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# Voicing voicing: attuning to the material in studio recording the Lullaby Choir

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a close ethnographic reading of an intercultural community choir's experience recording lullabies in a professional studio setting. Bringing together Chadwick's (2020, 2021) posthuman voice analytics with interdisciplinary voice studies, I turn ethnographic ears to the voice-as-vocalised by attuning to its materialities and more-than-human entanglements. In so doing I work to trouble idealised conceptions of voice that permeate music education practice and research, including the tropes of *giving voice*, *finding voice* and *collective voice* that I deployed in co-developing and facilitating the Lullaby Choir itself. By interrogating naturalised regimes of aurality and voice, this article contributes to broader efforts that enliven the material and the bodily in music, education, and research – considered together and separately – gesturing to pedagogies of sensation.

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## Introduction

Several well-established ideas about 'voice' permeate music education, exemplified by the impact commonly attributed to projects involving singing. Among other things, music education can purportedly help students *find their voice*, *give voice* to students' identities and experiences, and bring people together, developing a group's *collective voice*. When used to describe the objectives or outcomes of singing projects specifically, tropes such as these deploy multiple definitions of 'voice' simultaneously. The term relates to the physiological act of singing *and* the acoustic results of this activity, as well as the symbolic meanings attached to both. However, it is the last, immaterial concept of voice that foregrounds various claims about its significance in music education. Constructs like finding voice, giving voice and collective voice depend upon the conceptual primacy of whatever or whomever the singing voice is understood to realise or signify. The embodied act of singing, and the resulting sung voices, are only considered relevant insofar as they operate in service of, or stand in for, analogous identities, meanings, and relations.

In this article, I work to trouble these idealised conceptions of voice, interrogating the field's normative notions of finding voice, giving voice and collective voice by centering the material and the bodily. I do this by drawing on interdisciplinary voice studies to describe and interpret a community choir's experience singing in a professional studio setting. Employing Chadwick's (2020; 2021) posthuman voice analytics, I analyse ethnographic fieldnotes, participant observation-listenings, audio-recordings and interviews to answer the following tripartite research question. What can we learn by attending to:

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- (1) the material and bodily production of the singing voice, rather than the symbolic meanings attributed to the act of singing or the songs themselves,
- (2) the way that experiences of singing are shaped by encounters with non-humans in performance, and
- (3) the material and the embodied, not only in the singing experiences under scrutiny, but also other acts of voicing used to make sense of them (e.g. in interviews)?

In responding to these enquiries this article makes two interventions. First, it reshapes how we understand the significance of the voice in music education practice and research by focusing on singing and speaking as material, rather than representational, endeavours. The Lullaby Choir's studio session is featured to illustrate the article's central and primarily theoretical concern: reexamining *what voice does* in music education, by addressing *how voice becomes*. Adopting Chadwick's treatment of audio-recorded interviews to grapple with voice-as-matter, I argue that the ways people talk about singing enliven the felt, corporeal qualities of the experience under discussion. Interrogating this convergence – the voicing of voicing – is the article's second intervention: establishing and methodologically capturing the deeply embodied nature of singing through its spoken re-embodiment.

The article is organised as follows. The first section introduces the Lullaby Choir, an intercultural community choir that emerged as an applied research outcome of my postdoctoral research fellowship. In this section, I will explain the collaborative genesis of the choir, the public arts festival that brought the Lullaby Choir into the studio, and why, in this article, I am reexamining this experience years after having left the field. The second section contextualises the Lullaby Choir's romanticised and immaterial conception of group voice, identifying its presence in music education and community music literature. The next introduces my analytical methods, focusing on the sole-authored voice-centered poems and sensory ethnographic descriptions through which I present my interpretation of the data. In the subsequent examination of the Lullaby Choir's Ava Studios session, I argue that the exceptional set of conditions in studio settings offer particularly provocative insights into the materialities of the voice, complicating normative conceptions of finding voice, giving voice and collective voice. I conclude with a synthesis of the ways idealised notions of the voice have been troubled throughout the article, drawing connections between music education and pedagogies of sensation.

### Listening back to the Lullaby Choir

The Lullaby Choir developed from a collaborative research partnership under the auspices of my postdoctoral research fellowship, held at the University of Melbourne between 2016 and 2018 (see Funding Details). The fellowship sat within an umbrella project led by Principal Investigator Professor Jane W. Davidson and involved collaborating with a range of community and sector organisations – examining existing projects and developing new ones – to explore questions around music, empathy and conciliation. The Lullaby Choir evolved out of one such partnership with Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) New Futures, an education, employment pathway, childcare and community program provider for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants based in Coburg.<sup>1</sup> Together with the non-profit organisation Multicultural Arts Victoria, Jane and I sought and successfully obtained funding to develop a community arts project around lullabies (see Funding Details). We focused on lullabies because they are vocal practices that are intrinsically interpersonal; they enact communication and manifest the relationship between caregivers and their children. As they are traditionally transmitted intergenerationally, lullabies are often associated with personal and family memories, and their lyrics can come to reflect broader societal values and commemorate significant historical events. As written elsewhere,

In establishing an applied project aimed at examining music and intercultural relations, we were drawn to the universality represented by lullabies. As songs which are used to sooth or lull infants and young children,

across the world lullabies represent some of the earliest encounters with heritage music, language and culture. ... Conversely, we also valued the cultural specificity of lullaby practices. (Dieckmann and Davidson 2018, 159)

At the proposal stage, we (the funding applicants) did not envisage that the project would take its eventual shape as a choral ensemble with fortnightly rehearsals and outward-facing performances. Instead, we initially imagined a series of lullaby sharing sessions, networking VICSEG New Futures' senior, parenting and early childhood groups. The shifts in the objectives, implementation and outcomes of this project lie beyond the scope of this paper; how the first lullaby sessions gave rise to a community choir, the constitution of its membership and the complex dimensions of my researcher positionality are addressed extensively elsewhere (see Dieckmann and Davidson 2018; Dieckmann, [accepted](#)). What is pertinent to this article are the multiple roles I held. First, as a researcher-practitioner, I collaborated with VICSEG New Futures in co-developing the project-become-choir that served as both the focus of the research, as well as the vehicle for its applied outcomes. In response to its members, and with strong musical support from the choir's guitarist Joshua, I also came to adopt the position of the choir's facilitator, leading warm-ups, arranging the songs, curating programmes, and either conducting or scaffolding others' conducting of the singing. As an ensemble, we were collectively invested in exploring and singing lullabies to enhance and broadcast intercultural connections through music. The applied outputs of these joint endeavours were the performances themselves, sometimes complemented by co-delivered, public engagement programmes in venues like recital centres and community heritage museums. Finally, as an ethnographer I was engaged in eighteen months of fieldwork not only as a participant, but also as an observer. I collected data and interviewed my fellow choristers, analysing and theorising the choir's activities towards generating research findings outside of those that were jointly produced. In writing this article I inhabit this last position.

This retrospective analysis will problematise the ideas and ideals about the voice that I and others brought to the field. These are exemplified by the objectives outlined in the initial project proposal to develop a series of networked lullaby sharing sessions. (1) The project would 'provide a space for intergenerational, familial interaction and relationship development'; in other words, by reinvigorating the intergenerational transmission of culturally specific lullabies and their associated memories and histories, we hoped to help participants *find their voice*. (2) The project would 'foster greater visibility for women in Australia's marginalised communities ... offering alternative representations of these communities than those provided by sensationalist media narratives'; the project aimed to *give voice to* participants from dehumanised migrant and asylum seeker communities by platforming their gentle and profoundly human enunciations of caregiving. (3) The project would 'facilitate interfaith and intercultural connection through cross-cultural lullaby sharing'; that is, by sharing their lullabies with, learning lullabies from, and singing lullabies with others, participants would generate and exercise a harmonious and intercultural *collective voice*.

It is not the aim of this article to evaluate the extent to which the Lullaby Choir met these preliminary objectives, present findings about the general impact of singing in the Lullaby Choir (including in the Ava Studios session), or produce an ethnographic examination of the initial areas of enquiry (intercultural relations, migration, and lullabies).<sup>2</sup> Here I revisit the Lullaby Choir as an illustrative case study, in order to answer the theoretically oriented research question set out in this article's introduction. As evident in the preliminary project objectives quoted above, the Lullaby Choir was underpinned by several ideas and ideals about lullaby singing that framed *what voice does by what voice represents*. Lullabies were positioned as holders of personal memories, signifiers of cultural meanings, and symbols of shared humanity.

It is in reconfiguring the formulation of *what voice does* to account for *how voice becomes* that I turn my attention to the Lullaby Choir's Ava Studios session on October 6, 2017. At the time, the Lullaby Choir involved twenty-five singers from over ten countries of origin. VICSEG New Futures were well-established in Coburg, and the Lullaby Choir's activities were publicised on the not-for-profit

organisation's website and communications. Our exclusive focus on lullabies raised interest, as did the multilingual, intercultural constitution of the ensemble; consequently, we were invited to perform at local events. These ranged from migrant community festivals to Harmony Day<sup>3</sup> celebrations at an aged care home. One such invitation brought the Lullaby Choir to a professional recording studio. The resulting recordings were part of our contribution to MoreArt,<sup>4</sup> the local city council's annual public art festival, and they took final form as a sound installation played quietly and in a continuous loop at Jewell Train Station. In this article I focus on the Lullaby Choir in Ava Studios because it constitutes an especially rich fieldsite for examining *how voice becomes*. Voice-as-matter becomes particularly audible in recording processes because singers are hyper-aware of the material and bodily production of their singing, perforating naturalised regimes of aurality and the voice.

## Regimes of aurality and the voice in music education

Music education has long enveloped the practice of vocalising in ideals of the voice as a means of expression and of 'the metaphorical sense of "having a voice"' (Weidman 2014, 38). Group singing has been used as a mechanism for inculcating and sometimes transforming religious, political, moral and cultural values, with 'particular regimes of aurality and the voice' (38) institutionalised through houses of worship, mass schooling, and community-based singing movements. Whether considering historical cases such as the tonic sol-fa movement of the eighteenth century and the work of racial uplift by 'the vocal teacher of ten thousand' E. Azalia Hackley, or more recent contexts like renewed advocacy for whole-class singing in British primary schools and the grass-roots scene that is the natural voice movement, voice's power and meaning is often premised on a conflation between the literal and the metaphorical (respectively, Bithell 2014; Karpf 2022; Lamont, Daubney, and Spruce 2012; McGuire 2009). Everybody has a voice, and that voice denotes identity. Singing together surrogates and generates harmony. Vocal blending requires deep listening, losing the distinction between self and other. The voice is a proxy for agency, and collective voice for shared action and political power.

The last premise is of especial relevance to singing projects involving marginalised groups. The lullaby project's initial objectives to 'foster greater visibility' reverberates with Bithell's contention that, 'The experience of having one's voice witnessed by others is particularly powerful in the case of individuals who have more usually been excluded or overlooked' (2014, 294). And yet Hess asks music educationalists to consider 'the conditions that shape the lifting of particular voices', honouring silences in our research by 'grappling with voices who can no longer speak or sing their stories' (2021, 90, 103). Western takes aim at problematic tropes of "giving voice" to the voiceless' because, in such contexts, the 'politics and histories that silence people vanish altogether' (2020, 304). Reflecting on a sound essay project with and by refugees, Western draws attention to the willful complication engendered by collaborative work which 'allows us to say something about the complexities of immigration experiences without romanticising, victimising, or stigmatising people who cross borders' (305).

This article is part of my ongoing efforts to respond to calls like Hess's and Western's: to listen with, willfully complicate, and recognise silence. This has increasingly drawn my attention to matters corporeal, affective and sensory, as well as the variety of agents (human and non-human) involved in intercultural encounters, performance spaces and arts-based research (Campion and Dieckmann 2024; Dieckmann *accepted*; Dieckmann and Davidson 2018). While the voice has played a central role in these incursions, it has thus far entered into my analyses in service of the- orising other processes and phenomena: interculturality, translation, publicness, multicultural. Here, I work towards interrogating the topology of the voice – 'the product of both societal shaping *and* individual articulation and materiality' (Eidsheim 2012, 10) – as both a rich source of research data and my area of inquiry. How does the voice tell on itself?

The voice's materialities have long been the central focus in some branches of music education. Although choral and vocal pedagogy studies include wide-ranging and interdisciplinary interests,

the anatomical and acoustic are central concerns for those researching quality of vocal performance, healthy vocal development and singing techniques (see Abrahams and Head 2017; Welch, Howard, and Nix 2019). Working with d/Disabled, genderdiverse, and dysfunctioning voices is of increasing interest to choral and vocal pedagogues, with the literal-metaphorical conflation in the premise that ‘Everybody [read: every body] has a voice’ problematised by disability studies and examinations of modes of singing that do not involve conventional vocalisation (Howe et al. 2016; Quigley and MacDonald 2022; Waterman et al. 2024). These music education interventions, catalysed by specific issues with vocal production, resonate with musicological studies in which the starting point is interrogating discourses about the voice. For example, Meizel deconstructs the voice ‘understood as a kind of sonic fingerprint, embodying a unique, unalterable, and authentic self’ by listening to the multivocality emanating from bodies that, ‘imply transitions and transgressions across genre and gender boundaries, cultural borders, the lines between body and technology’ (2020, 21). This is achieved with ethnographic attention to d/Deaf singers, transgender singers, and singers experiencing voice loss, among others.

This article is energised by the resonances between music education research and interdisciplinary voice studies, theorising the Lullaby Choir’s voicing to address both, ‘concerns with agency, subjectivity, representation and power – the metaphorical sense of “having a voice” – and the more sonically and linguistically focused study of actual voices and vocal practices ... attending to voice in its multiple registers’ (Weidman 2014, 38). I join together with Sæther’s radical empiricism and sensuous scholarship, in order that music education research might focus on ‘experiences of the body’, taking seriously ‘the music, the body, the sweat’ (2021, 25). As Abbate noted twenty years ago, recalling Vladimir Jankélévitch, ‘real music is music that exists in time, the material acoustic phenomenon ... Musical sounds are sounds made by labor’ (2004, 505). Education is an equally embodied phenomenon, as in learning, ‘our physical selves become the locus of sociological, neurological, and enlightening happenings’ (Nguyen and Larson 2015, 333). If music education’s constituent parts are both intrinsically material, so too is research.

### **New materialist methods for interpreting multivocality**

The complicated and material co-constitution of the voice is at the core of both my research inquiry and its methodological apparatus. Addressing my research question – attending to the material and bodily production of the voice in singing and speaking, as well as the way that experiences of singing are shaped by encounters with non-humans – requires a close and detailed analysis of discrete voicing events. Therefore voice ‘in its concrete specificity, as an unfolding event articulated through a particular sensing and sensed body’ (Eidsheim 2012, 9) determines my approach to the ethnographic data: twelve video clips of the Lullaby Choir singing in Ava Studios, four audio recordings of related interviews, and related ethnographic fieldnotes, drawn from the much larger corpus collected over my eighteen months in the field.<sup>5</sup> Committing to what Chadwick calls ‘working otherwise with voices’, I analyse these data using three strategies from her voice-centered qualitative praxis:

- (1) embodied listening, focusing on the affective materiality of interviews and field encounters easily lost in acts of textual transcription,
- (2) using multivocality tools, highlighting the polyvocal and sometimes contradictory ways that individual and collective subjectivity is constituted, and
- (3) tracing viscous voices,<sup>6</sup> accounting for transindividual processes of voicing ‘in which sociomaterial realities, moral interpellations, fleshy bodies, self-other dynamics and multiple “I positions” become vitalised and entangled’ (2020, 16).

In the remainder of this article, I present my analysis of the data through two interpretive forms: sensory ethnographic vignettes and experimental voice-centered poems. Some of the ethnographic

descriptions and emergent theorisation position me within the field, because at the time under consideration – when the Lullaby Choir was being recorded at Ava Studios, and during the featured interviews – my researcher-practitioner role involved membership and facilitation of the choir. In these instances, my self-inclusion in a collective ‘we’ or ‘us’ reflects my situatedness in the ethnographic experience being described or theorised. However, readers are reminded that this article is the result of my ‘Listening back to the Lullaby Choir’ years after leaving the field. I conducted the analysis presented here independently and have sole-authored the poems and sensory descriptions to distill my own ethnographic interpretations. I highlight that the poems and vignettes are renditions of my own ‘embodied listenings’ (Chadwick 2020, 16) through their first lines. Each poem and vignette opens by locating readers in the moment of the analytic act. By using media file names and time stamps as opening lines, I remind readers that the featured interview or field encounter has been collected as data, digitised, archived, and then selectively extracted for the subsequent interpretive treatment. My own voice is therefore present throughout, sometimes explicitly, but often out of direct earshot: as a choir singer and facilitator in the examined Ava Studios session, as ethnographic interviewer, and in interpreting the voices of others through articulating my own embodied listening. Already, the ‘transindividual processes of voicing’ (16) begin to emerge.

The voice’s contradictions are also illustrated in the approach to perspective in the experimental voice-centered poems, each of which features the utterances of a single speaker. I use Chadwick’s expanded version of the I-poem device, structuring the poems’ line breaks by the speaker’s deployment of the pronouns ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘you’, ‘they’ and ‘it’. In the poems, the messy leakages from and between those to whom these pronouns refer foreground the transcorporeality underpinning Chadwick’s posthuman phenomenology of voice. She explains:

As bodies, we are not closed systems or self-contained individuals but radically interpermeated by (industrial and organic) plant and algae breaths, gaseous air molecules and planetary winds moving air across the globe ... Our bodies are always already more-than-human and our breaths intermingle endlessly ... Our voices are living movements and relational exchanges involving the entanglement of all these energies and elements: physiological vibrations and vitalizations, geomaterial air currents (life-giving and/also toxic), plant, algae, industrial and bacterial breath, affective energies, ideological and semiotic relations of power and embodied, geophysical and sociomaterial histories ... (2020, 3)

These exchanges and entanglements are traceable to the sonorous, fleshy qualities of the voice as it breathes, laughs, coughs, gurgles, utters and stutters. In accounting for these more-than-human permeations, I apply a second device featured in Chadwick’s poetic forms. The transcription notations that appear in Table 1 borrow directly from her methods, with the minor exception of my additions in the bottom two rows.

The dependencies of our ‘breathy embodiments’ (Chadwick 2020, 3) and the more-than-human qualities of our voicing are never more apparent than when we especially need to control them: in public speaking, solemn communal rituals, staged musical or dramatic performance or, most relevant here, studio recording.

**Table 1.** Transcription notations from Chadwick (2020, 7; 2021, 82).

<b>Massive</b> (bold)	Words spoken loudly
... (ellipses)	Speech trails off
<i>Good thing</i> (italic)	Words spoken slowly for effect
<u>Definitely</u> (underlined)	Words that are emphasized
<b><i>Tiny</i></b> (bold and italic)	Words spoken slowly and loudly
^^Oh my word^^ (double carets)	Words spoken with a laughter in the voice
OH NO (capitalised)	Words shouted
[name removed] (square brackets)	Explanatory material
**** (stars)	Omitted speech
My additions	
-by-the-way- (separated by dash)	Words spoken rapidly, in one breath, with rhythmic run-on
.... (middle dots)	Pause

## Getting voices on the record

Greg the Sound Engineer, Introducing the Recording Session

00002.MTS 02:41

We'll probably have two arcs of nine. Sort of, the center of the back, which .. is where

I'm standing now.

You'll see that there's

microphones here .. here and .. here. And two up here.

They're going to be

capturing an overall stereo image of what

you'll be singing. \*\*\* when

we're recording,

it's quite under the microscope and

everything is intensified. So any rustling or moving with ..

this many people will become noise-in-the-recording. So

we do have to be aware that, when

we're not recording

you can *relax and* .. snuffle-and-cough-and-all-that. And when

we are recording, everyone goes into a, sort-of-an *area of focus*, where

we say, 'Okay, everyone's really quiet now and

we really concentrate'. \*\*\* Even though

we'll be concentrating on ... being as accurate as

we can,

we also want to *capture* the spirituality of what

you're doing. So

we also want to capture the emotion and enjoyment of

your performance. \*\*\* But remember

it *really should be* not a *chore*. But

you know, a sense of enjoyment of, of *the art and the music* ... So try and keep that in

your focus as well as being as good as

we can.

In the Lullaby Choir's usual voicing practices, *finding our voice* involved selecting and learning lullabies that either held personal memories, or were considered culturally meaningful, for at least one of our members. Sometimes the member who sourced the lullaby was reconnecting with a song they no longer heard or sang very much before joining the choir. In one case, the lullaby-sourcing chorister selected a song to which they had never previously been exposed, reviving their relationship with a heritage language in an act of cultural recovery. Once a lullaby was performance-ready,

absorbed into the choir's repertoire and body memory, subsequent acts of singing that lullaby represented the choir's broadcasting of a voice we had already, successfully found. The above poem 'Greg the Sound Engineer, Introducing the Recording Session' complicates this notion of finding voice, demonstrating that 'a voice can show up quite differently than we *think* it should ... no "voice" shows up for us as real in the first place without the infrastructure, situation, habits, and practices that make it available' (Rahaim 2019, 26).

The Lullaby Choir had been recorded several times before our visit to Ava Studios. Choristers often recorded themselves using smart phone cameras, in rehearsal, as memory aids. VICSEG New Futures' marketing team recorded performances for newsletters and press releases. I recorded rehearsals and performances on a handycam for data collection purposes. Although we were used to our performances being documented audio-visually, the professional process of recording for our MoreArt sound installation involved heightened attentional practices. Greg was anticipating the challenges we would have – 'we' the Lullaby Choir, together with Greg as sound engineer, and the five condenser microphones he pointed out (line 5 of the poem) – in finding our voice amidst the noise. It is because of this strong distinction between sound and noise that the studio-as-fieldsite calls to the ethnographic ear, overturning the occularcentricity indicated by 'participant observation' in favour of 'participant listening' (Thompson and Lashua 2014).

'Greg the Sound Engineer, Introducing the Recording Session' richly illustrates the 'breathy embodiment' of our voicing and how, in Ava Studios, we would attempt to render its excesses and interruptive forces inaudible. Crucially, re-producing our singing voices as 'stable, essential, singular entities separable from the fleshy, embodied and sociomaterial relations' (2) demanded a mitigation of some more-than-human entanglements – resonances perceptible in *sniffle-and-cough-and-all-that*<sup>7</sup> – in favour of others. The infrastructures through which our voices were to be 'made available' (Rahaim 2019, 26) had to do with the capacities and limitations of the equipment, the venue and the recording techniques being put to use, because of which we were *quite under the microscope*.

Ava Studios had the architectural set-up typical of professional recording studios; they are complex material spaces, designed to capture the materiality of sound in specialised ways by highlighting some vibrating frequencies, and downplaying or eliminating others. The above poem, as well as the next vignette, interpret researcher videos taken in the live room where the Lullaby Choir performed. Greg watched our performances from the control room, which was acoustically isolated from the live room and set up with equipment including a mixing desk, computer, and studio monitors. This equipment became the secondary targets of our sung vocalisations, as we projected our voices into the control room via five *microphones here · · here and · · here. And two up here* suspended from the ceiling. We stood in *two arcs of nine*, at calculated distances and angles from the overhead microphones, positioned to capture the spatial information that would produce natural-sounding acoustics in *overall stereo image*: our voices as vibrations, becoming digitised waveforms, to become vibrations again: a 'peculiar kind of object ... durable, changeable, subject to trimming, cutting, pasting, extension, enhancement, and, crucially, reproduction' (Rahaim 2019, 24).<sup>8</sup>

The studio is a particularly generative fieldsite for examining voice because of its extraordinary vitalisation of and by 'vibrant matter' (see Bennett 2010). Having conducted ethnographic research into studio recordings of the South African mbaqanga tradition, Meintjes explains how the studio is designed for sonic isolation from the outside world. Inside, it insulates against 'the noise of its own operation' (2003, 91). She goes on to argue that this, 'fantastically regulated sonic environment' enables 'matter [to be] transformed into something more than matter, into symbol, feeling, and aesthetic form' (92). At Ava Studios, the Lullaby Choir were instructed to focus on *being as good as we can / being as accurate as we can* by way of *everyone enters into a, sort-of-an area of focus where we say, 'Okay, everyone's really quiet now and we really concentrate'*. Equally, to capture the *spirituality / a sense of enjoyment of, of the art and the music / keep that in your focus as well*. These twin desires reflect discursive tensions 'between the "authenticity" of performance and the "falsity" of mediated

sound' (139). In the case of studio productions of the mbaqanga tradition, Meintjes identifies these tensions as configuring a nostalgic aesthetic impulse that 'imagines a moment in which African music making was unmediated, intuitive, and integrated into the practice of everyday life' (139). Our musings on lullaby singing practices shared all these traits.

In attuning to the voicing of voicing – the resonances between the ways people talk about singing and the felt, corporeal qualities of the experience under discussion – recording studios offer significant methodological potential. This is illustrated in 'Greg the Sound Engineer, Introducing the Recording Session', where the most salient characteristics of recording the singing voice are evident in the 'breathy embodiment' of Greg's speech. The poem outlines the Lullaby Choir's introduction to the material hierarchies and discourses about voice that would come to determine the recording process. The expressivity with which Greg delivered these instructions produces a kind of metonymic symmetry, paralleling the vocal medium with the verbalised message. The governing mediatory position of the overhead microphones are given due space with pauses: *here · · here and · · here*. The stuff of noise is exasperated, promptly extinguished in the rhythmic run-on of rushed words: *sniffle-and-cough-and-all-that*. And the studio's guiding, discursive distinction between the twin poles of performed authenticity and mediated falsity evoke comparable signposting in slower, louder, emphatic speech: *when we're not recording you can relax / And when we are recording / it's quite under the microscope and everything is intensified. \*\*\*But remember it really should be not a chore.*

### Sounding 'the voice multiple'

The Fourth Take of 'Yalla tnam Reema'

00006.MTS 19:25

Dania, who taught us this lullaby, faces the choir. Bandhul, positioned at the end of the first arc, turns her head away and coughs. Again. Once more. I ask, 'Do you need to go and get some water before we start?' No. Two others start clearing their throats, and within seconds, guttural rasps, wheezes, coughs. Some purposeful, others involuntary, becoming a short burst of heaped laughter. Dania and Joshua, at the same time. 'Get back into position!' 'Huddle tight, standing in the same spot!' Playing two starting notes on the guitar, Joshua calls, 'You guys!' From Greg, quietly, sounding through the speakers from beyond the live room. 'And we're rolling.' For 1.5 seconds, 'silence' hisses white noise, sound's vibrations captured by my handycam's built-in mic.

We hum the first note, trying for sameness with the guitar, with each other. Halfway through the first line, Dania turns to the window. With a slight grimace, nods, gesturing a stop. Our intonations had deviated towards the end of our first, closed-mouth note, resonating dissonances from the throats, nasal passages, mouth cavities of those around us. Escaped discrepancies, circulating piercingly as we moved to produce recognisable words. 'Yalla tnam' with the tongue, the soft palate, the lips. 'Let's start again, because ...' Dania begins. Watching/hearing it back, now at 20:14, I cannot make out her verbal instructions over the sound of nervous laughter, paper rustling, bodies shifting with freedom from standing still. Turning her head from Greg to Joshua, Dania resumes with a question to and beyond the room. 'Alright. Rolling?'

In line with Rahaim's notion of 'the voice multiple', which accounts for the voice's manifold enactments and diverse 'technologies of attunement, broadcasting, and reproduction' (2019, 21), the Lullaby Choir's *collective voice* was encountered in contradictory ways. Our usual voicing practices located our choral voice as emanating with immediacy from our bodies, an imagined whole realised through each performance iteration. Our own recordings functioned as archives or pedagogical tools, replete with the sounds which, in the studio, were noise: *the sound of nervous laughter, paper rustling, bodies shifting with freedom from standing still*. In listening back to our own recordings, we would listen through the soundscape in which we were situated at time of replay, and then again through the recording itself. We would construct an audio image of our collective voice by listening out for relevant vocalisations, wherever possible, ignoring all other sounds.

Having our singing professionally recorded produced a different set of material relations. During breaks several choristers photographed themselves in Ava Studios, posing with microphones, instruments, the mixing desk, and the control room window. These enthusiasms bring to mind

Meintjes's (2003) discussion of the fetishisation of studio technology. She argues that the studio space becomes imbued with 'magical' qualities (73), and that, 'Those most awed and alienated by the studio environment are the musicians, particularly those with less recording experience' (101–102). Visually documenting the singing to, and physical co-presence with, audio-recording equipment, commemorated our participation in the rarefied practice through which the Lullaby Choir's voice manifested 'as real' (Rahaim 2019, 26). Aashvi described it thus:

#### Aashvi Reflects on the Ava Studios Recording Session

2018-02-09 Aashvi.wav 01:04:43

I thought-it-was .. *really* good to be . . . . to have been .. able to expose ourselves to that, to a much more formal setting. \*\*\* Yeah

I thought-it-was really important actually.

\* \* \*

#### **I thought just being,**

you know, taken out of this casual like,

'La-la-la-la-la,

mrgh-mrgh-mrgh-mrgh-mrgh',

chatty-chatty sitch ...

So being in that very disciplined sort of environment and *actually feeling the music*.

\*\*\* And

you know, going over

it **again** and **again** and **again** without the interruption in between, which

we have with choir?

We were *actually committing* to

\*\*\* ^^really strict^^ [laughter]

I felt more .. *respectful* of, of the work, yeah.

I felt like I was actually ... Sorry, no, each of the songs.

I felt more respectful.

\*\*\* Just to give

it that dedication and

your full presence and attention,

you know, to the one thing ... and just be there not ... not have like, **chat** in between and giggle.

In 'Aashvi Reflects on the Ava Studios Recording Session' the studio setting is marked off by emphatic references to the space, describing its qualities and the affective registers it inspired: Aashvi suggests that it was really good to *expose ourselves to that, to a much more formal setting, a very disciplined sort of environment*. Because the rarefied setting was 'remote from the ordinary' (Meintjes 2003, 73) it compelled *respectful / dedication / and attention*. For Aashvi, 'it' was *the work / each of the songs*, with which the Lullaby Choir could engage more respectfully by *actually committing / without the interruption in between*. That Aashvi rejoiced in this disciplining was made

palpable in her mirthful description of the session as *^^really strict^^ [laughter]*, with tone juxtaposing content. In addition to its off-handed, single-breath delivery, Aashvi's mimicry of the non-sensical, sensory disturbances of non-singing vocalisations were performed in a humorously high-pitched register: *La-la-la-la-la, mrgh-mrgh-mrgh-mrgh, chatty-chatty sitch*. A deeper pitch and more deliberate communicative tone was used, louder dynamics establishing a downbeat, to describe the regulatory *again and again and again* of repeated takes. These metered reiterations seemed to invoke the repetitive singing through which, for Aashvi, *actually feeling the music* occurred. For Aashvi, Ava Studios enabled 'matter [to be] transformed into more than matter' (92) through the taming of the *chat in between and giggle*, the throat-clearing, rasps, wheezes, coughs, and laughter that halted "The Fourth Take of "Yalla tnam Reema".

Aashvi summons an ethical dimension to the musical material as *felt / felt / felt*, such that proper attention to *the one thing / the work* did not involve meanings signified by the sung material, or any symbolic significance attributed to the act of singing together with others. Instead, what was substantive was singing as an active, narrowly focused sensory experience. *Just to give it / your full presence and attention*, recalls Abbate addressing what one actually thinks about when performing: 'during the experience of real music ... thoughts about what music signifies or about its formal features do not cross my mind' but instead '*doing this really fast is fun or here comes a big jump*' (2004, 511). While Aashvi appreciated how Greg's *area of focus* disciplined the moments of performance, others articulated their experiences differently.

#### Rehan Reflects on the Ava Studios Recording Session

2018-02-02 Rehan.wav 26:35

That's challenging, because

*he* want to get the best out of us, but .. sometimes

it's a bit ...

I think

it's a bit .. not best when

you are, because

we are not *used to*.

You had to *be quiet* and singing over-and-over again. Sometimes-a-bit,

it feel like boring? This boring feeling.

\*\*\* If

*you're free* ...

you feel you are free, and then

you can sing because you are comfortable to sing, you know? If

you are in that *atmosphere*, unless

you are perfect, a hundred per cent used to

it,

I think for the beginner

you're a bit nervous and sometimes

you might get *wrong* the, the, the pitch and the tune of the song.

‘Rehan Reflects on the Ava Studios Recording Session’ is striking in its exposure of the entanglements between affective energies, relations of power, and the physiological vibrations that produce the singing voice, all key to Chadwick’s theorisation of voice as phenomenologically posthuman. In the poem, Rehan draws the ethnographic ear to the ‘living movements and relational exchanges’ (Chadwick 2020, 3) between these energies. There is a conceptual call-and-response between Rehan’s hushed and paced effecting of *be quiet* and the race to profess that *singing over-and-over again. Sometimes-a-bit, it feel like boring?* Rehan’s embodied retelling impresses upon the listener the significance of *that atmosphere* on agency. What Chadwick would call socioaffective atmospherics of power (3) – *you feel you are free / comfortable / he want to get the best out of us / unless you are perfect, a hundred per cent used to it* – determine feelings and displays of control over one’s own vocal production – *you’re a bit nervous / sometimes you might get the wrong pitch and the tune of the song.*

There are notable differences between ‘Aashvi Reflects on the Ava Studios Recording Session’ and ‘Rehan Reflects on the Ava Studios Recording Session’, highlighting how the same act of producing a *collective voice* can be animated by dissimilar and even seemingly incompatible affective energies on the part of individual singers. Any given regime of musical voicing can be enthusiastically adopted or acquiescingly accepted, experienced as both vivifying and confining. Aashvi spoke about ‘going over it again and again and again’ as a method for deepening respect, dedication, and presence. By contrast, Rehan’s reflection insinuated a kind of stifling in the ‘over and over again’, the quietude and restraint to which the choir’s ‘beginner’ voicing was subjected. His observations connected affective experiences with vocalisations of the ‘wrong’ pitch and tune, recalling Eidsheim’s contention that,

By placing sound at the core of a multifaceted event that includes physical activity, corporeal changes, and the sounds that arise therefore, we unfairly impose inappropriate evaluative criteria on those sounds. For instance, the sound of the voice, and the way in which the instinct to notate renders listening selective, has seduced us into believing that the power of the voice lies in its sound, while in actuality the sound is merely the tip of an iceberg, the entirety of which shifts us into affective states. Singing happens before the sound; it is the action that produces the sound. Listening, then, takes place in the shared activity of singing – the shared actions of moving and being moved. (2015, 130)

### ‘Singing happens before the sound’<sup>9</sup>

In line with the objectives in the initial project proposal, as researcher and choir facilitator, I imagined that the Lullaby Choir *gave voice to* minoritised migrant and refugee communities by virtue of broadcasting participants’ memories, cultures and experiences through song. The act of *giving voice* was fulfilled in hearing each other out in sharing sessions and rehearsals, and in staging performances and co-delivering public engagement outputs. This notion of giving voice was complicated by the Ava Studios session, as it revealed the prominent role that ‘technologies of attunement, broadcasting and reproduction’ have in voicing (Rahaim 2019, 21). Greg’s work, and the work of the technologies he used, was not documentation or amplification that *gave voice to*, but a collaborative act inherent to the Lullaby Choir’s vocalisations.

With several years’ experience working with both professionals and amateurs, Greg was very aware of the pressure that studio recordings can exert on performers being recorded. He returned to the idea that our performance *really should be not a chore* (line 24, ‘Greg the Sound Engineer, Introducing the Recording Session’) in an interview conducted months after the recording session. Like Rehan, Greg addressed the socioaffective atmospherics of power in the recording process.

Greg Reflects on the Ava Studios Recording Session

2018-02-07 Greg.wav 32:51

For anyone *performing*

it’s a very ··· uhm *psychologically-based exercise.*

Recording's quite unnatural.

So, trying to get people *comfortable* and *happy* without pushing them too hard. But trying to .. encourage them to the level that you think they can achieve is . . . . not a challenge, but . . . it's, it's something that has-to-be-done to get the best results. And if you go *too far*, people start to shrink.

Like Aashvi and Rehan, Greg used evaluative language: *the level that you think they can achieve* and *the best results* evoke Eidsheim's interrogation of the criteria that emerge when 'placing sound at the core' of the 'multifaceted event' that is voicing (2015, 130). At the same time, 'Greg Reflects on the Ava Studios Session' highlights the speaker's recognition of the shifting affective states that authorise 'the power of the voice' (130), and that these operate in specific ways when capturing a community choir singing in the *quite unnatural* setting of studio recording. Greg tended to the listening that Eidsheim locates as part of, 'the shared activity of singing – the shared actions of moving and being moved' (130); for the Lullaby Choir, this was especially important because of the manner of our songs' distribution. There was considerable consternation at the thought of the songs being reproduced on continuous playback at Jewell Station for a period of two weeks. As Greg noted, 'Certainly if it's going twenty-four hours a day, or was, I can imagine it would have so many different reactions from people' (February 7, 2018). Notably, none of the choir members went to Jewell Station throughout the two-week sound installation. The discomfort of imagining the Lullaby Choir's voice as acousmatic sound, confronting unknown audiences, highlighted the ambivalence and exposure inherent in vocal emission:

So by using one's voice one is also 'always-already' yielding power to the Other; the silent listener has the power to decide over the fate of the voice and its sender; the listener can rule over its meaning, or turn a deaf ear. The trembling voice is a plea for mercy, for sympathy, for understanding, and it is in the power of the listener to grant it or not. (Dolar 2006, 80)

Imagined listening Others were significant constituents in the Lullaby Choir's voice multiple, as voice is 'a co-creation to which listeners significantly contribute' (Eidsheim 2012, 10). Although we did not explicitly acknowledge them in the Ava Studios session itself, future listeners nevertheless shaped the Lullaby Choir's singing and Greg's recording and producing. The over-and-over stoppages and restarts – *it has-to-be-done / without pushing them too hard* – the digital erasure of coughs and the stitching together of separate takes; in the case of these recordings, the work of giving voice to the Lullaby Choir was determined by *giving voice over* to myself as facilitator, to Greg as sound engineer, and to the silent listeners that were our ultimate addressees. We attempted to hear with *their* critical ears, and the pedagogical operations of warming up, rehearsing, performing, evaluating and correcting, established learning as a material process. Anticipating 'the power of the listener' (Dolar 2006, 80) shifted the Lullaby Choir's affective states, before, surrounding, and echoing long after recording our vocal emissions.

## Conclusion

By examining the material and bodily production of singing and speaking, including the ways in which this production is shaped by encounters with non-humans, this article interrogates regimes of aurality and the voice that permeate music education. The Lullaby Choir's Ava Studios recording session provides an illustrative case study through which understandings of *what voice does* in music education are reconfigured, decentering *what voice represents* and turning instead to *how*

*voice becomes*. The extraordinary vitalisation of ‘vibrant matter’ intrinsic to studio recordings supports a theorisation of voice as phenomenologically posthuman because the project of disciplining ‘breathy embodiments’ only makes them more apparent. I have traced the entanglements underpinning our choral voice’s ‘physiological vibrations’ (Chadwick 2020, 3), revealing the interpermeating of materialities including: our singing and speaking bodies; the complex material space of Ava Studios itself, its architectural design, acoustic qualities, recording equipment, and the affective energies with which it was imbued (‘unnatural’, ‘really strict’); sound as spatial information, vibrating frequencies, and manipulable digital waveforms; the ‘matter’ to-be-extinguished, like rustling paper and the exchanges with air currents that are coughs; the sociomaterialities of self-other dynamics, as in contagious laughter; and the socioaffective atmospherics of power, manifest in rigorously guided concentration felt by some as enabling, and others, constraining. Voice-centered poems and sensory ethnographic descriptions have been used to exhibit how the voice is vitalised by encounters between ‘all of these energies and elements’ (3), collapsing the boundaries between them.

Interestingly, these sociomaterial dynamics were carried forward from the studio to interviews. Through use of Chadwick’s graphic notation and expanded I-poem devices, in this article, the ethnographic ear is extended to the reader, hopefully providing a sensuously rich reading. The palimpsestic analysis of singing in the studio *through* verbal instructions about and reflections on the same, offers a novel integration of Chadwick’s posthuman voice analytics. The resulting poems and sensory ethnographic vignettes do not aim to encapsulate authentic or stable presentations of participant voices, and indeed, ‘We can never fully know or render the voices and lives of other people’ (Western 2020, 304). They are creative renditions of my ethnographic ‘embodied listenings’ (Chadwick 2020, 16), and the interpretive forms through which my analysis is presented highlight the proxemics of this frame. The poems themselves enunciate shifting agents, with moving I/you/we/they/it positions emulating the multiple permutations of self-other, posthuman dynamics at play.

The centering of voice’s materiality, and its entanglements with more-than-human energies, is shared, conceptually, with pedagogies of sensation (Ellsworth 2005). Considering pedagogy as sensation construction involves fostering environmental and processual conditions for learning as a sensory experience. Ellsworth explains that learning selves and events become manifest in ‘the material qualities of transitional space and their impingements on our embodied experiences of being in relation’ (32). There is merit in hearing the sensory and sonic realisations of our voicing as what D.W. Winnicott calls a ‘holding environment’ (Ellsworth 2005, 32), our being-in-relation as affective interferences and resonances in (dis)comfort, stillness, boredom, attention, dedication, exactitude, nerves, exasperation. In music education projects involving singing, continued adherence to immaterial and idealised conceptions of voice risks missing the sensory and embodied experience of learning. Music educators should pay due attention to how corporeality shapes learners’ impressions of singing experiences.

As the Lullaby Choir’s lead facilitator, I operated under the impression that the participants had *found their voice* long before the Ava Studios session. The difficulty with finding our voices under the regime of studio recording revealed our tenuous handle on their whereabouts, and the extent to which they were ‘made available’ to us and others through ‘technologies of attunement, broadcasting, and reproduction’ (Rahaim 2019, 21) beyond our own bodies. Our seemingly well-established *collective voice*, a symbol of intercultural harmony, was animated by conflicting affective energies and adverse, sociomaterial self-other dynamics. And *giving voice* to our personal memories, cultural meanings and shared humanity, meant giving our voices over to technologies, producers, and listeners. That singing is ‘a shared activity’ constituted by ‘the shared actions of moving and being moved’ (Eidsheim 2015, 130) completely shaped the ‘transindividual processes of voicing’ (Chadwick 2020, 16) that we exercised in Ava Studios. Finally, attending to the material and bodily voice has necessitated a recognition of silence. The sensory ethnographic vignettes and voice-centered poems interpret several moments of ‘silence’ – such as moments in between takes, or expressive

pauses when speaking – as well as the regulatory acts of silencing which bring them about. Silence envelops and infuses acts of singing of speaking, and it is palpable.

If sensational pedagogies ‘recognise the importance of corporeality, emplacement, and sensation in learning – of the body’s encounter with other bodies (human and non-human), of its location in space and time as enmeshed and intertwined, and that sensation is not simply a matter of an awakening to non-ocular ways of knowing, but recognises the politics of knowing sensationally’ (Springgay 2011, 651), I hope the ways the Lullaby Choir ‘knew sensationally’ offer fresh perspectives to music educationalists investigating and invested in finding, giving and collective voice.

## Notes

1. A suburb north of Melbourne’s central business district, Coburg rests on the traditional land of the Wurundjeri people, part of the Kulin Nation.
2. These areas of inquiry are dealt with in other articles (Dieckmann and Davidson 2018; Dieckmann *accepted*).
3. Harmony Day was established by the Department of Home Affairs in 1999, and involves activities aimed at the recognition and celebration of “Australian multiculturalism, and the successful integration of migrants into our community” (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs *n.d.*). It is held annually on 21st March to coincide with the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.
4. Our participation in MoreArt also involved live performances on station platforms and in moving trains, examined in Dieckmann (*accepted*).
5. Ethics approval was given by the University of Melbourne’s Human Ethics Research Committee (ID number 1647405.1). In this article, participants’ names have been pseudonymised.
6. In line with new materialist orientations, here, the metaphor of viscosity emphasises conceptual indeterminacy and that the ‘thingness’ of the voice exists in-relation, as porous as that which is “neither fluid nor solid” (Tuana 2008, 193–194; cited in Chadwick 2021, 91).
7. When cited in-text, excerpts from the poems are embedded in explanatory prose by way of italicisation. This means that, in this context, there is a departure from the graphic notation of the poems, where italics indicate slower speech (as in Table 1). Forward slashes separate words extracted from different lines of the poem. For conceptual clarity, these segregated excerpts may appear in a different order than in the original voice-centered poems.
8. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the voice-object fixed and aestheticised through the prism of sound engineering; the tracks resulting from our recording session. My interest here is principally located in the activities within the live room, not the creatively manufactured output of the control room.
9. This title borrows from the Eidsheim quote cited above (2015, 130).

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