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Voices Found: Free Jazz and Singing by Chris Tonelli

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Book Review

Voices Found: Free Jazz and Singing

Chris Tonelli
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Reviewed by Carey West

As a soundsinger, facilitator, and Assistant Professor at University of Groningen, Chris Tonelli traces the (incomplete) history of free jazz vocal performance in his first monograph *Voices Found: Free Jazz and Singing*. This work draws on research conducted during his postdoctoral residency at the University of Guelph for the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation, as well as during his time at Memorial University in Newfoundland and during his current post in the Netherlands. Reaching beyond a simple historical account, *Voices Found* weaves together ethnography, arts-based practice, and critical theory into a collection of essays that consider the socio-cultural implications of, and public reactions to, experimental vocal practice.

Finding Voice

Immediately confronting the complications of defining free jazz vocals within the fixed medium of text, Tonelli opens with an invitation to listen to an accompanying playlist (found online at www.improvisationinstitute.ca/research-project/voices-found) and asks readers to consider their own visceral responses. This transmedial experiential pedagogy resonates throughout the book as Tonelli discusses the underlying cultural resistance to, and overt rejection of, a type of artistic expression so provocative that many practitioners can't even agree on its proper name. With a courage that reflects the very nature of free jazz soundsinging, Tonelli holds space for debates regarding the nomenclature of experimental vocals, introducing terms such as "extended vocal technique" and "soundsinging," and defining and applying each one along the lines proposed by the artist who prefers it. While the art and execution of free jazz vocalization may be alienating to some audiences, this book certainly is not. Rather, it guides the reader through a potentially obscure subject with clear and compassionate language. Further accessibility to the research Tonelli conducted is provided by transcripts of interviews with artists, resulting in both transparency and documentation of a relatively neglected field of study. The resulting text serves as an estuary of practice, reflection, and theory: a valuable resource for those who want to contemplate the principles of singing.

The first section of the book, "Sources," presents what the author refers to as a "partial, problematic, and [. . .] unknowable past" (73). Recognizing the myriad prejudices that free jazz vocal performance has had to contend with over the years, *Voices Found* begins with a history of the art form's pioneering interdisciplinary women: Annick Nozati, Yoko Ono, Jeanne Lee, Christine Jeffrey, and Maggie Nicols. Across their varying identities Tonelli detects two main commonalities: protean careers and rebellious spirits. "Each of these women," he writes, "practiced a radical inclusivity that challenged the norms and borders of artistic disciplines that would have prevented them from cultivating a creative practice uniting important aspects of their interests and identities" (38). As a case in point, Tonelli dissects Ono's well-known relegation by

popular media to be known first as a “cultural icon” (17), second as a visual artist, and minimally as an improvising vocalist, exemplifying the cultural discomfort Western aesthetics has with “unconventional vocality” (19). This first chapter suggests that it is precisely because race, gender, sexuality, and other identifying factors had a culturally and politically radical presence in artistic circles in the 70s and 80s that these women generated equally radical vocal performances. Such trailblazing offered permission to others interested in exploring the full capacity of their voices, such as Phil Minton and, later, David Moss. The result, Tonelli argues, was the emergence of a “small transnational community of improvising vocalists” (38).

Folding an interdisciplinary ethos into the book, the author then turns his eye to dispelling traditional partitions between vocalists and instruments by tracking the influence of music technologies on extended vocal practice. Whether the tool being discussed is a microphone or a language, the second chapter focuses on the tension between what we consider natural and what we consider mediated forms of musicking. This allows for a historical discussion of sound poetry and of rhythm’s sneaky habit of turning language into music. From the work of François Dufrêne and Gil Wolman to the work of The Four Horseman with particular attention paid to the ongoing work of Paul Dutton alongside contemporary artists such as Jaap Blonk and DB Boyko, *Voices Found* documents the interactions between free jazz vocalists and technologies that create new possibilities. Favouring discussions of liminal creativity over relying upon binary constructions, the author argues that the tradition of extended vocal technique is in constant conversation with the technoscape, whether through the use of electronic tools or through the desire to replace them with the human voice.

Tonelli also makes space for more traditional “tributaries feeding free jazz singing” (73). Chapter 3 recognizes how his main subjects were influenced by commercially available recordings such as those of Louis Armstrong and John Coltrane. Here he notes that extended vocal techniques have been employed across cultures, citing yodeling, Tarzan’s jungle call, and a recording of *The Music of Ba-Benzélé Pygmies* as influential materials prompting singers to reconsider their vocal capacities. In doing so, he makes note of hegemonic customs where vocal sounds become classified as un-human in spite of the very organicism of their production. Tonelli questions the purpose of policing the voice towards constructed “desirable” sounds and away from sounds judged to be unbecoming. Noting that these qualifiers change among different cultures, he theorizes that such a practice is motivated by fear of bodies—some bodies more than others. “Listeners can hear Armstrong’s or Hawkins’s wordless vocalisations as nonsense,” he muses, “but they might also hear them as the material presence of a consciousness that has otherwise been silenced or deHumanised [sic]” (80). This thinking leads him straight into one of the great paradoxes of the voice: its dependency on our bodies as a means of production while simultaneously being something extra-corporeal. Free jazz singing is a political site where the cultural value of the body, or the corresponding cultural negation of it, is played out in real time. Soundsingers transcend traditional hegemonic categorizations of bodies through their efforts to appropriate and hybridize sounds emerging from the panorama of vocal traditions, and from non-human sources as well. Tonelli is careful to note that such appropriation “is not a mastery of the cultural property of the Other, it is embodied curiosity and engagement with the timbres and textures we encounter in the world” (87). These issues of embodiment and humility lead Tonelli towards some remarkable understandings in the second half of his book, “Theories.”

The Opposite of Themselves

From the discussion on embodied curiosity, the author moves on to present historical activities of those he dubs “the second generation” of free jazz singers. That title refers to artists who were active in the 1980s and 90s and who responded to the work of the pioneers covered in the

first section. The evidence gathered represents a transnational community in which cross-cultural collaborations emerge from the interest in new possibilities with the voice. Tonelli marks the validation of unaccompanied free jazz singing through this community of practice and its rise in visibility via recordings, concerts, and festivals. He is also careful to identify challenges inherent in community interaction, especially those specific to this practice. Tonelli zeroes in on David Moss's work with the Institute for Living Voice as an example of a singer who draws on experience in traditional genres and on exchanging techniques with others at workshops. Here Tonelli notes how such exchanges resist traditional music training where students devote themselves to mastering a singular vocal tradition. He is also careful to present the added demands brought about by such a method, most notably the time required for artists to develop understanding of how to improvise in meaningful ways across varying approaches to singing. Chapter 4 ends with a list of musicians who can also be considered part of the second generation of soundsingers and invites further investigation of this expansive field.

After mapping the growing community of free jazz vocalists through the turn of the millennium, Tonelli turns to his own experience as a soundsinger, and to the public reception of Yoko Ono, to discuss the phenomenon of policing the voice that sometimes occurs when listeners encounter extended vocal technique. Chapter 5 focuses on two examples of performances met with derision and ridicule by (some) members of their audiences. This is one of the book's most compelling chapters, as it transforms the volume from a helpful history into a reflection on the impact of free jazz singing in the world. While Tonelli is careful to mention that his examples are not definitive of free jazz singing, he suggests that consideration of how and why the human voice is regulated indicates the potential for radical disruptions in future contexts. The author deftly combines theory from equity discourses—such as disability, race, gender, and sexuality studies—with Lindon Barrett's concept of modernity as a systemic process of "Humanizing and deHumanising [sic]" (128). What transpires is an examination of "how the micropolitics of the encounters [described] are part of a broader systemic cultural logic that we need to resist and reject to diminish suffering and inequity" (128). Tonelli goes on to argue that, when human voices create sounds outside of established norms, they threaten to dismantle limiting notions of identity and the value systems that order our bodies within society. He ends his deliberations with a note of caution that, while the voice has a capacity to represent our diversity and to transcend rigid identity construction, it is our improvisational attitudes that will ensure it can be used for revolution. Tonelli's thoughtful interrogation of our discomfort with the full range of the human voice results in exciting possibilities for its role in social and political change.

Voices Found's final full chapter moves seamlessly from the political potentialities of free jazz singing to its social actualities, presenting histories of community choirs leading to their current iterations. Many of the singers on whose practices Tonelli has focused his research run ensembles deploying various degrees of structure in improvised singing. This last chapter comments on the radical inclusivity that transpires within these ensembles, not only regarding the diversity of vocal sounds but also in terms of the negotiations and interactions between members. Rather than leave us with a saccharine notion of everyone singing in perfect harmony, Tonelli continues to offer relentless critical insights regarding the professional derision for specialists when they work with amateurs. Perhaps it is the fragility of sustenance that causes those employed in making music to shun projects that invite participants of all skill levels. In such a context, dedicating time to facilitating community choirs is radical act in and of itself. Of course, Tonelli digs deeper, considering the negotiations that happen within the choirs themselves. In a passage describing Maggie Nicols' approach to resolving conflict according to improvisational principals, he writes, "These kinds of encounters in improvised music provide us with a space for personal growth that can extend into and inform our approach to all our encounters with others in daily life" (155). He uses his concluding statements to emphasize

once again the accessibility of the voice and the close relationship between its metaphorical representations with literal acts of agency and inclusiveness.

This book is a wellspring of information for those who research improvisational singing. *Voices Found* presents a roadmap through the field of soundsinging that the reader can use as a resource for scholarly and creative inspiration. Tonelli provides a much-needed context for current practitioners of free jazz singing, and the section containing transcripts of his interviews serves as a master class with established artists, for singers who are looking for a path forward in this idiom. Additionally, the author's deep thinking about why voice matters so much to us, whether we appreciate or revile the sounds, explains a lot about this instrument that is both privileged and policed in mainstream culture. "My core argument throughout this book," writes Tonelli, "is that vocalists who embrace human vocal sounds that others Other as non-Human play some role in challenging or disturbing [. . .] pernicious, self-privileging worldviews" (73). The author's philosophy plays out in his methods, with regards to the singers whom he interviews, the presentation of their unedited words, and the way he chooses to order historical events. As a result, *Voices Found* is a resource with integrity, a work that acknowledges the impossibility of defining an art and a history that seeks to surprise itself through constant revolution.

Tonelli ends the book with "A Short Prayer for Social Virtuosity" that's worth reproducing to end this review: "If soundsinging tomorrow has no socio-political potential, that'd be great. It would mean it no longer exists in the philosophical sense of the term and all singing is heard, accepted, and enjoyed as singing, offending no-one and threatening nothing" (183).