

## **Unit 6: Voice, Sound, and Sence**

**Feb. 10**

We began lecture by noting the close evolutionary relationship between language and music, and the ways in which they overlap:

### **The Formal Systems of Language and Music**

Languages are words arranged in sentences

Songs are notes arranged into melodies

Rules govern languages

Rules govern music

Languages have finite materials (alphabets)

Music has finite materials (note systems)

Then we introduced the notion of speech performances by starting with a few case examples: first with Martin Luther King's speech, "I have a dream" speech; and then we looked at the documentary, "Powerhouse of God," for the speech performance of an old-fashioned Baptist fierce preacheing style of speech performance:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vDWWy4CMhE>

<http://www.folkstreams.net/film,74>

Our discussion focused on the techniques each example used in their use of voice to create effect, rhetorical emphasis, or emotional pressure. But, we noted the critical importance of context in determining these speech gestures of voice, and the extent to which they require knowledge of such cues by their listeners.

### **Speech Performance**

Speech performance often reflects our relationships to others and to the ideas that surround us.

Using our voices, or performing in language (even with music) is often social.

Performing in language is thus a communicative system which is often more than conveying just the words, but it is also dependent on the *performance of meaning*.

When then shifted our attention to the performance of speech and voice when text becomes musicalized, in the platform of a song.

## **Our Experience with Texted Music**

We actually hear three things at once in texted music:

**words**, which appear to give songs an independent *source of semantic meaning*;

**rhetoric**, words being used in a special, musical way, *a way which draws attention to features and problems of speech*;

and **voices**, words being spoken or sung in human tones which are themselves 'meaningful' signs of a person or personality.

We applied this framework in our analysis of both speech and song in listening to Loretta Lynn's love ballad, "Hello Darlin," 1971

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOQmbBLOs4c>

After listening to the song we discussed:

**→What are the special ways song is drawing attention to a communicative system?**

## **What do songs tell us about our voice?**

Songs are effective for our study of voice, because they tell stories.

Songs allow voices to propel emotions forward.

Songs are often less about what is said, but *how* it is said.

Songs thus remind us, in our daily use of voice (when we are *not singing*) that in our speech, we are often performing by using our voice, and in doing so we are making meaning, and often complex moments of meaning.

We ended lecture by watching/listening to a moment that lets us observe how songs are interesting platforms to explore vocal authenticity. Even though we think of songs as transparent windows into ourselves, songs (along with other kinds of vocal performance) are also **compositions**, they are often written in advance, designed, structured and ordered. Emotion is often planned out.

So, our example presented to us a moment when that order and planning is interrupted by when voice fails us, or when emotion creates disruption.

Patti Smith performing "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," in honor of Bob Dylan award for the Nobel Prize for Literature, 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=941PHEJHCwU>

## **Feb. 12**

We began by having us dig a little deeper into ideas you read about this week in Simon Frith's chapter on Voice.

### **Simon Frith on Voice**

Frith understands voice as a nexus — a locus where simultaneous forces and actions take place to produce both affect and knowledge.

Voice as carrier of words

Voice as carrier of sounds

These two different ways of making meaning work together, but are often in tension and in conflict with one another.

We looked at Frith's approach:

## Approaching Voice in Four Ways

- voice a musical instrument
- voice as a body
- voice as a person
- voice as a character

We applied this particular framework, with the idea that all parts are working simultaneously, to another song case study, though not at all limited to this particular choice; many other choices could showcase these same elements. What was useful in this example was the obvious presence of voice.

Brittany Howard, with Alabama Shakes, "Gimme all your love," (2015)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_sNNTpORtDQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sNNTpORtDQ)

The next portion of our lectures was about reviewing central concepts from this week, as drawn from lecture on Monday and through our readings.

## Speech Performance

A speech performance is much more than expressing words; it involves using our voices — timbre, tone, rhythm — and all other forms of *accentuation* or *gesture* that are often used to express both words and emotion.

Performing in language is a communicative system, which is often more than conveying just the words, but it is also dependent on the *performance of meaning*. Speech performance often reflects our relationships to others and to the ideas that surround us.

Using our voices is therefore not just dependent upon words, but how words and being used in a *special way*, and that special way often has to tap into a context of *shared understanding*.

→Using our voices, or performing in language is often social.

## From Speech to Song

**Why song? Because it is a useful platform from which to observe:**

- our voice as a channel of communication;
- as a platform of expression and performance;
- and as a system that often depends on shared understanding—style, genre, and vocal conventions, or their disruptions.

## The Power and Failure of Voice

Singing takes voices and makes them vulnerable, and in doing so, it underscores both the power and fragility of voice.

“Risky and dangerous, artful and seductive, eccentric and uncontrollable, the vulnerable voice exceeds language and sense to reveal a voice in its very voiceness.” Martha Feldman, *The Voice as Something More* (2019)

Some singing pushes the voice to the brink, to the point in which it feels precarious, as if it could fail on us, totally go off the tracks, and break down.

## Post-Human Voices

We ended lecture by folding in our second reading this week, by Joseph Auner. We looked at his article’s opening example, using the 1968 movie, *2001*, in which we watch the spaceship’s computer, HAL (Heuristically programmed algorithmic computer) break down, and while doing so, sings the song “Daisy”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DX142NtqOE>

We explored: *what do we learn from voice in this moment?*

We returned to Frith's opposition that:

Voices carry words                      and                      Voices carry sounds

And we used the tension in this relationship to talk about cyborg voices, A.I. voices in our daily lives, the quality of those voices, what they express, and the ways they limit expression and identity.

But, we ended by anchoring this back to music. We returned to Auner to consider how he sees popular music as a critical arena where voice has been manipulated by technology, in large parts because of distribution, production, and consumption of music in the industrialized world.

Technology has permeated popular music so much, we no longer recognize or take note of its presence.

## **Auner on Music and Machines**

"In no aspect of our lives has the penetration of the human by machines been more complete than in music." (99)

"Dave's request for HAL to 'sing it for me' has been answered by an astonishing proliferation in our cultural terrain of sampled, modified and artificially generated voices." (99)

He thus sees 2001 as foreshadowing a broad range of contemporary music practices where meaning is made by de-stabilizing the borders between the authentic human presence of a voice, vs. that which is technologically mediated

So, what happens when the technological is the better sphere for the locus for expression?

And as we pick up in Units 7 and 8, we will also want to return to this question as it implicated in our constructions of identity, and what it might still mean to be human.