



Voicing Cohesion in the midst of COVID

By Charulatha Mani

The power of sound is experienced more strongly than ever as we find ourselves combatting the COVID-19 through the practice of social distancing. When being together cannot be achieved by literal proximity, I believe that the capacity for cohesion that the materiality of the human voice inheres can be the metaphorical glue that binds people - over physical distances, cultures, and constraints. The human voice can carry across floors, rooms, and even across homes, to neighbors. As obvious as this statement seems, this was one of my first realizations as I grappled with the practicalities of social distancing. As a singer/researcher with interests in voice studies, performance, and culture studies, I found myself marveling in some detail at a part of my existence that I had taken for granted all these years – my voice. Much literature evidence that when a voice is heard, the voicer is also perceived as “present” by the listener (Cavarero, 2005; Bonenfant, 2012). Voice studies scholar Nina Sun Eidsheim (2015) has notably advanced that the voice holds haptic, material, and vibratory qualities rendering it sensorially much richer than we give due credit for. Put simply, the materiality of the voice is a vibrant proxy to the material body that houses it; a vocal sound is a surrogate for touch, as I have argued in Mani (2020). This quality of the voice renders it enigmatic and subversively connective. That care and comfort can be

transmitted in a “contactless” manner through this humble agent that unassumingly “comes to be” in the air have become a point of great interest for me, not least over the last few months. I have now come to experientially realize that the human voice is indeed the social glue that holds the capacity to audaciously confound the pallor of loneliness brought about by physical distancing. The few experiences shared below are humble testimony.

No sooner had we moved into our new suburban home in Brisbane, Queensland, that the COVID-related stay-at-home restrictions came into force. My family found ourselves amidst vertical blocks of constructed houses, not homes inhabited by warm bodies. We had yet to come in contact with our immediate neighbors, let alone anyone else in the neighborhood. One sunny morning, a few weeks ago, I was watering my plant in the balcony and heard a “hello!” I turned to see a lady carrying a baby in her arms. Across the cul-de-sac, I began a conversation with “Lucia.” I heard the cooing infant. We exchanged laughs. A socially distanced friendship was made possible through the voices of two people wishing to be heard and listened to.

It is heart-warming to see the initiatives that various communities are undertaking to stay connected at this time. I was invited as a special guest to speak on ragas in Karnatik music (the classical music of Southern India) by a group of music-lovers based in the US. An informal gathering of Tamil-speaking migrants welcomed me with familiar sounds of language, musical material, culturally contingent

humor, and laughter. I sang, spoke, invited responders, and together we could hear more than we could see across the tiled Zoom screen. After weeks of feeling disconnected, I came away from that engagement feeling positive and connected – to my vocal art, to migrant voices like my own from thousands of miles away, to their specific experiences of coping in lockdown, and to the supportive network that online communities such as this proffer.

My students from North America and the UK who learn music from me via Skype usually began their class by telling me how busy they were the previous week – with school, other classes, and social engagements. Their response over the last few weeks, however, surprised me. They reported that they had more time to practice singing and to engage with digital media in relation to music education. One theme that emerged throughout was how much they were looking forward to the “paattu class” (traditional Tamil term for Karnatik music vocal lessons) in their weekly online schedule. Seeing a friendly face and singing uplifts the spirit and connects, across ages and skill levels. As a final nugget of sharing, I wish to reflect on a recent occurrence that gave me much joy. Last week, Kanjira artiste Swaminathan Selvaganesh who is a dear colleague from Chennai, invited me to collaborate with him on a piece of music that was to be featured on his Facebook series “[#Playfromhome](#)”. Pondering over what to sing, ways to record, theoretical and practical designs to weave the raga’s characteristic motifs (*prayogas*) with the Kanjira’s tones and patterns, and last but not least, what to wear for the recording brought much color to an otherwise dreary Thursday evening. I had begun

missing my live performances and could sense the restlessness that I loathed setting in. The opportunity to use my voice and perform was just the lift that I was seeking. On Friday morning, I set myself up in the garden; headphones, Macbook, Logic Pro software, iTanpura, the metronome at 100, and a microphone were all ready to go. I rehearsed my selection one final time: an intricately composed *thillana* (a fast-paced piece suited for dancing) in Madhuvanti raga¹ by violin Vidvan Lalgudi Jayaraman. Satisfied with the rehearsal, I was about to hit the red record button when I sensed movement from across the fence. Through the corner of one eye, I saw Lucia, the child in hand. They waved happily and gave me a lovely compliment. I smiled and thanked them. This time, my voice had greeted them through a medium that surpassed the language itself. Music.

¹ Our finalized recording of this piece can be accessed [here](#).



Works Cited

- Bonenfant, Y. (2012). Architecting sensation: Voice, light and touch. *Choreographic Practices*, 2(1), 43–67. https://doi.org/10.1386/chor.2.43_1
- Cavarero, A. (2005). For more than one voice: Toward a philosophy of vocal expression. Stanford University Press.
- Eidsheim, N. S. (2015). Sensing sound: Singing and listening as vibrational practice. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mani, C. (2020). On breaking with. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies*, 5(1), 59-80. https://doi.org/10.1386/jivs_00016_1