Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle (2025), 56, 1–7
doi:10.1017/rrc.2025.1

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ROUND TABLE

Voice and Agency: A Round Table

Chrysi Kyratsou, Ariana Phillips-Hutton, Fiona Murphy, and Evropi Chatzipanagiotidou

Introduction

Chrysi Kyratsou

Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick
Email: chrysi.kyratsou@mic.ul.ie

Abstract
This introduction to the round table attempts an overview of the conceptualizations of 'voice' and 'agency'. It maintains a dialogic balance between the novel insights offered by each contribution's topic and the authors' distinct angles, and current debates around voice and agency. The introduction interweaves philosophical, anthropological, and, of course, (ethno)musicological approaches to the vocal phenomenon, highlighting its complex dimensions as well as its dense intersubjective meaningfulness. If 'listening' is the counterpart of 'voicing', integral to its very materialization, 'vocal agency' urges us to think beyond the interconnection between the vocalizer and the listener, shifting our focus of attention to the capacity of the voice to offer insights into and through itself.

Keywords: vocal agency; vocal effect; subjectivity; listening; vocality

This round table was developed during an Irish Research Council Postdoctoral Researcher Fellowship, during which I was based at the School of Music of University College Dublin (2023–24). The seeds of this research date back to my PhD research project ('Refugees Musicking: Meanings and Encounters in Greek Reception Centres', funded by an AHRC-NBDTP studentship and a BFE Fieldwork Grant 2019) that orientated me to think of the everyday life of refugees sheltering in reception centres through sound. A preliminary version of my contribution to this round table was presented at the BFE-RMA Research Students' Conference hosted by the University of Plymouth between 6 and 8 January 2022, when I was still a PhD student at the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, Queen's University Belfast. The title of the paper was 'How Does a Silenced Place Sound? Resonances of Contested Relations in a Reception Centre of Asylum Seekers'; it was awarded with a prize that the *RMA Research Chronicle* ran that year, along with Emily Bennett (then a PhD student at the University of Cardiff). The scope of this round table was shaped through our fruitful conversations, endorsed by Eva Moreda Rodriguez (University of Glasgow) and Florian Scheding (University of Bristol), whom we additionally thank for their editorial comments. 'Voice and agency' emerged as a common theme to work on, merging our diverse backgrounds in opera and anthropology/ethnomusicology respectively, and inevitably highlighting the complexities surrounding what is easily seen as the essence of human existence. It also pushed this piece to develop specifically around 'voice'. Yet life always gave the initiative a shape not imagined back then, which will unfold in the following pages. I am grateful to Ariana Phillips-Hutton, Fiona Murphy, and Evropi Chatzipanagiotidou, who accepted the invitation to contribute with the beautiful pieces you will read. We are also grateful for the peer reviewers' critical, thoughtful, and insightful comments that supported us in advancing each contribution's argumentation and tightening the dialogue with each other.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/rrc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Introduction: Listening to Voice and Agency

This round table seeks to extend discussions around voice and agency beyond current concepts of voice as a personification of individual subjectivity.[1] The complex ways in which the vocal phenomenon entangles with human existence request multiple layers of analysis, so that its unique nature can be understood in depth. We situate voice amidst a dense network of relations, foregrounding its qualities and liminality, and pointing towards the importance of listening as a counterpart to voice. (The right to) ownership of voice and listening frame the ontologies of voice and its production throughout and foreground its intersubjective nature.

Vocal Entanglements

Adriana Cavarero discusses the ontologies of voice by means of philosophy.[2] She quotes Calvino's phrase: 'A voice means this: there is a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the air this voice, different from all other voices.'[3] This phrase emphasizes the embodied nature of voice and its capacity to express personal feelings. It foregrounds voice as a manifestation of human, living existence, traversing space aurally. Voice is recognized as unique, as distinct from any other voice, and thus tied to individual subjectivity. This line of thought is consistent with persistent mainstream perceptions of thinking around voice.[4]

The conflation of voice and individuality, however, may also be read in terms of trying to identify the source of the specific sound we hear. This is reflected in the question responding to any voicing, 'Who is this? Who is speaking?', a question of an acousmatic nature that aims to identify the source of the voice, positions the actualization of voice between the vocalizer and the listener, and therefore foregrounds its intersubjective nature.[5] The question enacts an interplay of power, evoking patterns of thought deeply rooted in the vocalizer's and the listener's backgrounds, the departing points of their social trajectories, and the respective filters shaped to perceive the world along with themselves in it. The contributions in this round table enhance our understandings of this complex interconnectedness. Our case studies range from sampling and (the right to) ownership of voice to states of presumed voicelessness and silence. As such, the round table proposes a collective nature of voice, challenges the possibility for voicelessness, and offers a perspective on voice as a constellation that may include silence.

At the same time, we foreground the ambiguity of voice. While this ambiguity echoes as distinct for each individual, the complexities of its materialization extend beyond a resonating individual subjectivity. The concept of agency and how it interlaces with voice's materialization prove useful here. Ortner defines agency as 'not some natural or originary will; it [rather] takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity of (culturally constituted) feelings, thoughts, and meanings'.[6] Agency, while integral to subjectivity, maintains its relational character, as it refers to the broader contexts within which subjectivity is shaped. This encompasses the vocalizer and the listener, each interlaced with individual subjectivity and agency, and at the same time interconnected, sonically

[1]Marlene Schäfers, 'Voice', in *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. by Felix Stein, facsimile of the first edition in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (2023 [2017]), doi:10.29164/17voice.

[2]Adriana Cavarero, 'Multiple Voices', in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. by Jonathan Sterne (Routledge, 2012), pp. 520–32.

[3]Italo Calvino, *Under the Jaguar Sun*, trans. by William Weaver (Harcourt Brace, 1998), pp. 33–64.

[4]As Schäfers notes, certain linguistic tropes that present, for instance, certain marginalized groups as 'lacking voice' or frame expressions of political agency and emancipation as 'raising voice' indicate understandings of voice as rooted to subjectivity, and by extension to its positionality amidst a nexus of power relations that are gendered, racialized, and so on; Schäfers, 'Voice'. See also relevant critique developed by Amanda Weidman, 'Anthropology and Voice', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 43 (2014), pp. 37–51 (pp. 39–40).

[5]Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music* (Duke University Press, 2019), p. 1.

[6]Sherry Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Duke University Press, 2006), p. 110.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rrc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

perceiving and interacting with each other. Agency entangles with who speaks and what they say, and who listens and what they listen to, in a constant interchange of mediated interpretations revolving around the individuals engaged and the meanings constructed in their interactions. While the vocalizer and the listener may be identifiable as distinct entities, rooted in the contexts that shaped them, their interaction manifests the affectivity they can have on each other and their contexts. By extension, focusing on their entanglements allows us to understand the complexities of their relationship and enables us to understand voice as agentive rather than purely subjective.

Agency is indeed crucial in positing voice as materialized intersubjectively. Attempts to define the meaningfulness of voice have resulted in intense debates, with approaches largely divided between those connecting it with the articulation of speech and those considering its aurality as the matrix for meaningfulness.[7] Bauman and Briggs have criticized the intertwining of meaningfulness with speech as it echoes the divide between 'signifying speech' and 'sonic vocality' formulated during the European Enlightenment, which 'valued [the first] over the latter'.[8] However, as Schäfers notes, both dimensions of voice have the capacity to carry valuable information, including expressions of aesthetics, social communication, social relations, and so on. In this sense, the meaningfulness of voice should be understood as the sum of all these factors as well as their affectivity, interlaced with the ways in which they are perceived by the listening subject.[9] Weidman outlines voice as 'a phenomenon that links material practices with subjectivity, and embodied sound with collectively recognized meanings' and as 'a crucial site where the realms of the cultural and sociopolitical link to the level of the individual, a site where shared discourses and values, affect, and aesthetics are made manifest in and contested through embodied practice'.[10] This orientates our thought around the material nature of voice, whose sound waves vibrate across space to become embodied parts of individuals and their environments, while the meaningfulness of the overall experience remains embedded in sociocultural contexts. Listening to someone's voice is a mediated process entangled with the analytical categories devised for its interpretation. Speech can be a valuable source of information, concerning not only *what* is said, but also *how*. This encompasses all particularities of someone's vocal expression, for instance the person's accent, manner of speaking, volume, and any other feature of their voicing. As linguistic anthropologists explain, voice enables us to trace someone's social and life trajectories, as registered aurally and transmitted in the public space, enabling contacts at a sonic level among individuals, across communities and cultures, and so on.[11]

Derrida's approach to voice justifies the distinct position it occupies in the sonic spectrum, balancing between its entanglements with speech articulation and the liminality of its aurality. He frames voice as words pronounced in the absolute proximity of the body, suggesting the expression of self and at the same time its perishable nature; once words leave the physical body, their affectivity fades unless they are heard.[12] As a sound being heard, voice, bodily rooted, enters another body's proximity, thus challenging its territoriality and reinforcing its authority through its affectivity. In other words, voice becomes 'uprooted' only to re-root again. Listening emerges as part of the vocal expression and manifestation by facilitating voice's uprooting and re-rooting. As the utmost humane sound, voice has the capacity to

[7]Examples re speech include Cavarero, 'Multiple Voices', and Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. by Sterne, pp. 504–10. Examples re aurality include Steven Feld and Aaron Fox, 'Music and Language', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23 (1994), pp. 25–53, and Steven Feld, Thomas Porcello, and David Samuels, 'Vocal Anthropology: From the Music of Language to the Language of Song', in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. by Alessandro Duranti (Blackwell, 2005), pp. 321–45, doi:10.1002/9780470996522.

[8]Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 37–38; Schäfers, 'Voice'.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Weidman, 'Anthropology and Voice', p. 43.

[11]*A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. by Duranti.

[12]Jacques Derrida, 'The Voice That Keeps Silence', in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. by Sterne, pp. 495–503.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rrc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

project within and across space. Its sounding, thanks to the materiality of its waves, traverses and contests space, while its effect lingers in other bodies.[13]

If we perceive voice as 'unique', rather than as a synonym of a solid subjectivity, it should be better understood as resonating with this unique moment in the vocalizer's life, when it is actually expressed as such. As Nina Sun Eidsheim has argued,

> the voice is not unique, in part because it is not a static organ. It is not an isolated and distinct entity; instead, it is shaped by the overall physical environment of the body: the nutrition to which it has access (or of which it is deprived) and the fresh air it enjoys (or harmful particles it inhales). It is the physical body and vocal apparatus that are trained and entrained each time a voice voices, and that develop accordingly.[14]

This approach enables us to conceptualize voice as liminal by nature, malleable and variable, highly dependent on its carrier's shifting circumstances and the impact on their body that will always sound unique and different, allowing glimpses into the vocalizer's constant becoming in tandem with their environments. Voice's liminality can be seen as testifying to the liminality of human experience and existence, constantly in flux and yet leaving indelible marks and traces. This concept enables us to avoid mapping individual subjectivity onto voice rigidly and to focus on its multidimensionality instead. In turn, this multidimensionality enables us to understand the relationality of voice, which reaffirms its relevance to a wide spectrum of human experience dispersed across networks of (dis)continuous trajectories. This round table, then, proposes that voice should be seen as collective, particularly considering the affordances created by the available technology and the advanced interfaces it fosters regarding the agentive reappropriation and processing of someone's voice.

The concept of 'multivocality' is useful to understand this relationality. Katherine Meizel introduces this concept and expands Berberian's definition of New Vocality, reinforcing the multiplicity entailed. Berberian hailed the alternative ways of being in the world facilitated through singing in any voice. She endorsed the incorporation of unprocessed bodily expressions, such as sighs and sobs, that reinforce the vocalizer's personal and humane expression, producing dense meaningfulness.[15] Meizel, considering vocality's wide range of possibilities, shifts her focus onto sociocultural entanglements, the multiple ways of being and acting in the world and the everyday border crossings that multivocality enacts.[16] Multivocality constitutes border crossings across the intersections of different facets of identity (i.e. class, race, gender, ethnicity, and so on), which become audible through the singing voice.[17] This multiplicity is contested and the product of negotiation, as it unfolds across the asymmetric dynamics among different registers of identity and power. This round table enhances understandings of this multiplicity by regarding voice as a diverse constellation dynamically situated amidst a dense nexus of sociocultural narratives, capable of transforming any presumed order and reconstituting relationships on a new basis.

Focusing on the meaningfulness produced at the intersections of different vocal apparatuses, and by extension the special weight and affectivity that voice acquires, we think about the interplay between

[13]Here I draw on the concept of 'sonic effect' and focus the discussion specifically on voice, as a distinct sonic category. Sonic effect, introduced by Augoyard and Torgue, describes sound's capacity to affect someone, foregrounding the interconnection between (sonic) environment and the individual, and the weight of the individual's circumstances and experiences in agentively negotiating this effect. The overall experience exceeds the given spatio-temporal contexts within which sound occurs; Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue, *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*, trans. by Andra McCartney and David Paquette (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008). Similarly, 'vocal effect' lingers past the moment of the voicing, evoking previous experiences and informing interpretations of current and future ones.

[14]Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, p. 11.

[15]Cathy Berberian, 'La nuova vocalità nell'opera contemporanea', *Discoteca*, 62 (1966), pp. 34–35; reprinted as 'The New Vocality in Contemporary Music' (trans. by Francesca Placanica), in *Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality*, ed. by Pamela Karantonis, Francesca Placanica, Anna Sivuoja-Kauppala, and Pieter Verstraete (Ashgate, 2014), pp. 47–50.

[16]Katherine Meizel, *Multivocality: Singing on the Borders of Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

[17]Ibid., p. 14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rrc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

so-called private and public spheres. Kunreuther talks about the mutually constitutive political and intimate spheres merged in one's voice as the sum of multiple expressions that feed back into the vocalizer's environment that fostered these references in the first place.[18] What is expressed, how it becomes expressed, and the inextricable interconnections between the vocalizer and their environments are in constant dialogue, constituting each other. We build on this perspective on the capacity of voice and argue for the impossibility of someone's voicelessness on the grounds of their positionality amidst the dipole of the private/public spheres. Instead, we foreground the urgency of listening as a fundamental tool to experience foreclosed social realities.

Contributions

As a springboard for her discussion, Ariana Phillips-Hutton's contribution takes *The Little Mermaid*, in its original version, a fairy tale authored by Hans Christian Andersen in 1830, and the 1989 Disney film of the same name. Departing from the theme of the narrative regarding the essential role of voice in constituting subjectivity, she builds an argument around the relationality of voice that constitutes its collective nature, in ways that radically contrast mainstream (western) perceptions of voice as a manifestation of individual subjectivity. Phillips-Hutton considers technological developments and the decisive impact they have had in recording, processing, and circulating someone's voice. These technological developments shape the matrix of material conditions that enable alternative interactions and interrelations with someone's voice. They determine what she calls the (agential) economy of voice, or 'the entangled relationships between individual and collectives, voices and their agencies'.[19] She goes on to examine the changes around the perceived ownership of someone's voice, which pertains not only to the use of voice for creative and commercial purposes, but also to the meanings that someone's voice communicates and how these have been shaped. Phillips-Hutton departs from the question of Andersen's character, 'if you take away my voice, what is left for me?', and posits the 'interstitial' character of voice. Rather than being confined to a certain individual subjectivity, voice interweaves relations among individuals and collectives, communicating and being infused with additional meanings, shaping a plethoric palimpsest of dialogic interconnections.

Chrysi Kyratsou takes the discussion from Phillips-Hutton's questioning of voice 'as property' to explore the (im)possibility of voicelessness. Kyratsou structures her contribution around soundscapes of the everyday life in reception centres for asylum seekers, and their interlocutors' testimonies around them. She aims to reconstruct the asylum-seeking paradigm through a focus on the sonic dimensions that asylum seekers' everyday lives involve, and primarily around the two edges of the sonic spectrum of silence and noise, as voiced through the interviewees' narratives. She employs these concepts figuratively, as pertaining to the imaginaries of asylum-seeking and to the challenging of established norms, and literally, as manifestations of actual life unfolding behind the walls of a reception centre. At the core of the discussion is asylum seekers' perceived voicelessness as a result of being stripped of their political being once they crossed the international borders of their home countries and consequently lost any citizenship-related privilege. Kyratsou challenges presumptions of voicelessness and shows the limitations of homogenizing interlocutors' voices as 'refugee voices'. She puts forward the argument that refugees, rather than being 'voiceless', as represented in mainstream discourses, are made 'inaudible' due to their marginal positionality and the power structures that determine it. Accordingly, the reception centres for asylum seekers, rather than being silent, emerge in noise. This noise resonates with the multiple contestations of the space of the centre, as well as with the asylum seekers' efforts to maintain and express their agentive creativity. Their voices emerge as an assemblage of their experiences across

[18]Laura Kunreuther, *Voicing Subjects: Public Intimacy and Mediation in Kathmandu* (University of California Press, 2014).

[19]Ariana Phillips-Hutton, 'Finding, Having, Borrowing the Voice', *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, 56 (2025), pp. 7–13, doi:10.1017/rrc.2025.3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rrc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

their disjointed migratory trajectories, asserting their presence in dialogue with other individuals and collectives who have entered their pathway. Listening explicitly surfaces here as voice's counterpart.

The interrelationship between listening and voice is further explored in the final contribution of this round table. Fiona Murphy and Evropi Chatzipanagiotidou approach voice as a constellation between object, image, and sound (including the absence of it), drawing on their project engaging a Syrian artist collective and a women-led social enterprise in Istanbul, Turkey. Their article is organized around a series of ethnographic snapshots that invite the reader to listen in ways that shift away from the oral narrative and the persistent scope of voice as narrative, and engage object, image, and sound instead. Silence becomes part of the constellation, as a means of voicing the unsaid. In doing so, Murphy and Chatzipanagiotidou move away from the tight interconnections between voice and subjectivity, or voice as narrative, and offer enhanced understanding into the relational and interstitial nature of voice. They focus on the creative practices of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey and how loss pertains to them. Listening becomes the linchpin between voice and silence. From a methodological point of view, the lens offered by this constellation around voice and the consideration of listening and silences contributes decisively to matters of ethical representation and to reconstituting the equitable relationships between researchers and their interlocutors.

Listening to Vocal Agency

The concept of vocal agency foregrounds voice's capacity to exercise agency beyond the voicing and listening individuals. While this term is not used explicitly in the individual contributions to this round table, it emerges as an orientation point and a common thread. Vocal agency connects the diverse angles on voice and agency offered by each contribution. It promotes not only the agency inherent in voice, but also a sensorial approach to getting insights into and through voice.

Bakker-Kellogg uses the concept of 'vocal agency' to comment on its double agency as 'resound[ing] both internally and externally to the human body', therefore being 'key to understanding how boundaries between categories are made "real"'.[20] This take on vocal agency highlights the relational character of voice that is foregrounded throughout this round table, while at the same time outlining its agentive nature and therefore its affectivity. Departing from LaBelle's 'sonic agency' as 'sound's agentive potentiality' entangled with 'the social experiences and productions of sound and audition, and how a sonic sensibility may inform emancipatory practices',[21] and considering the perspectives given in this round table, additional takes on the concept of 'vocal agency' can be offered, and accordingly suggest new pathways for research. More specifically, I would like to highlight the emancipatory capacity of voice in its multiplicity that incorporates silences as a methodological lens that allows us to defy established categories of being, acting, and musicking, offering new perspectives onto discourses around voice and agency. Listening is an integral counterpart of this process. This take on vocal agency aligns with the proposal made by the final contribution to this round table, 'Voice as Constellation: Listening to the Voices and Silences of Displacement in Three Acts', regarding the methodological advantages that conceptualizing voice as a constellation encompassing silences offers regarding representation. The emancipatory capacity of vocal agency reconstitutes by extension an equitable relationship between researchers and interlocutors by reinforcing a focus on *what* is voiced and *how*, along with the ethical predicaments of close listening and attuning oneself to the challenging perspectives that are offered.

Chrysi Kyratsou (chrysi.kyratsou@mic.ul.ie) is an anthropologist and musician with a background in (ethno)musicology and music education, and currently Postdoctoral Researcher Fellow at the Irish Research

[20]Sarah Bakker-Kellogg, 'Ritual Sounds, Political Echoes: Vocal Agency and the Sensory Cultures of Secularism in the Dutch Syriac Diaspora', *American Ethnologist*, 42.3, pp. 431–45 (p. 433).

[21]Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (Goldsmiths Press, 2018), p. 2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rrc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Council-funded MUSPACE project. Her research interests focus on musicking, (forced) migration, encounters, (non-)belonging, (im)mobilities, and inclusivity. She is the (co-)editor of the special issue 'Navigating Hurdles and Reconfiguring (Im)Mobilities in Times of Corona' and author of the articles 'Between Estrangement at Home and Marginalization by the Host: Tracing Senses of Belonging through Music' in *Arts* 12.3 (2023) and 'Musical Citizenship as a Means to Disrupt Exclusions' in *Citizenship Teaching and Learning* 17.1 (2022).

Cite this article: Kyratsou, C., Phillips-Hutton, A., Murphy, F. and Chatzipanagiotidou, E. 2025. Voice and Agency: A Round Table. *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle,* 56, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1017/rrc.2025.1

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