



Dire et Chanter Les Passions
DCLP



REVUE

INTERNATIONALE



DIRE ET



CHANTER



LES PASSIONS



05 *Vocalité et identité*

septembre 2026

Directeurs de la revue :

Marc JEANNIN et David POULIQUEN

Directeur de publication :

Jean-François BIANCO

Revue à comité de lecture

Directeurs de la revue

Marc JEANNIN	Université d'Angers
David POULIQUEN	Université de Rennes 2

Directeur de publication

Jean-François BIANCO	Université d'Angers
----------------------	---------------------

Direction scientifique

Matteo CASARI	Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna
Adrian GRAFE	Université d'Artois
Danièle PISTONE	Sorbonne Université

Comité scientifique

Angela ALBANESE	Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia
Carlo ALTINI	Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia
Patrick BARBAN	Université du Havre
Marina BONDI	Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia
Philippe BLAUDEAU	Université d'Angers
Jean-Noël CASTORIO	Université du Havre
Fabio CEPPELLI	Teatro Comunale Modena Pavarotti-Freni
Carole CHRISTEN	Université du Havre
Golda COHEN	Université d'Angers
Norbert COL	Université de Bretagne Sud
Carl GOMBRICH	The London Interdisciplinary School
Simon LEADER	The Leys School
Marie NGO NKANA	Université de Strasbourg
Jean-Yves LE JUGE	Festival de musique baroque de Quélven
Nicola PASQUALICCHIO	Università di Verona
Paul PHILLIPS	Stanford University
Geoffrey RATOUIS	Université d'Angers
Sophie ROCH-VEIRAS	Université Catholique de l'Ouest
Clair ROWDEN	Cardiff University School of Music

Équipe éditoriale

Marine VASLIN
Lisa FISCHER
Marjorie GRANDIS

**Revue internationale Dire et Chanter Les Passions,
Numéro 5, Vocalité et identité**

Direction d'ouvrage

Pierre FARGETON

Direction du numéro

Marc JEANNIN

Webmaster

Dominique RIBALET

Revue en libre accès disponible sur : www.dclp.eu/revue-dclp

Langues de publication : français, italien, anglais

Contact : contact-revue-dclp@dclp.eu

© Dire et Chanter Les Passions, 2026. Tous droits réservés.

Cette publication est mise à disposition sous licence

Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International.



ISSN : 2804-0074

La *Revue internationale Dire et Chanter Les Passions* (revue DCLP) est une revue à comité de lecture qui publie des articles rattachés à la thématique principale de l'expression des passions, des émotions, des voix, des talents, des savoir-faire, et des formes artistiques. Ancrée dans le champ des sciences humaines et sociales, elle accueille des travaux interdisciplinaires fondés sur une pluralité d'approches théoriques et méthodologiques. La revue DCLP publie dans le domaine des sciences humaines et sociales, en format numérique et/ou papier, des articles émanant de chercheurs, d'experts, de spécialistes, d'artistes et de personnalités rayonnant dans une sphère nationale et/ou internationale. À travers des numéros thématiques, des hors-séries et une rubrique varia, la revue DCLP affirme sa volonté de favoriser le dialogue entre les disciplines, le décroisement des savoirs et la diffusion des connaissances.

VOICE, IDENTITY, CONTROL

Daniel Leech-Wilkinson
King's College London

I was asked in 2008 to present a review for BBC Radio 3 of around seventy recordings of Schubert's seventy-minute song cycle *Winterreise*¹. My job was to choose the best. A more ridiculous task is hard to imagine. How can there possibly be a best performance? Many of them were excellent, at least a dozen were wonderful. At the time I was researching Schubert song performance, and the recordings the BBC sent me were an invaluable resource, which is why I agreed to do it. But it did also give me the opportunity to think about what we want from a singer, how we want them to communicate with us, to engage us, to enable us to feel with them. In other words, what we need from a voice. Because so much of response to singing, as with any human communication, is about our own needs. *Winterreise* is not always easy to hear, considering that the beautifully doomed sequence of songs tells the story of a rejected lover treading inexorably through an icy landscape towards his death. Seventy minutes of desolation is not easy for a singer to shape or for a listener to desire. Nonetheless, like any wonderful score wonderfully performed, it changes us: it is an experience, not a "work"; it happens to us, and it uses us, in unpredictable and very personal ways.

From this huge range of performances several things were clear. First, for all the variety of detail, the broad outlines of all seventy performances were very similar: none of those singers was prepared to (or none had been allowed to) imagine these songs radically differently from the norm. A recording with wind instruments and accordion, with an otherwise conventional vocal

¹ Broadcast on 9th February, 2009, at 9.30am.

² In Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *Challenging Performance: Classical Music Performance Norms and How to Escape Them*, 2020, v. 2.2.4 (17.xi.24), chapter 6, I argue that "the work" is a deceitful concept. <https://challengingperformance.com/the-book-6-17>, (accessed 12.xii.24).

performance, is as wild as they got³. A second conclusion was that, once you get past that general conformity and into the details, voices really are very different even in this highly disciplined tradition of vocal production where every classical singer is trained in broadly the same technique, producing similar sounds by similar means for similar purposes. Thirdly, the voices we hear most and know best do communicate with a precision that exceeds the norm: they are exceptionally well-controlled. Fourthly, precision and intensity of expression are, when combined together, the most effective quality that leads me as a listener to want to hear more. Voices can also be perfectly controlled without being intensely communicative, in other words safe but dull, or they can be communicative but out of control, which makes them uncomfortable to listen to. But for me it was those with fabulous and minute control of their voices, together with a willingness to draw boldly on the vocal sounds of emotion we know from life, who really held my attention and engaged me fully in the whole seventy-minute cycle of songs.

Just how much of my response was personal, and to do with my own identity and the particular identities I myself heard in these singers, became very clear after the programme was broadcast and the BBC began to receive angry emails from listeners whose preferences were quite different. Many were outraged that I had not chosen Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau but instead had preferred three women, Christine Schäfer and Nathalie Stutzmann, and for a historical recording Lotte Lehmann. These three communicate, to me, through notably different balances of precision and expressivity. Schäfer is almost super-human in the speed with which she can change mood with her voice⁴. A little scary, perhaps, but one has the sense that a Wanderer who can sound such a range of emotion so exactly would be exceptionally interesting to spend time with, if not for very long. Stutzmann is

³ Schubert, *Winterreise*, arr. Normand Forget, Christoph Prégardien (tenor) with the ensemble Pentaèdre and Joseph Petric (accordion). ATMA ACD2 2546 (recorded 2007).

⁴ Hear, for example, the opening of “Frühlingstraum”, on Schubert, *Winterreise*: Christine Schäfer (soprano) and Eric Schneider (piano), ONYX CLASSICS 4010 (recorded 2003, issued 2006), track 11, 0:0–1:15.

not so mercurial but—a contralto—is warmer in sound and perhaps more sympathetically human, a safer companion than Schäfer; also more a singer's singer, with a relaxed and fluid voice production⁵.

If I had been forced to choose a man with the conventional piano accompaniment it would probably have been Matthias Goerne, simply because his voice is so magnificent⁶. But of course he sounds far too robust and healthy to be the despairing, rejected poet of the text. Then again, how many male singers, given the chance to record this monument of the repertoire, would present themselves as a rejected no-hoper? And would one really want to hear such a voice sing these songs? It is easy enough to imagine die schöne Müllerin rejecting some of the amateur singers whose recordings of *Winterreise* I was sent, but one cannot as easily imagine her rejecting Matthias Goerne for her green-clad huntsman. A voice is enough, in other words, when it comes to sexual selection, to tell you as much as you feel you need to know.

THE POWER OF VOICE IN SHAPING IDENTITY

One's choices, so I suggest, have a great deal to do with identity, not of course the singer's identity, but rather the identities created by the listener to sounds made by these singers in these recordings. They are so different and yet those I have referenced here (and several others) are all Wanderers I should be fascinated to know, to spend time with, to listen closely to, to try to understand. For, to be attractive, a voice must be both recognisably an individual and also someone we would feel pleased to know or to be; since so much of identification is about feeling being someone. And that in turn is strongly influenced by culture, for one's sense of whom one would wish to be in response to a voice is shaped strongly by where and when one grows up.

⁵ Cf. Schubert, *Winterreise*: Nathalie Stutzmann (contralto) and Inger Södergren (piano), CALLIOPE CAL 9339 (recorded 2003, issued 2004), track 11, "Frühlingstraum", 0:0–0:58.

⁶ Cf. Schubert, *Winterreise*: Matthias Goerne (baritone) and Alfred Brendel (piano), DECCA 467 092-2 (recorded 2003, issued 2004), track 11, "Frühlingstraum", e.g. 2:10-3:06.

No one makes that clearer than Roland Barthes in his massively over-cited article “Le grain de la voix”⁷. While it is used again and again as a model of truth about the nature of vocal communication (albeit a truth on which nobody seems able to agree), the article is actually an account of a strikingly idiosyncratic taste, a classic instance of someone wanting to be one singer rather than another and of finding themselves in the sound of another’s voice; of striving and longing to become the singer through experiencing in one’s body—via one’s empathetic, mirroring imagination—what it is like to sound like them. Barthes studied singing with Panzéra and (as Barthes’ later eulogy for Panzéra shows) loved him (I mean loved him) and the sound of his voice⁸. The grain for Barthes is something thoroughly physical, sensation experienced in the body through listening. Which underlines the point I am making, that one becomes something of the singer through feeling what it might be like to sound like them. Barthes goes much further than this, which is what makes him such an interesting example. Here are the final words of *Le plaisir du texte*:

their sensuality, the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips, a whole presence of the human muzzle ... [throw], so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss⁹.

As Lise Helmer Petersen writes, “One could be tempted to say that [Barthes] has a ‘mouth-fixated’ relationship with the body”. What he misses in Fischer-Dieskau are “the larynx, the teeth, the mucous membrane, ... the nose”, indeed the body¹⁰. Whereas, with Panzéra it is the body he longs to hear and, through

⁷ Roland Barthes, “Le grain de la voix”, *Musique en jeu* 9, 1972, p. 57–63.

⁸ Jonathan Dunsby, “Roland Barthes and the grain of Panzéra’s voice”, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 134, 2009, p. 113–32 at 121.

⁹ Roland Barthes, “Voice”, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, p. 66–7 at 67; quoted in Jonathan Dunsby (131).

¹⁰ Lise Helmer Petersen, “Aspekter af ‘Le Grain de la Voix’ – stemmens krop”, *Caecilia*, 5, 2002, p. 149–62 at 153. Also very good on singer’s breath(s) as essential and (deeply) engaging, Richard Beaudoin, “Dashon Burton’s Song Sermon: Corporeal Liveness and the Solemnizing Breath”, *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 16/1, 2022, p. 1–23.

hearing, to feel. That deeply felt identity is what he means when he speaks of experiencing the grain of the voice: a sense of shared identity through hearing another's body. As Anne Kauppala writes, "voice, desire and erotic attunement are inextricably present and intertwined ... [*and intertwined with*] Barthes's homoerotic sensibility".¹¹ For Barthes, she suggests, the sense of the sexual lubrication he experiences in Panzéra's legato is what leads him to confess "a lover's relation to Panzéra's voice: not to his raw, physical voice, but to his voice *as it passes over language, our French language, like desire ...*"¹²

In an example of Panzéra that I find of particular interest—Robert Schumann's setting of "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai", accompanied by Alfred Cortot—he is singing German¹³, but to me what is really miraculous about this performance is not Panzéra's singing but Alfred Cortot's piano playing and their, nowadays incomprehensible, separation of voice from accompaniment: the two hardly ever hit a note at the same moment, while still managing to sound profoundly together. Speaking personally (which is my point here), Panzéra's voice I could happily hear replaced with another as long as they kept that miraculous flexibility of timing. Perhaps there is a nationalist element here, in Barthes' love of Panzéra's sound, that is simply inaccessible to an Anglo-Saxon and a non-singer like me, possibly also to a Scandinavian such as Petersen or Kauppala; but Barthes' understanding of what he experiences is so intensely personal, if not local, that I am not sure that his concept of grain is all that useful outside his own work, despite the enthusiasm with which theorists grab hold of it and try to reshape it. What is so valuable for me in this text is simply the power with which Barthes

¹¹ Anne Kauppala, "Barthes's 'The Grain of the Voice' revisited", chapter 6 of *The Routledge Handbook of Music Signification*, ed. Esti Sheinberg and William P. Dougherty, London: Routledge, 2020, p. 67–77 at 74.

¹² Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley: University of California Press, [1977]1991, p. 280, quoted in Kauppala, *op. cit.*, p. 75: my italics, overlapping to some extent with Kauppala's.

¹³ Robert Schumann, *Dichterliebe*. Charles Panzéra (baritone) and Alfred Cortot (piano), BIDDULPH LHW005 (recorded 1935, issued 1991), track 23, "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai", e.g. 0:12–0:45.

demonstrates the way in which I suspect most of us identify with singers: through trying to feel for oneself the people they sound.

Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat* (1993) offers another obvious example.

...a singer ... exposes the listener's interior. Her voice enters me, makes me a "me", an interior, by virtue of the fact that I have been entered. The singer, through osmosis, passes through the self's porous membrane, and discredits the fiction that bodies are separate, bounded packages. ... She becomes part of my brain. And I begin to believe—sheer illusion!—that she spins out my self, not hers¹⁴.

Joel Krueger argues¹⁵, drawing on classic studies by Schutz, Trevarthen and others, that this kind of identification has its origins for all of us in infant-carer communication, where musical sounds are exchanged in a powerfully affective acknowledgement, through the shared musical, glissando-like sounds of baby-talk, that even without language to specify a message, the infant and their carer love each other. By sounding alike they reassure each other that they belong together. Arguably, music does this better than language, seeming more perfectly convincing than other forms of communication because, unlike speech, it does only one thing: it models and communicates strong feeling. As Stephen Mithen and many others have shown, that is why music evolved: this is what it is for¹⁶.

¹⁴ Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, p. 43.

¹⁵ Joel Krueger, "Empathy, enaction, and shared musical experience: evidence from infant cognition", in *The Emotional Power of Music: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Musical Arousal, Expression, and Social Control*, ed. Tom Cochrane, Bernardino Fantini, and Klaus R. Scherer, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 177–96, esp. 179–80. Alfred Schutz, "Making music together: a study in social relationship", *Social Research*, 18, p. 76–97. Stephen Malloch and Colwen Trevarthen, *Communicative Musicality: Exploring the Basis of Human Companionship*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

¹⁶ Steven Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2005.

I have written previously about music's ideal modelling of the way life feels as we live it.

Music theory has spent more than a century showing how compositions are made from carefully shaped melodic lines, harmonic progressions, phrases, sections, and formal plans, all emerging, developing, and closing in ideal ways. And certainly as adults we are aware of music, compared to our own feelings, as more competent, more organized, more coherent, more perfectly shaped, just as we perhaps felt as infants that our carers (through their musical sounds, their touch, look, movements, their handling of us, their feeding us) were not so much other than us but rather were everything there was that we desired, the source of all safety, security, comfort, warmth, nourishment, love.

Music for us as adults, then, offers a utopian model of ourselves as we would wish to be. It models a finer self than our own—grander, cleverer, its ideas all intricately interrelated, arranged in an always-coherent sequence, more sorted, more eloquent, better formed, better resolved, better presented, more beautiful, more desirable—with which we can coordinate our feeling states and identify, becoming like it, becoming it, for as long as it lasts. ... And so we can see music as almost like an idealized lover, or at any rate someone we are so close to that we cannot avoid being bound up in, and deeply affected by, everything they do. ... This helps to explain many of the deep feelings we have during and after a moving performance. What we are experiencing, when deeply engaged with the music, is akin, to a very considerable degree, to an experience of mutual loving understanding and sharing¹⁷.

¹⁷ Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, "Secure and Insecure Bases in the Performance of Western Classical Music", in *Rethinking Music Through Science and Technology Studies*, ed. Antoine Hennion and Christophe Levaux, Abingdon: Routledge, 2021, p. 67–87 at 71–2.

In a related vein, Elliott and Silverman argue that one's sense of one's personhood, the person one is, is constantly being improvised out of multiple inputs from mental and bodily experience, and is in that sense (quote) "analogous to a huge jazz ensemble whose ... players are so expert at improvising collaboratively with the dynamic circumstances of your human and natural ecosystems that the 'beautiful music that is you' ... flow[s] seamlessly and continuously from moment to moment"¹⁸. Thus (they say, quoting Liebllich and Josselson) "identity is 'an ever-evolving, dynamic (rather than ... stable, static) entity' "¹⁹. From which it follows, I suggest, that because music models dynamic processes it is especially suited to modelling identity. And within music, obviously, voice, as most evidently human, is especially powerful a modeller. Musical voice and identity could hardly seem more intertwined, therefore. Which makes it easy to see how, when someone sings, it seems to tell us something direct and true about who they are, even if they are pretending as the professional singer often must. The way in which we recognise and absorb and align ourselves with the identity we are hearing from the singer encourages us to feel that, at least while we are listening, we are them.

THE DANGERS OF IDENTIFICATION

With this comes a danger. By becoming like another, Elliott and Silverman say, "we are engaging in something like an *ethical idealization of the other*"²⁰. And thus, "acts of music-making and music-listening are vulnerable to unethical and self-destructive identity formation"²¹. De Boysson-Bardies and colleagues find that infants' babble is increasingly shaped by the language sounds they hear around them, and thus increasingly insensitive to the sounds

¹⁸ David J. Elliott and Marissa Silverman, "Identities and Musics: Reclaiming Personhood", in *Handbook of Musical Identities*, ed. Raymond MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves and Dorothy Miell, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 27–45 at 27–8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40, their italics.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

of other languages²². Lewkowicz finds, very pertinently for us, that the same is true of multisensory perception. Multisensory perception is the ability humans have evolved to find similarities between inputs from one sense and experiences we know through other senses -- for example to find a sound bright or cold or heavy. Lewkowicz shows that the variety of mappings of which we are capable also narrows as we grow, becoming increasingly limited to the experiences in our own surroundings. In his words, “perceptual sensitivity and responsiveness increases to native categories while it decreases to non-native categories”²³. It is another factor that increases our alienation from the sounds of other cultures.

It follows, I think, that vocal othering is a powerful contributor to othering in general, and forms another strand, perhaps, in hostility to non-normative musical performance of which I shall say more below. Is this partly what is going on for Barthes? And for me when I disagree with him about Panzéra? The person he wants to be is that French-speaker whose sounds he understands so well, and whom he feels so comfortable around and wants to have around him and within him. Like Petersen, who is Danish, I am a lot more comfortable with my construction of Fischer-Dieskau. In other words, othering is built into our responses to voices. And we need to be aware of that, and the dangers it brings, when we listen to unfamiliar singers. (Barthes might usefully have done the same.) Nowadays, when singers need to work internationally with minimal conflict, classical vocal training aims to play down those national differences, so that singers, wherever they come from, sound broadly similar. This was not the case for Panzéra’s generation; it really began with Fischer-Dieskau’s, partly, as I have argued before, as a response to the divisions of the second world war and the danger that those

²² Bénédicte de Boysson-Bardies, Pierre Halle, Laurent Sagart and Catherine Durand, “A crosslinguistic investigation of vowel formants in babbling”, *Journal of Child Language*, 16/1, p. 1–17.

²³ David J. Lewkowicz, “Early experience and multisensory perceptual narrowing”, *Developmental Psychobiology*, 56, 2014, p. 292–315 at 307.

divisions made so obvious, a lesson people have now forgotten²⁴. Do we, whether as listeners seeking empathy or as smaller-minded nationalists, now perhaps prefer voices we can recognise as individuals or members of smaller groupings with whom we can identify, rather than models of normativity and technical perfection?

Latinus and Zäske, in an empirical study, find that “voices, similar to faces, are represented in memory relative to an average prototypical voice within a multidimensional acoustic space”²⁵. If that is so then what matters to the brain about a voice is how it differs from that prototype: individuality is everything when it comes to identity (obviously) and therefore crucial to meaning and pertinence and value for the listener. We are looking for individuality that is salient to us, that is like us or like someone we would like to be. The danger for diverse social cohesion is obvious.

In general, empirical research into vocal attractiveness finds exactly what you would expect from a situation in which evolutionary factors, to do with sexual selection, are mixed up and confused with factors that are thoroughly cultural. Confused because, in questioning participants about their preferences for different voices, researchers are always collecting preferences that are culturally shaped. So much so that reading this work, which attempts to reach universal conclusions about vocal attractiveness, one sometimes wonders if the labour involved in collecting and analysing all this data was time well spent.

For example, McAleer and Belin, surveying the scientific research literature, report that “Generally, findings reveal that both sexes perceive lower-pitched voices as more attractive”²⁶ and that

²⁴ Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, “Recordings and histories of performance style”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook, Eric Clarke, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and John Rink, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 246–62.

²⁵ Marianne Latinus and Romi Zäske, “Perceptual correlates and cerebral representation of voices—identity, gender, and age”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Voice Perception*, ed. Sascha Frühholz and Pascal Belin, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 561–584 at 561.

²⁶ Phil McAleer and Pascal Belin, “The Perception of Personality Traits from Voices”, in Frühholz and Belin, *op. cit.*, p. 585–606 at 586, this passage

“low-pitched male voices appear preferred when there is opportunity for procreation, given the association with strength and reproductive success, whilst high-pitched male voices are preferred when paternal instincts, stability, and longevity are required”²⁷. (So, contraltos and basses are best for an affair, sopranos and tenors best for marriage. Useful to know.) Females with low voices are perceived as having strong leadership qualities²⁸. (Which must be why Mrs Thatcher got vocal coaching to lower her register). And healthy, younger voices are perceived as more attractive²⁹. (I provide their many cited sources in the notes

referencing David R. Feinberg, Lisa M. DeBruine, Benedict C. Jones and Anthony C. Little, “Correlated preferences for men’s facial and vocal masculinity”, *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 29/4, 2008, p. 233–241; and Benedict C. Jones, David R. Feinberg, Lisa M. DeBruine, Anthony C. Little and Jovana Vukovic, “A domain-specific opposite-sex bias in human preferences for manipulated voice pitch”, *Animal Behaviour*, 79/1 (2010), 57–62.

²⁷ McAleer and Belin, *ibid.*, referencing Coren L. Apicella and David R. Feinberg, “Voice pitch alters mate-choice-relevant perception in hunter-gatherers”, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 276/1659, 2009, p. 1077–1082; Coren L. Apicella, David R. Feinberg and Frank W. Marlowe, “Voice pitch predicts reproductive success in male hunter-gatherers”, *Biology Letters*, 3/6, 2007, p. 682–684; Jillian J.M. O’Connor, Katarzyna Pisanski, Cara C. Tigue, Paul J. Fraccaro and David R. Feinberg, “Perceptions of infidelity risk predict women’s preferences for low male voice pitch in short-term over long-term relationship contexts”, *Personality and Individual Differences*, 56, 2014, p. 73–77.

²⁸ McAleer and Belin, *op. cit.*, p. 587, referencing Casey A. Klofstad, Rindy C. Anderson and Susan Peters, “Sounds like a winner: voice pitch influences perception of leadership capacity in both men and women”, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 279/1738, 2012, p. 2698–2704.

²⁹ McAleer and Belin, *op. cit.*, p. 588, referencing Susan M. Hughes, Marissa Harrison and Gordon G. Gallup, “The sound of symmetry—voice as a marker of developmental instability”, *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 23/3, 2002, p. 173–180; Judith H. Langlois, Lisa Kalakanis, Adam J. Rubenstein, Andrea Larson, Monica Hallam and Monica Smoot, “Maxims or myths of beauty? A meta-analytic and theoretical review”, *Psychological Bulletin*, 126/3, 2000, p. 390–423; Phil McAleer, Alexander Todorov and Pascal Belin, “How do you say ‘Hello’? Personality impressions from brief novel voices”, *PLoS One*, 9/3, 2014; Leslie A. Zebrowitz and Joann M. Montepare, “Social psychological face perception: why appearance matters”, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2/3, 2008, p. 1497; Leslie A. Zebrowitz and Gillian Rhodes, “Sensitivity to ‘bad genes’ and the anomalous face overgeneralization effect: cue validity, cue utilization, and

here to show just now much research lies behind these depressingly predictable findings.) As for women, Pisanski and Feinberg report that “high fundamental frequency among women is perceptually associated with femininity, fertility, youthfulness, and warmth, but also immaturity, babyishness, weakness, and lower levels of competence, intelligence, and dominance”³⁰.

Most of these studies, to be fair, do conclude, with Bruder et al., that culture has a large role in these impressions³¹. And it is perfectly obvious that if there was once, in subsistence societies, an evolutionary advantage in these kinds of assumptions about what voices signal, it has long since ceased to apply, so that whatever naturally selected urges still lie behind these kinds of assumptions they are now being indulged, by those who hold them, as prejudices, and nothing more. Nonetheless, when it comes to singing, perfect control of sound, whether high or low, masculine or feminine, is, as I found in *Winterreise*, undeniably attractive. In that sense the scientific research into vocal attractiveness is clearly right: we are always looking for highly competent people, but we do it in a psychological environment deeply infected with prejudice, with personal preference, and with individual needs and desires.

AGAINST CONFORMITY: A PLEA FOR A GREATER DIVERSITY OF VOCAL PERFORMANCE

With all that in mind, it is time to start asking some critical questions. I have argued that we use music to help us feel who we would like to be. But do we pay proper attention to the dangers that brings? Do we allow music too much to make us the people

accuracy in judging intelligence and health”, *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 28/3, 2004, p. 167–185.

³⁰ Katarzyna Pisanski and David R. Feinberg, “Vocal attractiveness”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Voice Perception*, ed. Sascha Frühholz and Pascal Belin, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 607–26 at 611, citing nine previous studies.

³¹ Camila Bruder, David Poeppel and Pauline Larrouy-Maestri, “Perceptual (but not acoustic) features predict singing voice preferences”, *Scientific Reports* 14, art. no. 8977, 2024.

we find modelled in it? We align ourselves with what we hear, and so music has the power to persuade us to feel in particular ways. In public that can be a problem: it is not always a good idea, while driving for example, to behave like the music one is listening to. In other listening situations (in concert halls, or at home) we experience these perfectly-formed sequences of feeling-states in a safe environment in which we listen without acting on what we feel. But inevitably we take away from our listening some sense of how fine it would be to feel that way in everyday life. Music that fosters anger, violence, speed, group-identity has an influence on our behaviour elsewhere, lasting after the music has stopped. And that makes national musical manners (or manners that sound group identities of any kind) powerful and dangerous. This in turn raises the question of who controls the nature of the music we listen to. Because, especially in classical music, that is powerfully controlled, as I have argued repeatedly over the past few years³². So let us look briefly but questioningly at nationalism in musical performance, and at who chooses the kinds of performances we get to hear, before pulling these threads together into a call for a more thoughtful, more critical and more diverse scene for classical performance in general.

It is still the case that different countries have their own varieties of popular music which they play as a way of reminding themselves of who they feel they are. To a smaller extent that used to be true also of classical music, at least as far as performance style was concerned. At the end of the nineteenth century there were still clear differences between Russian, French, Italian and German singing, and also piano, wind and string playing. To an extent those singing traditions survive, but in general, as I said earlier about training, the internationalisation of performance, in which singers travel easily across the world for concerts with different ensembles in the same limited repertoire, has caused a

³² Including in Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, “Classical music as enforced utopia”, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15/3-4, 2016, p. 325–36; “Moral judgement in response to performances of western art music”, in *Remixing Music Studies: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Cook*, ed. Ananay Aguilar, Eric Clarke, Ross Cole and Matthew Pritchard, Abingdon: Routledge, 2020, p. 91–111; and *Challenging Performance: Classical Music Performance Norms and How to Escape Them* (2020): <https://challengingperformance.com/the-book>, (accessed 12.xii.24).

homogenisation of performance style in order to keep rehearsal (and thus costs) to a minimum. But that does not always prevent music being re-nationalised when politics intervene. A powerful example of this was revealed recently by Marco Fatichenti writing on the piano playing of Enrique Granados³³. We now think of Granados's music as quintessentially Spanish, with pointed rhythms referencing Spanish popular dances, but when Granados recorded it on piano rolls in the 1910s it sounded much less overtly Spanish, much more similar to other piano playing at that time. Through careful analysis of recordings, Fatichenti shows that it was the later generation of Alicia de Larrocha, and de Larrocha herself especially, who brought those dance styles into the playing of Spanish piano repertoire; and he shows that that introduction coincides exactly with the rise of fascism in Spain bringing its emphasis on nationalist feeling. In other words, Spanish classical performance adapted itself to political sentiment, and sentiment of a particularly vicious variety. Today we still think of that style as quintessentially and properly Spanish. Thus one could argue that the work of sounding fascism is still being done, albeit unrecognised and unintended, every time a pianist plays Granados or Albeniz or Falla in that way, as pianists throughout the world still do, and indeed are required to do through training and criticism.

This is a shocking situation, but it shows just how easily prejudice influences performance practice and how long that influence can last. And it shows how dangerous it is. How we perform this music changes people. I have written about this in my ebook *Challenging Performance*, discussing also philosophical work by Marcel Cobussen and Nanette Nielsen, and a few years later by Jeff Warren³⁴. But neither of their studies had such powerful evidence of the danger of which they warned. It shows us, I think,

³³ Marco Fatichenti, "Escaping aesthetic control: from a historic Quejas to a new Amor", *Quodlibet*, 76, 2021, p. 85–125; and in more detail, "[Rejecting the Dictator: Overcoming Identity Aesthetics through Granados's Sounding Legacy](#)", PhD thesis, King's College London, 2020.

³⁴ Leech-Wilkinson, *Challenging Performance*, [chapter 19.2](#). Marcel Cobussen and Nanette Nielsen, *Music and Ethics*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012; Jeff R. Warren, *Music and Ethical Responsibility*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

that, while remaining sensitive to cultural appropriation, we have to be particularly wary of arguments that particular repertoire can only be sung or played by particular kinds of people and in particular ways. Any such argument is potentially dangerous and we must be sure that it is justified before we accept it.

This raises, in turn, the question of how these kinds of performance traditions are taught and enforced. Who decides which kinds of performances are acceptable and which are not, which are right and which are wrong? This is a huge problem in western classical music especially, where only a very narrow range of interpretations of a composer's score are currently acceptable, with even small deviations from the norm criticised strongly. A lot of *Challenging Performance* concerns the policing of classical music, showing how normative performance is taught ([chapter 7](#)), enforced through exams and competitions, and then later in professional life by managers, concert promoters, record companies, and critics. I have shown (in [chapter 9](#)) how vicious is the language of performance criticism and ([chapter 14](#)) how much physical and psychological stress it brings to classical performance. All this is part of the policing of voice and musical identity. The extent of this policing, which allows only approved performers to get work and excludes everything else, is very close in character to fascism ([chapter 30.1](#)). Obedience to ideology is compulsory. I have also shown ([chapters 5 and 6](#)) that that ideology is based on misrepresentations and delusions, as authoritarianism always is; in this case, on claims that the composer's imagined performance is always best, that we know how that sounded, and that we are providing that performance today. None of that is true.

So it is reasonable to argue that classical voice is forced to sound composers' scores in very limited ways, and therefore we as listeners are offered equally limited ways of aligning our feelings with this music. We may only feel what these performances permit us to feel. When you experience a wonderful performance of this repertoire, you may feel that this kind of policing is benign, leading to lovely and heart-warming results. But it is strongly shaped by class and race -- this is still music made by and for white middle-class people, showing them how they like to feel and how they like to think of themselves. And the thoroughgoing exclusion of

difference from performance, from musical meanings and manners, from the range of feelings one will have in response to music, excludes significant difference among performers, not to mention composers, and excludes the possibility of classical scores offering us different ways of hearing and feeling in our daily lives.

Yet voice, above all, offers a powerful means of understanding and empathising with Others. In that sense its adaptability, its potential for sounding other ways of being, could be immensely positive, helping us to use this repertoire to sound and to become better, kinder, nobler, more loving people. It therefore really matters, matters to us all, our audiences, our students, our successors, that we focus our attention on being far more inclusive and on teaching and making a far more varied range of performances starting from these scores. I have offered ways and examples of how to do that in *Challenging Performance* ([chapters 23 and 24](#)). It means deliberately seeking to escape from normative ways of singing and playing them, and if that means changing the kinds of people and the kinds of loyalties we shape through music then so be it, bring it on. Identity needs to become flexible, empathetic, inquisitive, creative, open to change, guided only by kindness and care for the widest possible range of others. Music can contribute, but only if it is open to continuing, radical change.