering power relations in the cultural sector and the interdependencies between funding, networking, curation, artists and audiences, artists and curators navigate stories, unmake injustices and hierarchies, unmake hard borders and make new territories.

Where lies the actual power of who's voice is being heard and listened too. How to make the voices count?

CULTURE, COMMUNITY, IDENTITY

"Voice is both a set of sonic, material, and literary practices shaped by culturally and historically specific moments and a category invoked in discourse about personal agency, communication and representation, and political power" Quote: Anthropology and Voice by Amanda Weidman <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43049561>

Voices as carriers of language, culture, identity and communal possibility. They have a special agency in music. Voice is an instrument connected to our bodies. It is giving (an) account of the world. What we listen to matters. it informs us.

To use voice in music is an important choice a musician or an entire genre makes. Voice as instant available instrument does not "cost" anything, compare to an intricate instrument like a violin or a modular synthesiser. It is the most affordable way to make music. to come together to harmonise and create energy with others. It is also the most vulnerable.

Voice is an immense powerful instrument. It is always with us and has an average frequency range from 20 to 20k hz.

My voice is something I can freely control more than any other instrument. I can express myself freely. It's easy to use. Quote: Phew <https://toneglow.substack.com/p/0296-phew>

It is also very unique, like a face. One in a billion.

What is the source of one's voice? Where is the root? Where does the voice originate from?

Tehani Amarasuriya sings as part of the collaborative project: Pitch, Pigeon, Puerta

roots run deep
roots run wild
roots run far

During the range of interviews with vocalists I conducted, the answers are rich:

Yasia' Andriana-Yaroslava Saienko: *"I sing and pull the power from the land"*

Lido Pimento: *"I sing from my family, my people, it is guttural."*

Bint Mbareh: *"I sing myself into the future, from community, my mother, and the water body."*

Alejandra Cárdenas: *"My voice as testimony"*

Aydrey Chen: *"I sing with the intention to free myself."*

Kianí del Valle: *"the voice becomes a weapon"*

Aleksandra Popovska: *'I am not sure the voice is mine, we belong to ourselves'*

"Voice is ancient, evolutionary, grown. The intelligence developed alongside is perhaps one of the complex infinite forms of creation that humans perform." Quote: Nina Kraus "The Sound Mind"

Rich traditions of collective voicing in many cultures show the longevity and debt embedded in human vocal practices, from the landscape relating Yoik of the Sami people in northern treeless lands, one of the oldest traditions of singing preserved in Europe (yoik wiki) to the body of work rap music has originated in the streets of USA. This leads us to the song as technology.

THE SONG

Does the song change us, does the Song change when it travels?

Along with life, songs have migrated across the planet. Songs started out as oral traditions in prehistoric and ancient times. They were transmissions of knowledge, laws, stories, and history. See Songline

Lyricism combined with a melody is a powerful mnemonic device, otherwise known as a memory aid. Additionally songs often carry strong emotions, making it easier to remember and relate to them. Therefore they have the ability to survive and travel through generations. Songs can turn people into walking libraries.

Songs play an important role in teaching. They cater to an auditory learning style, which can be an important component for understanding and memorising. Through rhythm and repetition they make learning more engaging.

Researchers believe song to have been formed before spoken language. Neanderthals created a musical foundation to communication through their creation of the bone flute and other musical instruments. As emotional expressions of sound were added to these melodies, the first songs were created. They acted as a path to first complex human languages.

An essential part of songs are their emotional weight. Songs can be used to express celebration or mourning. They help create an atmosphere where we feel seen. Creating or listening to songs can be a very important emotional release. The music and lyrics help us understand our emotions and give us a way to truly feel them. Songs can dig out even hardened feelings, and memories we thought we had forgotten.

Songs soothe and they comfort. Mothers worldwide guide their babies into the world through songs. Their purpose is to communicate, even when everything still seems so foreign to the newborn. Rhythms mimic our biological functions, lyrics replicate feelings.

Songs also strengthen community. Through synchronised creation and release they build bonds, even on a neurochemical level. Singing releases hormones such as oxytocin, which supports a connection between people. Songs can also make a bridge between cultures. Translation is not always necessary to convey the feeling of a song.

Along with release, songs can also be used to muster up emotions. On their way to battle, people would sing in order to rile themselves up. Through motivational lyrics and collective singing they had the ability to access bravery they didn't know they had.

Certain sounds can trigger emotions in a listener, thanks to nostalgia. For most people in our modern world, songs walk hand in hand with memories, intertwining and connecting. Songs stick with us.

Song message, embodied or not contains language and it is very interesting to see which languages will make it to the future, it will be up to us, which languages we preserve by listening and what storytelling we allow into our proximities to participate in cultural preservation and resilience.

HISTORY OF VOICE IN ELECTRONIC AND ACOUSMATIC MUSIC

"The 21st century has offered an array of technological means to separate voice from body, practices which have been used for good and ill. We currently zoom about the internet, in conversations full of audio glitches, using tools that make it possible to live life at a distance." Quote: Jaimie Baron, Jennifer Fleeger, and Shannon Wong Lerner (Eds.) - Media Ventriloquism – How Audiovisual Technologies Transform the Voice-Body Relationship

Voice in electronic music has been explored for a hundred years now. From the very beginnings of the theremin - make the machine sing - via explorations in acousmatic music signified in a refusal to use the human voice. Early 20 century pioneering was connected to technology, innovation, transcendence and led to the absence of a real human singing a composed song.

Nevertheless in the margins especially women have always worked with voice, for example Alice Shields, 1943 technical director of CPEMC who investigated complex electronic vocal compositions, important 'Study for Voice and Tape' (1968)

Annette Peacock, born 1941, US, who recorded experimental electronic rap in 1970s, 'I'm the One 1972' where she was one of the first artists to feed voice into a synthesiser.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I%27m_the_One_\(Annette_Peacock_album\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I%27m_the_One_(Annette_Peacock_album))

agf: [A feminist timeline of electronic music pioneering](#)

When 'music concrete' dealt with voice through tape manipulation as a form of sampling, and created drone music with looping of the tiniest snippet of a human voice or a synthesiser - techno originally a black freedom music (DeForest Brown) acted as a resistance to popular "straight" music and majority (contained under capitalist trade-of) life. When club music attracted mainstream at times it turned into escapist mass culture (Love Parade, Berghain) easily removed from politics but as a movement appropriated even by far right, now arguable dancing to techno across the planet.

Artists and critics (Wark:Ravers) again and again remind us that raving as escapism must itself be seen as a political act, so moving back into political space - bring the voice and language back in - reappear - re-inhabit the music with political meaning. Sing the song that moves us back into a direction we want to live and love under.

Similar observation can be made in the 20th century "new contemporary music" space post 2nd world war. The refusal of the voice holds a radical element at the same time an evasion. (Stockhausen Serves Imperialism by Cornelius Cardew)

The re-embodiment (singing) in digital disembodied experimental music can be observed in periodic waves, like a sound wave itself, rejected and needed again, the word, a truth spoken or rapped or a scream in a frustration. ([Yoko Ono](#))

Our moment now, the hybridity in music, where genres and hierarchies are mixed and learn from each other (mainstream versus underground) are using voice and identity in many creative ways to cut through and distance themselves from conformity or submission or agreement with the current status.

But to distance oneself from fascism one has to recognise the fascism. this is really important.

And fascists have always used and abused voice and the body (Leni Riefenstahl) well for their manipulative propaganda.

So there lies the dark side of the voice.

VOICE TECHNOLOGY & SYNTHETIC MEDIA aka "AI"

"Cultural Techniques of Flattening" Sybille Krämer in Flatness. Aesthetics and Epistemology
<https://oa.ici-berlin.org/repository/doi/10.25620/e220503>

When voice is used (as a digital process in music) it creates something new. Now the voice is received and under perception.

In experimental electronic music artists have used voice to signal liberation as a form of politics through exercising their freedom to be the voice in music. It has been used to insert human sonic material into "techno" composition to remind us of the precious value of life that is worth fighting for.

Voice links our mind's and heart's visions to where our ancestors walked, sang, danced and created their lives. It fleshes out our understanding of the past and the present.

The voice carries great weight to AI. When AI speaks, it can be seen as "media ventriloquism" (Jaimie Baron), as it speaks with a voice that does not belong to the "body", which does not exist.

Separating the voice from the body raises concerns about theft, extraction and alienation.

The effort to grab the human voice for the techno ownership class (Musk, Thiel, Durov) is a way to control the narrative. It is a way to influence and to be algorithmically direct "voice" at will. It can control the masses and replace true self-expression and freedom of speech.

Have the audio artists contributed or resisted this? How to react to this form of cooption and appropriation of our creativity?

Voice is really important to express and contribute in democracy, as brilliantly explained by Susan Bickford in "Listening, Conflict, and Citizenship The Dissonance of Democracy". Democracy is about participation.

"spare me the music, my people do not have mouths for songs" by Adamu Yahuza Abdullahi
<https://smallwondersmag.com/piece/i-beg-spare-me-the-music/>

HOW DOES VOICE INFLUENCE US - VOICE AS SKIN

"No one today is responsible for events that took place in the past, but we are responsible for learning about them, so that we do not repeat negatives of the past." Paulette F. C. Steeves in *The Indigenous Paleolithic of the Western Hemisphere* by <https://newbooksnetwork.com/the-indigenous-paleolithic-of-the-western-hemisphere>

Pioneer feminist rapper Lady Lykez speaks of "matching the energy" with her voice, cutting through the music with frequency and lyrics, like a super skilled drummer her rap fills deliver high potent abstract energy from a Jamaican diasporic south London artist. watching her direct a majority male "white" crowd at LeGuessWho 2025 to attack each other in 2 groups was almost an art piece and a genius metaphor of our time. The skill and persuasion of her voice from an elevated stage illustrates it's power, if adoration, amplification and facilitation is given.

What is the power of the voice? Why is someone afraid of another voice or truth?

"... the riskiness of listening comes partly from the possibility that what we hear will require change from us." Quote: Susan Bickford in *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict, and Citizenship* (Cornell University Press, 1996)

Are men afraid of the women's voice? Are men listening to women?

Much research on gender and voice has been conducted and it is hugely interesting material that can be found from thinkers like Hannah Bosma. From emancipatory potential of women using voice in their music, to class questions, the most interesting question remain - how much energy and money is spent to suppress women's voices? Women liberation and the implementation of the women's voice is the first step toward democratic society, since women make out 50% of populations.

The CEO of Palantir, the most powerful data company Alex Karp recently said in an on screen interview out loud that AI will undermine the influence of "highly educated, often female voters" <https://futurism.com/artificial-intelligence/ceo-palantir-ai-women>

Equally important research exists on voice & ethnicity, explaining that voice does not only carry frequency but a whole lot of knowing about the person who voices. A voice reveals race, class, gender, sexuality often without rationalising, without conscious thought, people know the context of a voice.

see: *The Race of Sound - Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* by Nina Sun Eidsheim <https://www.dukeupress.edu/the-race-of-sound>
<https://podcasts.apple.com/fi/podcast/from-the-margins-what-music-theory-doesnt-want-you-to-know/id1785509815?i=1000696839768>

What do we feel when we hear a voice, in a piece of music, in the forest, on the dancefloor?

Voice as a medium that transforms and is transformed by its interaction with bodies, spaces, and technologies. (...) voice is reimagined as a living surface, or an interactive interface she evocatively terms "voice-skin" see: *Building a Voice: Sound, Surface, Skin* by Zeynep Bulut

CONCLUSION

'Artists are important transmitters of forgotten "none-state" knowledges.' paraphrasing 88. *The Tale and the Tongue. HOW CAN A FORM BE A HOLDER FOR INTENTIONS AND IDEAS* – *Crystal Z Campbell* <https://dertank.ch/podcasts/promise-no-promises/>

Voice in music is used as **soft power** to influence societies, citizens, workers and overall culture - but there also lies the cult in culture.

Voice has power, we can see it in its capture.

We can recognise the money that is poured into controlling the algorithms, laws and legislations. We are aware of the efforts to shape what is sang, spoken and multiplied.

Many societies struggle with freedom of speech, rights for education, bodily agency and access to spaces of power and the stage.

I argue the experimental music scene is one of the free-est territories in democratic societies.

By giving attention and space to voices that in its vast diversity are alive now, in the margins, oppressed, missing in discourse, a balance is attempted. Maybe that is curation for a cultural justice. To critically look into who is not in the room, on stage, listened to and allow these voices to voice out.

Considering power relations in the cultural sector and the interdependencies between funding, networking, curation, artists and audiences, where lies the power or value of the who is being heard and listened too. How to make our work count.

Remains, has **soft power** failed or is it so successful that we are in a hot war now?

To stay open, receiving, unafraid - is the quest of the moment, when so much content is washing over shaping the disinformation age.

Being open requires the condition of peace. Living in peace is a responsibility.

To create the unexpected, to leak through the slogans, to find a voice and language that contributes to a truth that is non discriminatory but true to oneself.

Artists and curators show that voice is about agency. Artists use their voice creatively to another form, another angle. Artists can break the cult, that is its task. Creation can reject bullying and outperform censorship and amplify voices from one space into another.

This all flows into a softness of the power of voices.