Singing the Self:  
Improvisational Pedagogy in Community Choirs

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ABSTRACT

SINGING THE SELF:

IMPROVISATIONAL PEDAGOGY IN COMMUNITY CHOIRS

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Voice is commonly regarded as a metaphor for agency. Examining literal models of vocal agency assists the understanding of the far-reaching implications of this metaphor. This inquiry examines the discrepancy between the experiences of facilitating singing and being invited to sing. The invitation to sing, extended with compassion by vocal teachers, can be received with fear, refusal and silence. As such, vocal instructors are regularly placed at the apex between artistic empowerment and traumatic encounters. Teachers invested in facilitating students towards agency must be aware of power dynamics to maximize liberatory potentialities. This study examines best practices and positive outcomes in the work of performers and facilitators of improvisational community choirs. The first chapter reviews personal experiences with vocal improvisation. The second chapter focuses on collaborative processes. The third chapter examines the role of public presentation and its influence on positive outcomes for participants in soundsinging choirs.
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…All the way to Johnston St. Guelph, where the neighbours keep an eye out, lend a hand, and help tie up loose ends.
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INTRODUCTION

This inquiry investigates gaps between perceptions and experiences of the affective influences of vocal improvisation. My motive is, in part, inspired by a panel presented at the Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium titled “Research, Creation, Process, Practice: Other Ways of Knowing, Other Ways of Being,” in 2016 featuring Jesse Stewart, Kathe Gray and Sara Ramshaw. The juxtaposition of their research created a dialogue that resonated with my experiences as a music educator and as a vocalist. Stewart reported on his project “We Are All Musicians” facilitating an improvisational orchestra with high school students from Ottawa. He recounted young people’s empowerment as they exercised agency through a devised performance reflecting their local environment, and subsequently presenting their music in several elite venues. Gray’s paper, “Aha! Utopian Moments in Improvised Music Making,” relayed her own experience participating in a vocal improvisation workshop. She described the harrowing experience of being exposed to extended vocal technique, her discovery of new possibilities for self-expression and the lasting effects in her personal life. Finally Ramshaw’s paper, “Practice as Process: Social Justice and Improvisation,” reflected on elements of improvisatory practice within legal frameworks. Ramshaw presented extensive research on the legal field’s employment of improvisatory techniques, such as listening and negotiation. Based on my personal experiences in both classrooms and courtrooms, I found that these three papers elicited a paradox for me: Why does vocal agency feel so intimidating when it holds the promise of empowerment? Why is the invitation to use voice experienced as both threatening and liberating? How do we balance risk and reward when we use our voice? What blind spots are present for teachers when sharing their enjoyment of singing with students who fear the activity? What can an examination of this discrepancy tell us about power dynamics when people of
varying positions of privilege collaborate? Finally, how can we apply the answers to these questions to create satisfying experiences in such interactions?

The resonance of these questions is born of my 20 years’ experience as a vocalist highly influenced by jazz and blues music. This career developed alongside 14 years working as an elementary school music teacher using the Orff technique, a method which prizes improvisational skills as a mark of musical fluency. My coincidental careers as performer and pedagogue routinely meet with this line of inquiry in direct and powerful ways. The responsibility of facilitating musical expression towards enablement pervades musical work with young children. Experience as a professional musician continually informed teaching methods as I endeavoured to share practical solutions to creative challenges between the stage and classroom. Facilitating musical expression requires attendance to the emotional resistance of students. I also recognize the presence of anxieties in myself and my professional collaborators. Daily, I would address performance anxiety in my students based on my own experiences with stage fright, particularly in the area of vocal improvisation. As a teacher, I was enthusiastic about taming these dragons, while as a performer I exhibited reticence similar to those of my students. The discrepancy between my behaviour in these two performance arenas calls me to reflect on performance variance according to privileged knowledge in music making, collaboration and pedagogy. The essence of my affection for jazz music was the hopeful promise of turning difficulties into resources and the legacy of accessibility circumventing elite schooling systems which were unavailable to people with my background. Regrettably, commitment to quality kept me favouring material I knew well and had previously prepared on the bandstand. Desire to
realize both teaching and performance ideals led me to wonder what broader implications lie in concrete experiences with vocal improvisation and power.

Ramshaw’s work in improvisational legal practices brought about the match-light moment for the research presented here. Focusing on elements shared by the legal process and improvisational processes, her paper prompted me to recall my involvement as a witness within a judicial trial. Briefly, I can describe the experience as unsatisfying. In this context ‘being heard’ was not liberating but disorienting. Such experiences are commonly reported in mainstream media. Discrepancies between crimes reported and charges laid indicate the testimony's rewards are overshadowed by risks incurred. At Ramshaw’s initiation, I considered that experiences such as the one I’d had in the courtroom might echo the experience of children in classrooms. Conflating classrooms and courtrooms would be a mistake. Nonetheless, there are significant parallels where vocal improvisation and testimony are concerned. Each arena demands participation in structured events with hegemonic knowledge distribution. When tasked with generating authentic, expressive performances most feel overwhelmed and intimidated. Those who transcend these challenges become empowered to exercise agency. Not surprisingly proceedings are experienced differently depending on which side of the power structure one occupies. Additionally, ideal goals such as justice and education, both liberatory practices, are served by the empowerment of those mandated for participation under marginalized circumstances. Presently across public domains, a conversation rages regarding the impact of privilege and the consequences of ignorance. Terms such as reconciliation are being redefined, through concrete actions occupying central political space in Canada. Understanding when and
why invitations to activate voice are satisfying can provide crucial considerations in these cultural conversations.

Recognizing that critical examination of power dynamics during liberatory procedures across institutions exceeds the scope of a Master’s thesis, I probe the dichotomy presented by considering ways that satisfying vocal improvisation experiences succeed at making the invitation for positive, authentic personal contributions. Concrete examples of agency found in practices of listening, responding and creating demonstrate contributions available from critical studies in improvisation. Improvisation’s interdisciplinary nature offers an opportunity to combine the fields of pedagogy and performance towards addressing the silencing that occurs in the presence of unbalanced power. Positively stated, improvisation studies connects vocal practices with socio-political implications through real-world examples. This thesis seeks to discover how to facilitate and create satisfying self-expression from marginalized positions.

In this effort, I have focused on three vocal improvisation practitioners. Christine Duncan, Chris Tonelli and Phil Minton enjoy careers that combine performance and pedagogy in improvisation. Attending workshops led by each participant allowed for firsthand experience of positive collaboration under their guidance. Each of these facilitators focus on joyful, emancipatory effects of improvisation, which they hope to share through their workshops. Participants answered a series of questions derived from my research of their practices using interviews, scholarly articles, audio and video archives. To juxtapose the experiences of creating versus that of facilitating, these inquiries were organized in three sections referring to an understanding of improvising from the individual outward. The first group of questions addressed personal experience and practice with improvisational techniques. These were
followed by questions about the participants’ collaborative experiences which led to facilitating improvisational choirs. The third group of questions regarded the imperatives of public presentation. Due to the location of the respondents (Toronto, England and The Netherlands), these interviews were conducted via email, with follow up correspondence. Limitations on conversational tone created by email correspondence were eased through multiple communications, voice recorded responses, and face-to-face interaction, which was pursued when possible.

In addition to reviewing interviews and video documentation featuring each respondent, I conducted practice-based research through participation in a local collective of vocal improvisers who regularly gather to engage in circle singing (a process of small group improvisation developed by Bobby McFerrin and Rhiannon, the latter with whom I have trained privately). Regular practice of Pauline Oliveros’ “Deep Listening technique” also accompanied this course of research, providing an insider perspective on vocal improvisation processes. Practice-based research, combined with qualitative inquiry, informed the methodology and analysis. Comparisons of experiences facilitating versus being facilitated were drawn directly from the integrated method of practicing vocal improvisation from variant positions, those of student, collaborator, performer and facilitator. Each scenario situationally provided perspective for comparative analysis of factors present during vocal improvisation. This method and the findings gathered here provide evidence towards emergent trends serving as groundwork for a broader study.

Music education allows examination of dynamics present during creative collaboration resulting in both satisfactory and frustrating experiences. Improvisation provides a unique site
Introduction

within music-making to study agency because of the immediacy of expression. Ingrid Monson’s *Saying Something* is one seminal account illustrating the value placed on improvisation as an opportunity to explore and establish identity. Monson documents how “…there is a simultaneous articulation of social and musical space” (194) as each ensemble member collaborates towards making a musical statement in the form of improvisation. Monson’s work is central in this study, both as a foundational perspective and as an exemplary methodological approach. Following her assertion that the practice of jazz improvisation is one in which musicians strive to converse, I focus on vocal improvisation as a site that represents agency in poignant and immediate ways. The intimacy of the embodied instrument and how “voice” stands as an index for agency indicate a suitable starting point to examine gaps between the experience of activating one’s autonomy and the experience of enabling the same event for someone else. Anthropologist Amanda Weideman provides a thorough survey of societal constructs of voice which extend the ontological definition:

> These associations are made daily in our common parlance: We “find” our “voice” or discover an “inner voice”; we “have a voice” in matters or “give voice to” our ideas; we “voice concern” and are “vocal” in our opinions. But voice is also a category that is now salient in many other parts of the world as well—in connection with anticolonial nationalist movements, the “opening” of socialist societies, the emergence of new democracies, the discourse of human rights, the rise of indigenous and other social movements, and the neoliberal promises of choice and agency. (38)
Agency is a state promoted across the development of both capitalism and democracy. Current systems of governance claim to increase the agency of citizens, either so they may contribute to cultural direction or so they stimulate economy and generate prosperity. This study concentrates on social concepts of agency as a measure of personal power and individual ability to impact the collective. The idea of agency as the capacity for economic empowerment exceeds the purview of this study, with the understanding that the latter may result from the former.

Focus on pedagogical practices provides cultural reflections of societal values. Progressive methodologies promoted by Paulo Freire, bell hooks and John Taylor Gatto, pedagogy can reflect democratic values applied to education. Innovative attempts at increasing engaged participation have produced concepts such as “the flipped classroom” and “inquiry-based learning”. Carl Orff’s method of “elemental music” was a likewise attempt to recreate natural ways of learning through an embodied and participatory technique. Liberatory pedagogies regularly document desirable outcomes such as knowledge acquisition, critical thinking and innovative expression. However, no one technique is universally successful. Therefore this research addresses resistant behaviour from outliers and rebels within processes of liberatory education. Educator Herbert Kohl’s book I Won’t Learn from You describes the theory of creative resistance within the process of education, and marks subversive behaviour as an act of agency itself. He differentiates between failure to engage and “not-learning,” which “tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to her or his personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity” (6). Kohl asserts that behaviour presenting as dysfunctional is, in fact, an act of self-preservation.
Complexities of the power dynamics described by Kohl’s creative resistance theory are central issues in music classrooms. Creative resistance occurs in music class when students are placed at crossroads between self-expression and self-preservation. Those who commit to assisting this navigation have a genuine desire to help children “find their voices.” Conversely, the invitation to sing is met with multiple responses from students including avoidance techniques which inspire teaching strategies addressing risk and reward. Kohl’s theory of creative resistance encourages respect for resistant behaviour as an indication of commitment to self-protection. The imperative to facilitate student engagement with crucial social tools, following Weideman’s observations, demand addressing resistant behaviour as a component of vocal expression. The tension between risk and reward in the learning process is both fundamental and derivative. This balanced exchange is in accordance with psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's text *Flow* wherein he states that positive, creative experiences require an equilibrium of challenge and ability (74-75). A reward is directly relative to the sense of risk involved. Maintaining that balance across collective needs is a challenge in classrooms. In light of the theory of creative resistance outliers are exercising autonomy. Students who resist the invitation to sing in class could be considered savvy in avoiding public embarrassment and alienation from their peers. Resistant behaviour such as this demonstrates an instinctual understanding of Erving Goffman’s principle that the self is performed in each moment and becomes defined by a series of “Doings.” Therefore resistance to vocal improvisation can be interpreted as an embodied performance of conformity based on the instinct to belong via consistent prescribed behaviour.
Paradoxically, respect for resistant behaviour as a self-preserving instinct in the face of embodied performance can lead facilitators to excuse participants from skill development crucial in building self-esteem. The arts, and vocal agency in particular, regularly become devalued in negotiations regarding basic education curriculum. Children are identified with learning differences when they retreat from subjects protected under the covenant of a “standard education” such as reading or numeracy. Educators respond by pursuing appropriate support strategies. In contrast, when children are resistant to artistic expression, their response is classified as disinterest. Children are categorized as “uncreative” and engagement strategies are left unexplored. School programs across Canada demonstrate the belief that arts education must consist of an invitation and cannot be mandated. Many music programs receive relegation to the category of “extra-curricular.” Often students must elect for participation which impacts the cultural value for arts activity as a selected specialty.

In contrast, communities where artistic expression is a cultural expectation demonstrate highly developed self-advocacy skills. One recent example of this is the student mobilization following the shootings at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas Highschool in Parkland Florida. In a piece written for *Slate Magazine* Dahlia Lithwick tracks the effects of an enriched (and recognizably privileged) education program where “students who were being painstakingly taught about drama, media, free speech, political activism, and forensics became the epicenter of the school-violence crisis and handled it creditably.” Lithwick argues that these students were primed for advocacy because they were well practiced in articulate public presentations. In reaction to traumatic violence these students risked media scrutiny by stepping into public debate with confidence. In this case the risks incurred were understandably mitigated by the urgency of
the issue they advocated for. Lithwick suggests that their sense of risk is also leveled through cultural patterns embedded within their education.

When contemplating the risks of performance, vocal expression is a sensitive site of evaluation. Our inability to separate our essence and physiology means we are bound to our voice. Weidman’s writing demonstrates the significance our voices have within cultural contexts. In this milieu improvisation presents unique risks. Conventional modes of singing can be understood to cause fear of inadequacy based on exemplary models. Why, then, is the absence of mimesis met with fear across popular culture? Gary Peters acknowledges the presence of creative resistance in *A Philosophy of Improvisation*, addressing the prevalence of anxiety when tasked with improvising. He states that this is less often a fear of irrational behaviour and more likely a “fear of the unmarked space, of the unknown and unplanned, of failure and ridicule, and above all of the fear of nothingness— that nothing will happen and the work will fail to begin” (44). What we fear about improvisational singing is the revelation that we lack both physical capacity and symbolic empowerment. Fear of singing is the fear of revealing an agency we neglected to cultivate within ourselves. Voice is activation of embodied knowledge, an act incorporating the physical, intellectual, and arguably, spiritual, creative self, with equal influence at the moment of performance. If vocal improvisation is an activity which provides an arena for us to imagine new possibilities for ourselves within a communal context, then failure in this context threatens to reveal lack of hope, knowledge and agency. Lack of agency results in marginalization. Given historical tendencies for marginalization to be exacted based on embodied experience, singing demands direct interaction with the nature of our oppression.
Not surprisingly, liberation movements have an intimate history with improvised music. Feminist discourse centralizes concepts of agency as a measure of liberation. Musicologist Suzanne G. Cusick notes how musicians are cast as labouring bodies and therefore devalued within the patriarchal evaluation in her essay “Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem.” Cusick reminds us that bodies in performance are disquieting enough to have been largely ignored by music theorists and musicologists who traditionally focus their efforts on analyzing scores (15). Tracking the deletion of bodily practices from musical theory, Cusick responds to the “theological, moral, and class implications to this denial of the flesh in an art which cannot exist without the flesh” along with gendered considerations. Her analysis asks,

Is singing's full embodiedness related to the long-term trend in European art music that has deprivileged vocal music in favour of instrumental? Does that long-term trend, acted out from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries, tell us something about our culture's responses to the feminine? (15)

Cusick's essay hopes to reconnect music and theory so that the latter may express the joy of the former. In doing so, she critiques the marginalization of the labouring bodies responsible for musical production. Peters shares Cusick’s observation that contradictions proliferate attempts to understand performances across genres. He also acknowledges the liberatory promise of improvisational work, suggesting that the gift of improvisation may be its ability to present two polarities in a harmonic context. When considering the ironic reliance of free improvisation on structure, he concludes that exploring the space between two dichotomies is an attribute to be celebrated rather than solved:
Thought ideally, free-improvisation begins in freedom and ends with freedom before it, but it is itself unfree. This observation is not critical, it is affirmative. There are degrees of unfreedom from the most ignorant to the most knowing, and to know one is unfree (the tragic knowledge of the ironist) is, perhaps, itself a kind of freedom. (53)

Tensions such as those Peters describes between freedom and structure, embodiment and ephemerality, work and play, performance and documentation, risk and reward, are definitive elements of the literature surrounding improvisation. As such, these considerations create the framework in which much of this research resides. Movement between dichotomies provides insight as to why improvisation is intimately intertwined with resistance and liberation movements.

Legacies of communities well-versed in improvisatory practices implementing agency for broader societal change are too extensive to detail in this study, but the civil rights, feminist, and LGBTQGF movements provide numerous examples where music and improvisation cooperate in mobilizing marginal experiences towards cultural acceptance. In light of this, what damage do we do when we exchange risk for safety in classrooms? What diversity do we lose when we fail to provide communities of practice in the arts? Promissory effects of arts educations are not all that is sacrificed when we promote binary concepts of “basics” over “extras” in curriculum design.

Moving beyond traditional notions of binary opposites creates space for productive improvisational learning techniques where risk and reward are symbiotic dynamics active on a spectrum. The transformative power of vocal improvisation to be informative in its failure is
crucial in the self-articulation that Monson marks as an aesthetic value within jazz music making. Discomfort and frustration, even fear, are valuable, if dangerous, aspects of learning. How, then, do music educators best support people who have trusted us as we invite repeated failure towards the discovery of strategies for success? Game play provides a familiar structure for balance between failure and fun with the distancing magic of “make believe.” Orff and Kodaly techniques rely on musical games primarily because they reference cultural conventions. Additionally, the structure of game relies on repetition toward mastery. This is the essence of rehearsal, and children who play hone transferable skills of endurance, analysis and discipline alongside achieving the object of the specific game.

Conversely, children who cannot “play” must raise alarm bells for adults who care for them. Play resistant behaviours can have extreme indications. Trauma expert, Bessel Van der Kolk conducted a study called “The Psychological Processing of Traumatic Experience: Rorschach Patterns in PTSD” revealing effects of trauma on the imagination. In his book *The Body Keeps the Score* he recounts how a small number (5/21) of Vietnam vets suffering PTSD could not apply creative imagination during a Rorschach test seeing only inkblots. He recounts: “the five men who saw nothing in the blots had lost the capacity to let their minds play” (16-17). Such a reaction to trauma is an extreme version of creative block. Van der Kolk also elaborates on therapeutic transformations that take place when we play as it allows us to experiment with multiple narratives and possibilities in relaxed and creative modes. Yet, “the fear of the unmarked space” is dominant enough to elicit many improvisation technique manuals for practitioners across disciplines. Balancing the significant risk posed by improvised singing with rewarding playful motivation is central to engagement.
Failure to perform within the educational system links to professional music practice by way of exhibition and evaluation. Stage fright takes place in classrooms and professional arts arenas concurrently. The possibility of failure requires the presence of an ideal within improvisation practice. The promise of freedom is a promise of freedom to, not freedom from. The musicians in Monson’s study expressed aesthetic standards that qualified solos as “good” or “bad,” while Derek Bailey’s influential text, *Improvisation*, criticizes the state of contemporary jazz music as oppositional to its original agenda. Jazz improvisation offered musicians the freedom to leave the score, to elaborate and extemporize. Woe betide the jazz musician who fails to do so. In chapter 1 of *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics* Georgina Born defines and describes aesthetic values at play in critiques of improvised performances, stating “Relational aesthetics places art’s orchestration of socialites at the core of a new conception of the aesthetic” (33). The implication is that works can fail to produce satisfying results and be rated hierarchically. This paradigm offers no freedom from expectation. Peters suggests agility is the quality on display in improvisational performances. If so, it is understandable how obligation hinders agility in execution. Peters zeroes in on many ironic qualities in improvisatory practices, but his philosophy becomes particularly resonant when he describes how this mode of creativity can paralyze people:

…the world of free-improvisation remains a strange place, strange because it is not really a place but more an edge between spaces, between times. This might explain the widespread fear of free-improvisation, both among audiences who tend to avoid it and performers who apparently are terrified by it. (44)
Lack of clear goal posts, places of belonging and markers of success are naturally demoralizing to students under assessment or musicians under review. Improvisation offers the opportunity for failure to achieve continually shifting aesthetic goals.

Offering value for such failures J. Halberstam advocates for the beneficial experience of embarrassment in *The Queer Art of Failure*. Reviewing a selection of children’s animated films which they term the “silly archive,” Halberstam demonstrates how silliness, forgetfulness and silence are versions of failure that “As a practice…recognize that alternatives are embedded in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent: indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminant qualities” (88). These words easily apply to musical activity, a site where power is never total or consistent and which offers unpredictability and indeterminant qualities. Halberstam’s focus on kid culture illuminates another core element of improvisation: what Phil Minton terms “the politics of play.” Play, being both the child’s work and the musician’s occupation, is commonly met with derision in professional contexts. Play and people who do it receive pejorative connotations because of the intrinsic relationship play has with failure. Pointing to creative political responses, Halberstam recognizes playful improvisation as a strategy “to keep pace with the constantly shifting relations between dominant and subordinate within the chaotic flow of political life” (89). This study explores the politics of play and the power it holds to suggest alternate possibilities. These possibilities include dynamic relations amongst creative collaborators within creative learning environments, disrupting hegemonic educational traditions.

One critical function for transcending social conventions is accepting diversity as a means of broadening available possibilities. Vocal improvisation offers inclusive, alternative
models of aesthetic values where redefinition and replacement are possible. Regard for vocal improvisation as marginal in music practice proliferates. Strikingly, but not surprisingly, respondents in this study resist such notions. Their authority within their professional occupation demonstrates improvisational pedagogy’s ability to move marginal ideas to the centre of social discourse within communities. This musical model has powerful socio-political implications.

If the work of leading students to “find their voice” is indeed a microcosm of free agency, then critical analysis of experiential discrepancies between facilitators and students reveals liberatory strategies applicable within the neoliberal discourses referred to by Weideman. As evolving democracies propose access due to agency it is necessary to understand how that invitation may unwittingly consolidate silence in aggrieved populations. Such a promise is made by those who have had the privilege of agency and are blind to obstacles and barriers that do not affect them. Furthermore, the study of vocal improvisation provides a wealth of positive responses to paralysis in favour of active engagement.

Certainly, liberating possibilities exist, such as those recounted by Kathe Gray in her experience of moving through embarrassment and shame to finally arrive at a “quiver” during the soundsinging workshop conducted by Chris Tonelli. “I chose the word quiver,” she explains, “for the aptness with which it captures the swell of aftershock I felt, my trembling insides; for that brief spell, like a quiver holds arrows, I felt I contained the sublime” (Gray 3). Given that such transformational moments are ideal in pedagogy, this study seeks to examine the necessary components for positive knowledge acquisition through vocal improvisational practice.
CHAPTER 1—Pulse:

Centralizing the Self Through Extended Vocal Technique

Voice stands as a representational metaphor for the self, and as such its use is laden with meaning. The classic fairy tale of *The Little Mermaid* presents coded concepts of voice as agency. Hans Christian Anderson's original version leaves the heroine's voice intact; this contract comes with physical pain and suffering, potentially influencing her agency, while never entirely removing it. By contrast, Disney's 1989 animated adaptation reinforces the current cultural tendency to equate voice with agency, poignantly activating this concept through the main character, princess Ariel. In this contemporary version, the little mermaid trades her voice for earthly mobility. The cost of this transformation complicates her task of establishing romantic reciprocity with the prince within three days. The heroine's paradox reflects modern notions of agency: the voice is equal to action and made into an object of power. The decision to render the heroine mute as opposed to the original version where she is constantly pained serves as evidence of a cultural shift where the voice and its use are central to empowerment. This focus on the voice as essential to agency also implies a value system for technical wielding of the tool itself. Systemic integration of the concept of voice as a tool exists across institutions where evaluations rate good and bad speakers, powerful and weak voices, capable and incapable singers. What comprises a powerful and well-trained voice, or an articulate voice, becomes a matter of cultural orthodoxy and aesthetics. This chapter illustrates how practitioners of vocal improvisation engage directly with cultural concepts of agency and orthodoxy through the use and exploration of their physical capacities. Tracking the personal experience of vocal improvisers demonstrates how directed responsive attention in pursuit of production leads the
creation of inclusive communities of practice wherein marginalized behaviour is centralized and accepted.

It is fair to say that vocal improvisation can become so specialized that one may consider it an idiom positioning the singer on the margins of professional vocal practice. The three participants in this study demonstrate a vital connection with core principles of vocal improvisation which pulsates through their work as performers and as professional facilitators of public choirs. The data gathered here suggests that applying fundamental principles of improvisation through vocal expression initiates important concepts of agency with impacts that reach outward from the practitioner to the community. The fundamental principles examined in this chapter focus on the respondent’s personal experiences with vocal improvisation revealing the importance of communities of practice wherein directed attention can be rehearsed resulting in radical self-acceptance.

The term radical self-acceptance is used here to refer to the imperative of these practitioners to embrace their existing vocal capacity while extending and incorporating a wide range of embodied sounds. In doing so, their work affects an inclusive world-view. The implications of statements made by the respondents reveal not a perspective from the margins of cultural production, but rather the perspective of central agents of fundamental human rights. As such they demonstrate vocal improvisation’s capacity to provide both essential and concrete experiences in exercising agency. This chapter focuses on the vitality of core principles, the initial pulse inspiring each respondent to engage in work comprised of responsive embodied music.
In reviewing the responses from Christine Duncan, Phil Minton and Chris Tonelli to questions addressing their initial experiences with vocal improvisation, it is critical to acknowledge each practitioner’s use of different techniques and identification with varying definitions of vocal improvisation. Christine Duncan often refers to her work as extended vocal technique, considering herself a technician of the voice. Chris Tonelli identifies his practice as soundsinging since it incorporates many functions of the body which do not necessarily engage the vocal cords. Phil Minton uses the term vocal improvisation and singing interchangeably in his answers. In this writing, I have applied each respondent's preferred term regarding his or her practice accordingly. The terms are therefore used somewhat interchangeably while other works might focus on the defining factors between them. Questions posed to these participants did not seek to differentiate between approaches towards vocal improvisation, but rather to examine fundamental elements shared by these three established practitioners. Inclusive analysis of their answers revealed a focus on the importance of active listening and directed attention. Questions posed derived from research of their commitment to a musical practice which refutes dominant notions of what “proper,” “good” or “beautiful” singing is. Responses provided evidence of a socio-political stance rejecting suggestions of extended vocal technique as abnormal behaviour. Instead, the subjects position their practice as central, not marginal, natural, not unorthodox, and inherent, not extrinsic. This reframing is one example of how fundamental principles of vocal improvisation lead to radical self-acceptance. Understanding their vocal capacity as inherently valuable rejects elitist evaluations containing concepts of talent and virtuosity. Embracing what might be considered marginal or unusual practice as a fundamental human capacity creates broader access to vocal self-expression via this inclusionary attitude. The aesthetic values of
vocal improvisation become core principles of the practitioner, the pulse which provides vitality in their work. One similarity shared by these participants is to work within a community of practice where members exercise focused responsive attention. Such interactions also take place between the practitioner and their environment, or internally as an expression of their corporeal experience. Habituated listening strategies requiring continuous inclusive response translates to empowerment and agency in the collaborations and performances studied in the following chapters. Engagement with fundamental concepts of vocal improvisation practice breaks down binaries between the composer and the performer, the instrument and the body and the exclusive status of the musician as an exceptional member of the community.

Descriptions of early encounters with vocal improvisation provided by Duncan, Minton and Tonelli mark the shift from traditional dialectic vocal practices toward engagement with inclusive dialogical vocal technique. Careers which initially started in more popular idioms such as pop, gospel and classical music lead each musician to encounter vocal improvisation through a “community of practice,” a term defined by Keith Sawyer. The initiating event that introduced the possibility of working with the voice in ways that vary from traditional western training stemmed from interactions with other practitioners both formal and informal. Sawyer’s essay “Group Creativity: Musical Performance and Collaboration” advocates for a “sociocultural approach to music education [where] the classroom is no longer considered the site for the transmission of musical knowledge but rather a place where children are socialized” (99). Sawyer makes a case for the integration of artistic and social practice by recognizing organic exchange between these spheres.
Chris Tonelli provides an example of this principle when asked to identify influences on his shift from conventional vocal idioms to soundsinging. He describes the importance of communal gatherings:

The first [factor] was having a space to do improvisation in the first place. I was at Trent University and Ellen Waterman had organized a regular free improvisation space that was open to anyone that wanted to make music improvisationally and I started participating in that on the guitar… I'd played a lot of jazz guitar, and I was improvising on the guitar and using my voice a little bit in that context as well as using found objects that were around the space… it happened that we were using a space that had a lot of junk and things lying around that became part of the improvisation. I was using my voice a bit in those contexts… But when Ellen brought Paul Dutton to Peterborough and I saw him for the first time, that's when I stopped bringing my guitar. I just lost interest in using guitar in those contexts because I thought it was so extraordinary that one could just use their raw voice as an instrument and improvise with unconventional sounds. I just fell in love instantly…

Tonelli’s comments reflect the capacity for regular gathering to support emerging musical interests by providing repeated opportunities for exploration of techniques inspired by musical role-models –one of whom was introduced through the same community network. The function of “communities of practice” as a component of musical learning reflects both aesthetic and socio-political values. These values place importance on interaction as a source of musical inspiration. Paul F. Berliner documents similar notions of the community as a classroom in his
tome Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation. “For almost a century” he writes, “the jazz community has functioned as a large educational system for producing, preserving and transmitting musical knowledge” (37). Berliner continues to talk about how this approach of “hanging out and jamming” allows for the combination of somatic practice, technical development and critical aesthetic values to develop in symbiotic ways.

These processes –and the complementary themes of shared community values and idiosyncratic musical perspectives– are already evident in the lives of learners soon after they begin to acquire knowledge of those formal structures of jazz on which their own performances will depend. (59)

Communities of practice allow for an immersive education capable of knowledge transfer of sound that cannot be textualized, social expectations that are extra-legal, possibilities not yet articulated, and essential survival skills. Necessity may have been the mother of invention for communities of practice in the jazz tradition, yet other musical pedagogies also recognize the effectiveness of an immersive approach to musical education. Three musical education techniques popular in Canada, Orff, Kodály, and Suzuki, rely on such integrated approaches. These methods stress inter-age ensembles and physical responses to music (i.e., dance) that prepare instrumental technique and repertoire development integrated throughout social environments.

In his address at the opening of the Orff elementary education course presented at the University of Toronto in July of 1962, Carl Orff recounted the evolution of his music study technique and identified the role of multidisciplinary traditions citing folk and jazz music cultures as influential (70). Contemporary practitioners of this technique implement a curriculum
that relies on multi-modal interaction with musical elements to achieve wholistic understanding regardless of musical genre. In her review of a showcase of Orff ensembles from across the province of Alberta in 2006 Cherlynn Sauter asserts “…skills and knowledge should be integrated into the lives of students so that students would develop critical-thinking skills” (11). Orff’s own insistence that his technique should consist of “Never music alone, but music connected with movement, dance, and speech –not to be listened to, meaningful only in active participation” (72) emphasizes music making as an intrinsic form of communication. It stands to reason that a technique with these aesthetic values identifies improvisation as a fundamental marker of musical fluency. The acknowledgement of the synthesis of social interaction and musical making returns musical activities to their origins of cultural expression and identity articulation.

Fischlin, Heble and Lipsitz articulate political implications of music making practices that unify performance modes in their book The Fierce Urgency of Now. “…As the ur-form of speech, perhaps the very activity that produced human speech, song, and expressive diversity,” they write, “improvisation reiterates a defining condition for rights: the capacity to freely express oneself, to be heard, to give testimony, to not be forgotten or silenced” (61). Musical improvisation fundamentally resists historically brief, yet dominant traditions where the composer is the central point of creation and holds a higher status than the performer. Traditions where musicians produce sounds dictated by composers tend to define the role of performers as those who display virtuosity and (often “divinely” bestowed) talent in service of the composer’s vision. Conversely, a musical practice which values mutual interaction activates the concept of
sounding as an act of individual agency through unique contributions made by the labouring body.

An examination of the importance of embodied music making provides reliable insights regarding how and why the concepts of music making became disembodied in the first place. In her ground-breaking book *Gender and the Musical Canon* Marcia Citron examines Western culture’s exclusion of women for consideration as cultural agents in the field of music. Citron shines a light onto the omissions inherent in canons which actively eliminate large groups of society, noting “illumination of such bias means that many works Western Culture has valued are now uncomfortable or embarrassing” (74). Critics of Citron’s work have focused on her reverence for the dominant paradigm, as she argues for women’s inclusion within the Western Art Canon rather than discrediting canonical systems all together. Nonetheless, her critique identifies the idolatry bestowed upon the construct of the composer-genius. Feminist musicologists continue to investigate the illegitimacy of this model, first critiqued by Citron. Musicologist Suzanne Cusick uses Citron’s premise of the composer-genius to identify the gendered discourse surrounding music analysis:

The composer is masculine *not because so many individuals who live in the category are biologically male*, but because the composer has come to be understood to be mind--mind that creates patterns of sounds to which other minds assign meanings. (16; emphasis in original)

In what I consider to be one of the most rewarding discoveries in my transition from practitioner to researcher, Cusick warns musicologists of the enormous omissions within Western traditions which separate the body from the process of music making. Her essay on inclusive thinking
regarding feminine presence in music making brings the importance of the corporeal to the fore reminding music theorists what music players inherently understand: “the work includes the performer's mobilizing of previously studied skills so as to embody, to make real, to make sounding, a set of relationships that are only partly relationships among sounds” (18). Cusick’s understanding of the body’s central importance in musical agency connects with Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz’s assertion that musical practice carries inherent political expression based on recognition that bodies in performance imbue intersectional attestation. Cusick asks us to consider the demands placed upon bodies who perform gender in conjunction with performing music: “Thus, it may be that we will discover that much of the pleasure in music is afforded by the opportunity it gives us to play ourselves free of gender’s rigidities” (20). Her analysis identifies the same dynamic that Fischlin, Heble and Lipsitz present as the ability of improvised music to teach “us to make ‘a way' out of ‘no way' by cultivating the capacity to discern hidden elements of possibility, hope and promise in even in the most discouraging circumstances” (xii).

The work of a musician can demonstrate corporeal engagement while offering a promise of expressing what lies beyond exterior socio-political readings of a body.

Likewise, improvisation provides an opportunity for individuals to negotiate and redefine themselves within their community of practice. Musical improvisation where the body does not just manipulate the instrument but where the instrument is the body demands the musician to engage with corporeal limitations and possibilities. Engagement with liberatory possibilities by way of physical action confronts limitations and constitutes risk. Christine Duncan articulates the revolutionary nature of refuting culturally sanctioned behaviours within the broad spectrum of vocal expression:
Improvised vocal performance is risky business. There is no structure to hide behind, and particularly with the use of extended vocal techniques, the range of sounds can make the listener uncomfortable, or even anger them. Extended voice practice explores a lot of the ‘unsafe’ vocal sounds, the sounds that we don't trot out in public. These fall into the category of incidental sounds, body sounds, unintentional and even unconscious sounds, the sounds people make when they are not in control, and there can be embarrassment and shame attached to this kind of sound making. It can also make people feel like voyeurs to experience listening to this kind of thing, and there can be guilt attached to that as well. Listeners can also be shocked or triggered when experiencing this kind of ‘sounding,’ and they will make choices about how to respond to that.

Duncan’s statement identifies risk as a result of rejecting a culturally prescribed sonic expression. It also connects the idea of risk with notions of shame and embarrassment. To be clear, the use of the word shame applies not to the attitudes of improvising singers, but the reactions of audience members present at performances. Chris Tonelli explores the results of vocal risk-taking and the presence of shame in his essay “Ableism and the Reception of Improvised Soundsinging” (2016) in which he theorizes hostile reactions he witnessed at performances of soundsinger Paul Dutton. He notes that many negative comments refer to the corporeal presence of Dutton while he vocalizes. “Disability studies,” Tonelli suggests, “offers a framework for understanding the threat posed to this symbolic order by both bodies perceived as disabled and by voices that operate beyond dominant vocal norms” (4). Tonelli identifies the inclusive mandate prevalent in soundsinging practices and suggests the threatening component of
vocal improvisation is posed by the redirection of attention from sanctioned behaviour towards yet unspecified possibilities. He describes how audiences occasionally respond to the range of vocal prospects explored and utilized in extended vocal technique with mockery or negative comments, stating “we can theorize that the expectation of the screener for a voice that signified perfection was not met; …[and the screener responded with] a speech act intended to discourage the exercise of that imperfect vocality” (7). Tonelli’s theory recognizes vocal improvisation as a practice that challenges ideas of normative behaviour, therefore incurring the risks referred to by Duncan when she identifies “sounds that we don't trot out in public.” One strategy towards addressing the potential for shame or embarrassment is the courageous attitude of “owning it” or self-acceptance.

Kathe Gray’s testament to self-acceptance discovered through vocal improvisation presented at the 2016 Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium provides a useful description of the reaction theorized by Tonelli from the perspective of the onlooker. As I suggested in my introduction, Gray details her trepidations towards unconventional vocalization while attending a workshop led by Tonelli. As Tonelli opened up the workshop by demonstrating his practice with a solo, Gray “watched red-faced and mortified, my stomach churning with embarrassment for the weird noises and faces he made” (2). She compares the initial reactions of embarrassment while watching a demonstration by Tonelli with her later experience of joy during her own vocalizations (3). Gray recounts ideal effects of vocal improvisation practices beautifully in her description of travelling the spectrum from repulsion to acceptance. Her testimony and Tonelli’s observation of audience reactions establish the practice of soundsinging as one whose transformative power lies within the risky behaviour of engaging with sounds that challenge
norms of commonly idealized vocalization. The sensation of encompassing the sublime, for Gray, emerged as a product of radical self-acceptance of her vocal capacities which lie outside of conventional practice.

To build a career around unconventional behaviour may appear courageous from within confining norms. Yet, when asked to address risks posed in their professional practice, Duncan, Minton and Tonelli resist definitions of their work containing assumptions of marginalization. Throughout their interviews, the three participants reject implications that their vocalizations are unusual, odd, embarrassing or alienating. Duncan acknowledges that her work is “risky” but describes the choice to engage with that factor as a fundamental aspect of her identity. She describes her strategies towards an empowered position within her practice:

The key for me is to be able to be transparent enough to follow the musical muse and allow people to witness my process as it unfolds, without trying to curate their experience, or necessarily shield myself from the truth of the musical journey. I do not feel unprotected, or unsafe though; part of this comes from the ability to channel energy and be totally absorbed by the experience of the music making. The more it feels honest, the less I need to be attached to it. Also, I realize that I cannot take responsibility for the choices of anyone else. If people choose to be open to this kind of experience or closed to it/angered by it, etc., that is their responsibility.

When asked if she had experienced derision or policing of her voice Duncan identified that experience and skill acquisition played a role in being able to respond with confidence, easing such encounters. Such a moment occurred during a talkback at the 2018 Guelph Jazz Festival
and Colloquium when an audience member asked her how she could perform certain vocal qualities without causing damage. Duncan's demeanor was relaxed and self-assured when she described herself as a technician of the voice; she told the audience that she relies on extensive study and familiarity with her instrument. She explained that she makes conscientious choices about her vocal capacity and maintains constant control. These statements mark the positioning of her authority and commitment to musicianship. While Duncan acknowledges that her choice of musical practice may be risky in the lack of structure or in the reception from the public, she also takes an authoritative professional stance within her work. The fact that she is asked to occupy such space is revealing of prevailing attitudes towards vocalists. Nevertheless, Duncan is comfortable role-modelling this authority as a component of her commitment to her profession: “I have been performing for almost all of my life, and cannot separate my music/art making from my spiritual path, so when I think of this in terms of rewards, I guess it comes down to quality of life, and reinforcing my core sense of myself and relationship to that”. Here Duncan provides powerful testimony to the interconnected nature between her craft and identity. She describes how working outside dominant musical paradigms provides her with a “quality of life” thereby refuting the narrative that conformity equates with belonging and is preferable to self-knowledge.

This interwoven relationship between artistic practice and world-view is echoed in the book Vocal River by vocal improvisor Rhiannon, a member of the group We Be Three, and Voicestra. Rhiannon is also a teacher of circle singing who has developed a curriculum which she facilitates in workshops worldwide. The introduction to her instructional text describes how improvisation supported her sense of authority in other areas. “I allowed my newfound freedom
of choice to guide me, and I began to understand the politics of music and being a woman in the world…Improvisation teaches us to look at our options” (xii-xiii). Connections such as this might lead to criticism for overly-simplistic and sentimental metaphors. Still, precedents establish the necessity of centralizing one’s experiences as vital in revolutionary work.

*Borderlands, La Frontera*, written by Gloria Anzaldúa, demonstrates a process of redefining marginalized identity by reconceptualizing a persecuted existence in what she terms *mestiza* consciousness (1987). Anzaldúa’s seminal work describes how intersectional marginalization and the negation of the physical self creates madness (41). She argues that aggrieved individuals faced with a choice between eradication and rebellion respond to this tension with agency born of their will to survive (43). As a Latinx lesbian born in the United States and raised within a patriarchal, Catholic community Anzaldúa experienced multifaceted oppression and genuine dangers. Her detailed manifesto for reframing identity from margin to center pinpoints the fear of physical and material differences within cultures demanding conformity:

> The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the popular ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behaviour…only by remaining flexible is she able to…shift out of habitual formations…to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes…Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (101)

Anzaldúa’s description of transformative radical self-acceptance identifies techniques shared by improvisers in musical practice: listening, abandoning patterned expectations, and exercising inclusive thinking toward new possibilities. Her articulation of this process bears essential
implications as scholars from across disciplines work towards models of reframing empowerment. The rejection of established paradigms aligns with Gary Peters’ “fundamental principles of creative practice” (10). Anzaldúa’s experience of marginalization is compounded by many factors. As Peters’ observes, “all improvisers must face the demand for a work from within the confines of a limited material universe” (11). Her arrival of a new *mestiza* consciousness, which she attains through writing, demonstrates how “art does not express the self, it meaningfully configures it” (Peters 14). Anzaldúa arrives at a philosophy of inclusive divergent thinking through her poetry and scholarly work. This mentality mirrors Duncan’s belief that vocal improvisation bolsters her quality of life by reinforcing her sense of self. Like Anzaldúa, Christine Duncan embodies Gary Peters’ *fundamental principle*, as she states, “I believe that we are constantly being transformed, and every art experience we engage in alters us, even on a molecular level, regardless of our responses.” Meaningful configuration is a vital component of daily life for Duncan as is evident in her understanding of the ubiquitous transformative power of creativity.

The concept of ubiquitous vital creativity can relieve the artist of total responsibility for inspiration. Duncan’s reference to “channelling energy” and being “absorbed in the moment” indicates how her technique of directed attention mitigates, even alleviates risk. Directing attention toward the environment or other members of the community of practice is regularly employed to generate improvised output. Each participant in this study identified listening as a critical technique towards successful vocal improvisation practice. When asked to describe his professional regime Tonelli relates a simple approach of rigorous engagement. “I just sing. I sing a lot”, he states. This response reflects Berliner’s techniques including: seeking inspiration,
attempting approximation, and then variation; all these outcomes result in the development of unique contributions. “My practice is to find my own sounds in the process of exploration and to be inspired by others who are using unconventional sounds.” Tonelli identifies the community of practice as a learning tool and as a means of creative generation. These two functions are not separate but concurrent. In this practice listening is both a conceptual and a concrete aesthetic priority.

Improvising musicians engage listening as a source for spontaneous compositions born, not from consonance, but from response. Listening in this manner incorporates traditional definitions and practices, forming the basis for literacy and mimesis. Berliner provides illustration when he describes how jazz musicians familiarize themselves with a traditional repertoire: “Jelly Roll Morton and other musicians frequently attended concerts at the French Opera House and immersed themselves in compositions by Verdi, Massenet, Donizetti and other masters” (55). In this tradition, musicians extend this habit of learning by ear and the study of specific repertoire as generative towards compositions as well as improvisations. Berliner tells us that “the jazz tradition generally elevates aural musical knowledge, with its associated powers of apprehension and recall to the paramount position” (93). The oral traditions that imbue jazz practice elevated and increase the value of active listening; the traditions of active listening are by no means unique to any jazz idiom alone. Nevertheless, the example of an exchange, call and response, and self-representation found in jazz exemplify a useful scenario in which the motivation to listen is strong. Ingrid Monson explains this pragmatic imperative when considering how jazz musicians possibly define listening differently than other musical practitioners. “They mean it in a very active sense: they mean listen closely because they are
continually called upon to respond to and participate in an ongoing flow of musical action that can change or surprise them at any moment” (43). Without suggesting that jazz musicians have a cartel on listening practices, jazz stands as a recognizable influence on methods employed by modern improvisers as a whole. The performative conventions of jazz improvisation demand that musicians continually exercise listening skills as a component of engaging with their community of practice. While Berliner’s book tracks the customs found in jazz communities, Pauline Oliveros builds this tradition as she develops her practice. In her book *Deep Listening: A Composer’s Sound Practice* she combines jazz techniques with those established in meditation traditions of eastern philosophies towards developing attention directing skills:

The sitting position described for the exercise is common to many meditation practices. However, the two forms of attention –focal and global –are directed in Deep Listening practice to sound/silence. An objective is to feel the sharp contrast between the two forms of attention –the clear detail of a sound or sequence of sounds using focal attention and the expansion to multiple sources of sound simultaneously in multi-dimensions with global attention. (12)

Christine Duncan articulates a similar approach; she differentiates among types of attention in order to hone and apply these skills towards improvisational responses. When discussing the influence of Tai Chi practice on her musical process, she writes:

I believe listening is one of the most important factors in successful improvisation. I consider listening and awareness to be very connected and experience them in a variety of ways. I practice four specific awareness
designations, which came from doing five years of pretty intense internal martial arts study with Sam Masich.

Duncan’s use of four designations of attention is a generative strategy for contributing to improvisatory performances. She points out how honing her attention allows her ability to trust silence. The importance of the space between the notes, as noted by Duncan, references Claude Debussy’s celebrated statement *music is comprised of this silence.* Duncan acknowledges this truth (as she experiences it) can be intimidating for vocalists as attention to silence and listening removes dominant frameworks of singing paradigms. “When lyrics are removed from the picture when song structure is removed, and when the voice is no longer used for beautiful, or comforting, pleasurable, or even recognizable melodic information, the listener can feel unsafe.”

A discussion of dynamics between vocalists and audiences takes place in greater detail in the chapter regarding performance. The art of vocal improvisation departs from conventional norms, notes Duncan, and as a result she attends to the resulting demands on practitioners for strategies in *active listening* and *focused attention.* Phil Minton notes the importance of directing his attention in his response to questions about the physicality of his performances. He explains:

> I’m always surprised when I see film of me performing and sometimes embarrassed, “what a prat,” it’s only concentration, if I start to think what I look like I can't find the music, I’d be a hopeless opera or pop singer.

Minton underscores the importance of placing attention in the right location and away from other considerations in order to be productive under high stakes, as described earlier by Ingrid Monson. Additionally, Minton’s statement highlights the risk-taking nature of unconventional singing. Minton’s attention to popular music, pop singing in particular, as an idiom valuing
appearance is not accidental. Pop music (meaning popular music) is based upon market-driven priorities and audience appeal. Therefore, the physical performance, as Minton points out, must fall inside hegemonic, market-driven and precedential frameworks of entertainment. The concept of such familiar and accepted structures (i.e., the infrastructure of hegemonic entertainment industries) creates a dichotomy of aesthetic values (from disgust to joy; failure to prosperity; loss to affluence) with a well-established code of conduct. Vocal improvisation extended vocal technique and soundsinging function as meaningful explorations of possibilities in sound and performance that act in contrast (in resistance) to these prominently accepted structures of values. Vocal improvisation invites practitioners to direct their attention toward possibilities that differ from established performance construction leading to appearances, behaviours, and sonic production that fall outside conventional expectations.

Duncan articulates the strategy of directing her attention; Minton identifies strategies that focus on listening (as opposed to looking); and Tonelli references paying attention to others, in order to activate his artistic impulse. These collected strategies demonstrate Peters' observation: “It is not so much working together to make something new out of the old but, rather, the more solitary act of ‘standing-within’ the old, occupying it in such a way that its own opening onto being or ‘thrust into the Open’ is preserved” (17). When participants in vocal improvisation understand how to embody a specific and unique vocal capacity, this confidence, when shared through directed attention towards collaborators, guarantees productive and creative outcomes. In this way, mimesis provides structure for creative output with infinite variations. This phenomenon was described eloquently at the 2018 Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium by Darius Jones during an artist panel titled “Voice and Song in Creative Music.” Jones’s inclusive words
inspire: “Time and time again the voice teaches us this lesson: diversity. Because no two people ever sound the same.” As such, Tonelli’s elegant description of his practice, “I just sing,” is an inscription of repeated self-acceptance as he engages with his capacities within diverse possibilities.

The notion of diversity must not be equated with differentiation and categorization. The work of acceptance that lies inherent in vocal improvisation practice is an act of inclusiveness. Tonelli’s language, “unconventional,” acknowledges how soundsinging falls outside standard practices. He advocates for an inclusive understanding of vocal capacity that accepts a wide range of possibilities; unusual sounds are not policed. Tonelli extends his acceptance to the embodied experience accompanying vocal improvisation. When asked about his engaging embodiment, the practice of using his body, he replies,

…Because my body can be used in that way and should be used in that way, and the prohibitions on exploring your voice freely are prohibitions that I'm happy not to have because I’ve encountered a space where I can use my voice in that way.

It’s pleasurable to find sounds. It’s pleasurable to be free with your voice.

My use of italics underscores Tonelli’s strong tone in his verbal recorded responses. His emphasis on accessing the pleasurable capacities of the human voice imply a defensive position in response to restrictive social standards. Tonelli insists his vocalizations are a natural imperative, reassuring his commitment to a paradigm which values freedom over prohibitions. It is from this position Tonelli asserts that those “sounds that we don't trot out in public” are deserving of inclusion as culturally acceptable forms of expression. This stance is both a requirement and a result of a daily practice of vocal improvisation. It is also a strong political
position incorporating his full range of vocal possibility as an essential way of being in the world. Tonelli’s assertion furthers the notion that the act of ongoing engagement with vocal improvisation functions as an act of radical self-acceptance. The positioning of vocal improvisational engagement next to radical self-acceptance is beautifully demonstrated in conversation with Tonelli.

Like Christine Duncan, Phil Minton echoes these musical and aesthetic values. For example, in the Feral Choir workshop I attended in 2014, Minton opened activities by modelling naturally occurring vocal sounds, such as laughter. In the interview for this study, Minton explains: “I do use the laughing sound as a warm-up exercise when I do feral choir workshops, and that becomes infectious, and that produces genuine laughter among the participants.” It is from this relaxed state that participants can explore more adventurous sounds with Minton. The course of events within Minton’s workshops recalls pedagogical techniques used in music classrooms such as warm-up games. Early Childhood music training stresses the importance of opening routines that put young children at ease, acknowledge their presence and engender trust as a teaching strategy. Such initiations must contain a playful tone that might “become infectious” and direct attention toward participation. When Minton is asked about playful elements in his approach both as a facilitator and as a performer, he replies: “When I'm playing with other improvising musicians, I find that the most interesting and profound music happens when there is a serious, trusting and playful counterpoint of ridiculous ideas.” Here again, the negotiation of a presence through directed attention has marked significance. Attention employed in both serious and playful states concurrently results in innovative work that “sustains contradictions” and rejects binaries.
Humour is a powerful tool for creating change. In her essay honouring the significance of the Feminist Improvising Group (FIG), Julie Dawn Smith explains how the members of this second wave feminist ensemble redefine their subjectivity as female musicians while incorporating humour as a means of critiquing marginalization within the musical community. Smith traces the intersectional support strategies, particularly humour, used by the members of FIG remarking that “Free improvisation questions how music functions in society, especially in relation to power…” (228). The fact that Minton uses a modality which is “trusting” and “playful” in order to experience “interesting” and “profound” discoveries in his improvisations reinforces those improvisatory strategies used to engage in unstructured, spontaneous creativity. Positive inclusiveness leads to productive, responsive attention wherein performers can question culturally established power relationships defining their agency within the moment of interaction.

The process of centralizing vocal improvisation does not eliminate awareness of the marginal status of the activity, but functions as a deliberate choice to focus and find a resource within a defined community. Minton remarks, “It’s still hard to be taken seriously in some quarters, that does not bother me anymore because I know there’s a multitude of people in the world that love what I [am doing] and other improvising singers are doing.” Attention directed both internally and externally is a significant tool towards self-acceptance broadening perspectives for these three respondents. The next chapter examines ways in which vocal improvisation practice inspired them to share their course of action by creating spaces for others to participate.
The original version of *The Little Mermaid* ends with a heroine who embraces pain and unrequited love. Conversely, modern notions of heroism amend the story considerably. The Disney version presents concepts of stealing, giving, losing, impersonating and recovering voice. These exchanges ultimately result in recognition, legitimation and acceptance. In all its functions, Ariel’s *voice* represents her essence and her agency; Ariel’s *voice* provides evidence of her physical presence, she is real! Her sonic and aural tones figure in ways as she makes her mark on the world. *Ariel’s voice* is both an internal instinct and an outer active expression. The next chapter provides focus on the original pulse of self-acceptance generated within communities of practice, from pulse to collective vibrations that resonate outward from my participants through their work with public choirs in praxis of improvisational pedagogy.
CHAPTER 2—Resonance:

Recreating Communities of Practice

To use one's voice in productive and meaningful ways, one must engage with issues of self-acceptance, articulation and diversity alongside concrete skill development. The participants in this study each began to hone their craft through contact with communities of practice wherein they felt a pulse which corroborated their curiosity for vocal opportunities. These sites allowed for exploration of their unique capacities rewarding them with an expanded range of vocal possibilities. Yet the work of musical improvisation, so far as it is communication, requires more than just sonic production. It also demands collaboration. Listening and sounding is as much about responding as it is about initiating. This chapter examines participants’ engagement in professional collaborations and projects facilitating new communities of practice. The endeavour of creating further opportunities for improvising by facilitating public choirs reflects an impulse to recreate their own liberating experiences with the agency provided by extended vocal technique allowing it to resonate through wider social engagement.

Each participant has invested long periods of research developing a series of activities, and cues for sonic components, offering a structure for collaborations with “non-professional” publics. Examining their techniques reveals methods of engagement with the risks and rewards present in vocal improvisation. Consideration of improvisation’s influence on pedagogy uncovers means by which vocal practice can retain its promissory values. Practical applications of improvisational techniques during collaborative processes establish alternative methods for addressing power discrepancies within learning environments. Facilitators engage with risk and reward, status switching, generative structures and identity negotiation all within the context of
collaborations. These processes resonate outward from individual through creative communities by implementing improvisation practice as a pedagogical method.

Each of the three participants in this study began their initiation into vocal improvisation through a community of practice. Christine Duncan began her career early in life as the member of a Christian musical group comprised of members of her immediate family. What may have been a traditional beginning for a vocalist became an idiosyncratic career incorporating gospel and country to R & B and jazz, eventually leading to the vocal improvisation she practices today in several projects of notoriety. The development of The Element Choir, a community-based group of singers with a revolving roster convening in cities across Canada, is the product of years of study as a vocal technician, a conductor and a teacher. Duncan has developed specific hand cues such as “fire” or “water” which connote emotional qualities, as well as those marking pitch, volume and other musical elements.

Chris Tonelli describes his early encounters with soundsinging under Ellen Waterman’s instruction in the previous chapter, identifying Mike Patton and Paul Dutton among his early influences. Tonelli continues to develop his career as a soundsinger and as a theorist of improvisation. As part of his postdoctoral residency with Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice, (ICASP) he organized the Symposium on Voice, Agency and Improvisation in 2014 in Guelph, ON. Tonelli subsequently founded the St. John’s Vocal Explorations Choir and currently conducts the Groningen Vocal Exploration Choir in tandem with his work as an Assistant Professor at the University of Groningen. His approach to conducting is highly democratic and he often switches roles with members of the choir or passing public during open
air performances. Tonelli has recently published the book *Voices Found: A Celebration of 65 Years of Improvised Extranormal Singing*.

Phil Minton’s early professional engagements saw him working as a trumpet player and singer in jazz, rock and dance bands through the 1960s. He references an early interest in jazz horn players broadcast on *Voice of America* as a primary influence in improvisation (Tonelli, “Social” 3). Minton is widely regarded as a pioneer of vocal improvisation with a career spanning over forty years. He established the Feral Choir in the late 1980s and has facilitated the project in over twenty countries.

These biographic accomplishments are listed not merely to establish the participants in this study as acclaimed experts in their field, but to mark the patterns of moving from traditional musical beginnings towards improvisational collaborations. These collaborations result in the establishment of communities of practice for other curious minded vocal explorers. Description and analysis of approaches used by each facilitator provide a concentrated sample of techniques for collaborating with amateur vocalists. The consistencies discovered in their choral organizations were arrived at through their independent efforts to share vocal improvisation within the milieu of community choir work. The desire to echo their own experience of imagined possibility, and to re-sonate their initial engagement with vocal agency through public access, is a function of their belief in vocal improvisation as a liberatory and empowering practice. Examination of the participants’ responses unpack the influence of improvisatory principles and how they function as a means and an end. Surveying the consistencies present in their improvisational pedagogy reveals useful applications for learning experiences where self-expression is required.
Using central principles of improvisation as a pedagogical technique informs the process of knowledge sharing, fundamentally affecting methods and structures within a learning environment. Founding members of the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI), Ajay Heble and Ellen Waterman articulated the powerful implications of improvisation as a pedagogical model in their introduction to the 2008 journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation* dedicated to the intersection of the two disciplines. Drawing upon the work of Henry Giroux, bell hooks, and Paulo Freire who theorize knowledge discovery outside institutional frameworks, Heble and Waterman make the following claim:

Taking as a point of departure performance practices that cannot readily be scripted, predicted, or compelled into orthodoxy, our researchers argue that the innovative working models of improvisation developed by creative practitioners have helped to promote a dynamic exchange of cultural forms, and to encourage new, socially responsive forms of community building across national, cultural, and artistic boundaries. Improvisation, in short, has much to tell us about the ways in which communities based on such forms are politically and materially pertinent to envisioning and sounding alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. Improvisation demands shared responsibility for participation in a community, an ability to negotiate differences, and a willingness to accept the challenges of risk and contingency (3).

Acknowledging my own project’s origins within the school of thought initiated by IICSI and the significant influences of these basic premises, this chapter critically examines Duncan, Minton, and Tonelli’s facilitation techniques. In doing so, I consider how they exemplify and expand on
Within their editorial, Heble and Waterman highlight fundamentals of improvisational practices and principles used for analysis here. These qualities include spontaneity, inventiveness, exchange, responsiveness, genre-defying, shared responsibility, participation, negotiation of differences, risk and contingency. Added to this list are elements discussed in the previous chapter: directed attention, responsive listening, playfulness and self-acceptance. Consideration of these improvisational techniques and their influence on facilitation practices reveals practical approaches to realizing Freire’s imperative of liberatory education.

Freire’s famous work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* advocates for dialogical education methods by exchanging the instructor role in favour of a facilitation role, which he terms the “teacher-student.” The teacher-student explores alongside learners and role-models critical inquiry. “For the dialogical, problem-posing teacher-student,” Freire writes, “the program content of education is neither a gift nor an imposition—bits of information to be deposited in the students—but rather the organized, systematized, and developed ‘re-presentation’ to individuals of the things about which they want to know more” (74). This quote is particularly relevant to the origins of this inquiry which seek to understand how the “gift” of voice so easily becomes the “imposition” of singing in educational settings. Freire argues techniques involving praxis and dialogism deliver revolutionary critical perspectives allowing individuals to realize liberation through cultural synthesis (164). The parallels between Freire’s ideal style of knowledge acquisition and Berliner’s jazz pedagogy are highlighted in an essay by award-winning ethnomusicologist Barbara Rose Lange titled “Teaching the Ethics of Free Improvisation” where she performs a case study of the efforts of educator David Dove to implement improvisational pedagogy into his music classroom (2011). Lange is careful in her report to address how even
highly skilled improvisers, committed to the project of “freeing” their students, can falter in their attempts to embed improvisational elements into their teaching style while delivering these same elements as curriculum content. She writes, “Freire’s model is not congruent with all of the teaching practices of the free improvisers whom I have observed, although it is congruent with the educational ideals that they have expressed to me and to the participants in workshops I have attended” (5). Lange goes on to list several famous jazz musicians who taught improvisation through autocratic techniques, operated according to the banking model, and promoted exceptionalism. Berliner also describes incidents wherein jazz musicians horde their techniques through acts of protectionism (55). It is important to acknowledge that musical improvisation and certainly jazz as an idiom is not an inherently liberatory learning environment. Rather, it is a site where such liberatory pedagogy is possible due to the presence of dialogic fundamentals – directed attention, deep listening and responsiveness – promoted in the practice. Therefore, a facilitator of musical improvisation is not automatically relieved of patterns derived from years of exposure to hierarchical banking models of education. Implementing improvisational pedagogy is derivative of the ability to synthesize fundamental principles of musical practice into praxis within a collaborative learning environment.

For an examination of this process of praxis, it is valuable to survey initial motivation for creating publicly accessible choirs. In Christine Duncan’s case, her artistic practice is an inextricable component of her identity, and her work directing the Element Choir is an extension of her value system:

Since I don’t separate my spiritual path from my artistic one, my aesthetic and values are combined in this aspect as well. I value listening, honesty, clarity,
sensitivity, growth, love, trust, engagement, connection, taking responsibility for choices, and also musical/artistic and personal chemistry.

Duncan repurposes critical elements of her approach to music as an ethos guiding her presence in the world. Terms such as “listening, honesty…sensitivity…trust…engagement” and making conscientious decisions describe Duncan’s personal process and approach to extended vocal technique as presented in Chapter 1. Her inextricable response demonstrates the resonance of these principles creating praxis through her collaborative experiences and her community engagement. Phil Minton echoes Duncan’s focus on positive interactions. When asked what benefits result from the Feral Choir his response is elegantly concise: “The positive joy of singing together.” It is reasonable to interpret this goal as stemming from a desire to share his own positive experiences as a vocalist recreating positive interactions with expanded vocal capacity. Chris Tonelli’s decision to facilitate space for others to resonate with soundsinging is born from the recognition of his privilege and opportunity: “Since I was lucky enough to have the post-doctoral support that I had to study the work of these singers, [Dutton, Minton & Maggie Nicols among others], I felt obliged to continue their work and create those spaces myself, and it's utterly rewarding”. His reference to a “rewarding” experience points to Freire's dialogical approach and its ideals. Tonelli’s statement recognizing privilege positions him as a recipient of the transformative benefits of collaborative soundsinging. In doing so he articulates a motivation for his adoption of the role of the “teacher-student,” a fellow participant of the process of collaborative singing.

Across idioms collaboration plays a central role in the development of a musician’s own skill set. Musiking is in itself a social practice. The imperative of responsiveness in
improvisational singing necessitates engagement with others. Through such interaction professionals exercise and consolidate understanding of their vocal apparatus and musical agility. In his essay, “Free Jazz in the Classroom,” saxophonist and ethnomusicologist David Borgo advocates for improvisational pedagogy within university music programs. Following Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, Borgo argues “all of the higher mental processes…originate as relationships between individuals and are constructed through a subject's continuing interactions with a social and physical world” (9). The importance of such interactions motivates individuals who want to deepen their musical practice to facilitate social ecologies creating opportunities for exchange and shared curiosity. When Tonelli employs the term “rewarding,” one so commonly used by teachers, he is identifying his personal development taking place during collaboration. He elaborates on this phenomenon saying,

…beautiful things happen, either in terms of individuals being very moved and valuing having that space, finding it transformative in some way, or for the relationships you build. I meet wonderful people through creating these spaces, and it just gives you another group of people to improvise with as well. Magical things happen when you improvise, and that's why the work's important to me.

This socio-environmental cultivation allows facilitators to grow their knowledge base. As Freire's terms suggest, we learn when we teach. The “reward” is often a deepened understanding—a further resonance of the original pulse driving our endeavors in skill development.

Questions of “rewards” can easily lead to questions of exploitation. The motivations which sustain teachers in their work must be balanced with consideration for the experiences of students in order to avoid self-serving behaviours. Should the relationship of the teacher-student
to other teacher-students with whom they collaborate become utilitarian it is helpful to consider that participants in group improvisation are interacting with musical elements in addition to one another. Philosopher Edgar Landgraf suggests a post-humanist perspective can prove useful when evaluating improvisation and agency. Applying this lens necessitates consideration of the impact derived from the singer’s engagement with the instrument—the body itself—and the music which this engagement produces. Habitual study of singing can produce explicit understanding of vocal possibilities during moments of verbal instruction and reflection. Practicing singing provides additional implicit somatic understanding. Interaction with music itself and the imperative of collaboration can provide somatic knowledge obtained only through the act of doing.

Berliner refers to this somatic knowledge in *Thinking in Jazz* when describing physical sensations of “composing in the moment” (192-220). He discusses the interplay between a musician’s theoretical understanding and “the singing mind” which uses aural intuition to create musical responses to structured intervals (208). He notes, “These incidents illustrate the body’s capacity to dictate with great assurance during improvisations by giving momentary primacy to the physical logic of patterned movement over the strictly aural logic of melodic form” (209). Well-honed physical logic or somatic knowledge is often referred to as musicality and more erroneously “talent.” People regularly conflate acquired musical capacity and “natural ability.” Such terms often stand as an index for agency, particularly in musical discussions. As a modifier Landgraf offers “the surrendering of agency is a necessary condition for the possibility of improvisation” (6). His productive critique of emphasis on agency within liberatory studies of improvisation responds to David Borgo’s statement “A particular joy of making improvised
music is not knowing precisely the relationship between one’s thoughts and one’s action” (113). Landgraf asks us to consider moments when “…improvisation makes the ‘agent’ aware of a loss of authorial control, of one’s actions being more than the execution of a particular intention” (7).

In the context of improvised singing, this interaction takes place between the musicians and their own bodies as individual explorations of vocal capacities and instincts transpire in response to the sonic productions of their collaborators. Therefore, consider the collaborative work of the participants in this study as the production of opportunities for interaction with the music itself, rather than opportunities for knowledge transfer from an expert to an amateur. Landgraf’s suggestion to include the forces at play extending beyond the facilitator and the members of the choirs they conduct, leads to consideration of the music itself as a significant contributing factor. As a result, facilitators do not capitalize on the discoveries of others. Rather, reward emerges from interactions with vocal improvisation as an agent unto itself. While a thorough post-human methodological analysis exceeds the purview of this particular study, it offers interesting implications towards consideration of the body as an instrument and how somatic knowledge influences the actions of soundsingers. Landgraf advocates for this methodology with the intention of “mak[ing] significant inroads into destabilizing schemas of a detached, normative, controlled and controlling subject-agent” (14). His insights offer a valuable perspective on issues of agency which overburden practitioners seeking to share their own liberatory experiences with improvisation while respecting the learning process as an influence on facilitators and students alike.

Minton's response when asked to differentiate between collaborations with singers and other instruments demonstrates such equitable analysis. He replies, “There is no difference, I
hear instruments as other voices.” Minton does not see the voice as an instrument, but rather sees *instruments as voices*. His comments remind us that musical instruments are in fact a technological extension of voice. The significance of his perspective stands in contrast to those commonly represented in Western music traditions where the voice regularly receives categorization as an elementary instrument. Instrumental chauvinism, as Monson has termed it, is the tendency for each musician to regard their chosen instrument as superior. Cultural traditions negating or shaming the body display relatively dismissive attitudes towards voice, privileging disembodied voices or disregarding voice as an instrument all together. Such patterns were emphasized by Amirtha Kidambi while participating on the 2018 Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium panel titled “Voice and Song in Creative Music.” Reflecting on the undermining of the importance of the voice as an instrument, Kidambi commented on the origins of jazz stemming from blues music where “…the voice is the primary thing, and jazz just became like [she makes a dismissive gesture]. The voice just has gotten so marginalized and compartmentalized and for me it’s a very Western idea…moving from the body to the intellect…Taking the body out of it has been part of that marginalization.” She also noted similarities in the progression of European music originating in chant and shifting to symphonic music. Kidambi connects socio-political motivations for trends separating the voice and the body resulting in hegemonic attitudes toward vocalists. She explains: “…women have been so much associated with singing and the voice, particularly in these kinds of genres and musics. Like in jazz there's such a gendered association with voice that it marginalizes the woman…it's all tied together. You can't separate those things.” Her poignant remarks call to mind ready examples of Western patriarchal attempts to disembody the human voice. Arena, church and recital hall architecture
are examples of vocal modification which precede modern developments, such as auto-tune or vocoders. Chris Tonelli tracks embarrassment caused by the embodied visceral voice in his essay “Ableism and the Reception of Soundsinging”:

…many soundsingers have told me stories of audiences responding with punitive words or actions, experiencing profoundly enlivening feelings, imitating their performances in both mocking and exploratory manners, and expressing disdain at the incomprehensibility of the practice…Extreme reactions to soundsinging frequently come in the form of speech acts that critique soundsingers by comparing them with bodies the speaker deems incapable…To some degree, soundsingers have gravitated to the sounds of soundsinging as a means of promoting a politics of inclusion that opposes the exclusory logic of modernity.

(4, 6, 9)

Tonelli’s assertions of soundsinging as a radical act resisting hierarchical categorizations of bodies are consistent with his answers to the questions posed in this study. His reflections imply that soundsinging rejects aesthetically “ideal” vocal sounds in favor of shared authority, minimizing power gaps between collaborators. An example of this aesthetic is reflected by Tonelli’s comments on a performance involving two of his role models, Maggie Nicols, and Phil Minton, well as his colleague, Gabriel Dharmoo:

I think there is a real generosity in the way that both [Minton and Nicols] improvise and I don't think either of them are hung up on hierarchies of competence. That can happen in a lot of improvising communities. I probably have never felt it with another vocalist that I have performed with anyway, and
that's one of the things that I think might be specific to soundsinging rather than other forms of improvisation. Sometimes I think it can be very hierarchical: improvisation, communities and relationships.

Care must be taken to avoid the instrumental chauvinism when comparing the various specific cultures of instrumentalists. Nevertheless, it is worth considering how vocal improvisation makes tacit unique capacities of individual contributors. While this is the case in any ensemble, the possibility for mediated voices produced by extra-corporeal instruments to foster a pretension of uniformity enables false comparisons between players. Such ideas of ranking musical ability are a premise of Berliner’s musical community as classroom theory. The tradition outlined in *Thinking in Jazz* relies on expertise and knowledge transfer in conjunction with knowledge production. Competition emerges as a cultural value within the community.

In contrast, the collaborative practices demonstrated by Duncan, Minton and Tonelli avoid exploitative dynamics traditionally employed between the expert and the novice. Operating from the impulse to create spaces of mutual interaction with music-making in itself, these participants mitigate exploitation among community members. Interactions equally available to each member of the collective regardless of experience minimize or negate potential hierarchies.

The process presented in Chapter 1, that of directed attention honed within communities of practice leading to radical self-acceptance, is elaborated upon, and the aesthetic paradigm informs the professional paradigm. Emphasis shifts toward individuals exercising authority over their own musical capacity, creating access to success and satisfaction. Minton acknowledges that “most of the participants in my workshops have no intention of becoming professional vocal improvisers but are very happy to be part of a collective performance.” Describing his own
experience, he remarks, “I think that the feral choir nearly always produces music that I've never heard before, and that's one of the motivations for me to continue.” The latter comment reflects his relationship to authority within the project. Minton attests to interaction with a musical product which originates independent of his experience, providing him with important artistic encouragement. In the interview conducted by Chris Tonelli at the Symposium on Voice, Agency and Improvisation in 2014, Minton described in detail how his intentions to control the aesthetic productions of the Feral Choir underwent an evolution through the collaborative process:

I was invited first in a music college in Sweden to [produce the Feral Choir]. It was with trained singers mostly, and I wasn't really that happy with it in the early days, but then I got invited to do some in housing projects in France, and I did quite a tour around in France. The actual choral results weren't that impressive—the actual sound of the singers, it wasn't exactly what I wanted, how I was hearing it in my head—but afterwards, the people were so enthusiastic and loved it so much. They said, “Oh, we had such a great time. It was the first time we'd ever been onstage and sung and used our voices,” and it really literally brought me to tears and I thought I really want to do this more in lots and lots of different situations. Now the aesthetic idea of trying to get a group of singers to sound like some preconceived idea I had in my head, that's gone. What happens now? Every time I do it, it's a new creation, and I'm hearing fantastic works of art every time I listen to a group of people singing. People are capable of such beautiful music.
Minton’s description of collaborative processes deploying direct interaction with the musical product itself reveal methods for evolving hierarchies found in traditional teaching practices.

The ability for dialogic praxis to transform outmoded teaching practices within historically hegemonic cultures is a means by which pedagogues might reclaim the joy of singing within the classroom. Examination of the participants’ guidance techniques suggest that terms such as “expert” and “leader” can be subverted and disrupted towards dialogical ends. Since educational hierarchies are not inherently eradicated through the practice of musical improvisation, we must consider methods that integrate improvisatory principles within teaching practices themselves. In the article, “The Pedagogical Imperative of Musical Improvisation,” Scott Thomson argues improvisational practices can undermine traditional authoritarian relationships between musicians of varying experience. Examining the burgeoning improvisational community in Toronto during the turn of the century, Thomson writes “...the nature of authority within this pedagogical model—the roles of teacher and student—resists fixity and, at its best, this authority circulates fluidly within any ensemble, a process that informs the relationships between players” (1). This view of ideal collaborations reflects altruistic intentions amongst collaborators in improvisations. Still, musicians are just as likely to use collaborative improvisations to consolidate their authority by way of mentorship or even deference among players.

Tendency for experience to be equated with authority draws practitioners of any collaboration into conventional hierarchies. Teachers and facilitators alike are met with the expectation to offer authority and expert understanding. Remarkably in each case studied here, the facilitator acts as a choir conductor, a role associated with a central authority based on
experience. Duncan, Minton, and Tonelli have a format for conducting activities during their workshops, and the people who participate with them in such collaborations are seeking their guidance. Each of these musicians, who hold professional designation, initiate decision making. While members of the choir may share the position of the conductor, the role is first modelled by the facilitator before the invitation to lead is extended. While there are improvisatory vocal methods which make use of singing in the round, such as those conducted by Bobby McFerrin and Rhiannon, the three ensembles examined in this project resemble more traditional choir performances, with a “maestro” directing the music and standing in opposition to the singers. These practices exist within a spectrum where Tonelli’s Vocal Exploration Choir makes regular use of role exchange while Duncan's Element Choir consists of a relatively static framework wherein she commands the singers via a predetermined language of gestures.

Closer examination of the function of “choral master” reveals a collaborative purpose that is more egalitarian than initially perceived. The role of a traditional instructor or teacher is one commonly identified as rewarding. Rewards become exploitative when they function as a central motivator for teaching. Choral instructors who worry that singers under their guidance reflect solely on their skills have been known to suggest that less apt members mouth the words. Yet, when the facilitator joins his or her participants in exploratory interactions, as these three conductors do, this power discrepancy is reduced. Additionally, facilitators mitigate exploitation through acts of responsible authority. Understanding the voice as both a literal and metaphorical instrument of agency highlights risks taken on in the role of the “expert” or “professional” as well as those incurred by the choir members. Taking these risks into consideration is helpful in
gaining understanding of how these particular choir leaders create liberatory singing experiences through collaborative improvisatory practices.

To examine risks incurred by instructors and people in similar positions of privilege during educational activities it is helpful to return to descriptions of dynamics found in traditional banking models of education. Music educator Eloise Ristad examines the negative effects of traditional music pedagogy in her treatise *A Soprano on Her Head*, illustrating the impact failure has on teachers as well as students. Ristad advocates for embodied learning, improvisational exploration and interdisciplinary approaches to aid students in their recovery from the frustration and resistance gathered in previous experience with exploitative teaching practices. The author also articulates the origins of abusive behaviour from instructors. In one description of a miscarried education Ristad notes, “The ‘famous teacher’ was humiliated at the same time, for she knew she was failing this wistful-looking teenager who seemed so in love with the music until she turned those strangely reluctant fingers loose on the keys” (65). Such prose provides an example of the responsibility assumed by educators in a paradigm with asymmetrical distribution of authority. Therefore, the role of the conductor performed by Duncan, Minton and Tonelli combines authority and accountability in culturally recognizable ways. By assuming authority over the proceedings in collaborative vocal improvisation, these facilitators perform a protective act creating safe space for their collaborators while simultaneously creating opportunity for subversions within the role.

Terms such as “role,” “act,” and “perform” apply here due to the cultural significance of the conductor. Gestures of standing in front of a choir and appearing to elicit music from singers are part of a recognizable authoritarian position. Subversions to the tradition occur within the
structure. In a process that mimics the musical model of “theme and variation,” Duncan invites her choir to contribute open interpretations of her cues and gestures, providing a structure within which individuals have decision-making power to explore a wide array of vocal capacities. Concurrently she uses her technical authority over her instrument as an example for the members of her choir from which they can contemplate a range of contributions from a position of safety. Duncan has given much consideration to the development of this structure, from the dual position of musician and pedagogue. She describes several pragmatic uses of conducting the Element Choir with the intent to empower her collaborators:

First of all, I tend to come off as very clear, confident, warm, and inviting in my approach to training and working with groups. I give people permission to say no to me and don't expect too much from any individual unless they are willing to take more of a risk in the situation. I make sure they know they are in control of their own experiences in this environment… I freely demonstrate the cues and the sounds with my own voice and use my ability to entertain and also my sense of humour to diffuse anxiety and nervousness and to draw people in. The system I'm working with is very intuitive, and I tend to be quite clear and consistent with the signals and cues, so people are able to connect what they are seeing to the sounds they are making, quickly and efficiently. I keep reiterating that people need to be the ‘stewards' of their own vocal instruments and that they can always say no to me, even in performance. I make offers, not demands. I assure them that I have their backs, and as an experienced vocal improviser…I also let them know, that in
this kind of group ‘sounding,’ their own individual voices won't be distinguishable from the group, and likely won't even be heard unless they choose to make it so.

Duncan's emphasis on consistency reflects her value for personal responsibility from each member of the ensemble. By positioning herself alongside her collaborators, incorporating herself within the expectation of personal responsibility, Duncan collapses traditional hegemony found in authoritative music-making practices. This understanding of best practices relates to Keith Johnstone's theory of a status see-saw discussed in the third chapter of his book *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. Johnstone identifies status subversion as a device used in his improvisational theatre technique to generate narrative arch. Status see-saw dictates that actors are most productive when characters play status that is oppositional to their social standing. A relatable example might be Charlie Chaplin’s confident tramp. Through this lens the roles played by choir and conductor offer new possibilities. Within the apparently low-status context of an anonymous choral singer, vocalists can exercise authority by producing personal interpretations of sound cues, while Duncan herself uses “commanding” hand gestures as a means of invitation for the singers’ interpretations, thereby relinquishing control over the musical product. From this position she listens and responds, shaping the musical output, but never dictating the raw materials presented by the choir.

Duncan's comments emphasize musical ideas rather than vocal capacity. Her focus reflects an improvisational aesthetic value for variation as opposed to regularity, once again differentiating extended singing technique from other traditions where the process of narrowing possibilities towards an ideal outcome are the dominant pursuit. Focus on the facilitation of possibilities, on “offers not demands” is shared by Minton:
I try to use the limitations of people as well as the virtuoso...I'm trying to integrate the whole thing together with the people that have, perhaps, quite a small range of vocal ideas, more than say vocal range. With my warm-ups and introductions to the choir, I try to tell people there are all sorts of things you can do. (Tonelli, “Ableism” 2015)

By redefining vocal capacity from an ideal sounding to an engaged practice, the facilitators I interviewed engaged their expertise while simultaneously relinquishing superiority. Balance between these factors exists across a spectrum of facilitation styles. Chris Tonelli’s approach represents and enacts inclusivity. When asked how he may “protect” his participants from audience reactions which attempt to police his choir members, his answer reveals high levels of trust and confidence: “I don't think I do.” Commitment to exploring the full capacity of human sonic production without shame as a praxis of celebrating diversity demands accepting a broad range of responses as well. “Groups that embrace difference encourage others to embrace difference,” Tonelli remarks, “and I think we need a world where people are encouraged to see value in things that they don’t normally see value in, and so I think there’s a political function to sharing these sounds publicly.” Tonelli is consistent in his inclusive stance. When asked to reflect on the risk-taking engaged in with the Vocal Exploration Choir, he identifies conceptual rewards as congruent with concrete results. Tonelli’s comments demonstrate Freire's assertion that learning models are reflections of political belief systems within the context of human interactions:

Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality and thereby coming to know
it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation but committed involvement. (18-19)

Committed involvement from these facilitators to re-create knowledge of vocal improvisation alongside their choir members builds resonant communities of shared experience. This resonance continues through committed involvement where the choirs interact with the broader public, offering to share new considerations of what vocal music can be. Interactions between vocal improvisers and the broader public draw the focus of this inquiry to public performances. These workshops could exist without public demonstration, yet each of these facilitators hold recitals. Rewarding and liberatory outcomes assisted by invitations and offers made by Duncan, Minton and Tonelli are made complete at the point of collaboration. Still, singers who might not otherwise feel deserving of public attention for their vocal production volunteer to demonstrate their discoveries for audiences. The next chapter follows Tonelli’s suggestion that public demonstrations serve radical functions. Examination of what empowerment performance may offer tracks the initial impulse of soundsinging practices, its resonance through communities of practice, and the reverberations broadcast in the public sphere.
CHAPTER 3—Reverberation:

The Feedback of Public Presentation

From the point of their initial inspiration to engage in a practice of extended singing techniques, to the work of collaborating within structures designed for active listening, the three participants in this study undertake a further endeavour: public presentation. Recitals are an integral part of the process for Duncan, Minton and Tonelli both in their performance careers and in their work as facilitators. The decision to include public recitals is a significant one, though not an end goal. It is not commonplace for artists to labour towards performance and then with the goal accomplished declare themselves satiated, never to return to the stage again. On the contrary, presentations are part of a cyclical process where skill acquisition is tested and celebrated, confidence is cultivated as a result of grace under fire, and new aspirations are identified through productive failure. In a typical professional context, an artist is likely to rely on performance as a means of revenue, but in the three projects comprising the focus of this study, choir members are rarely remunerated. Why then is this endeavour a necessary component of Duncan, Minton and Tonelli's work? If the practice of responsive attention, co-creation, community building, and interaction with new sonic possibilities is the reward which motivates communal vocal improvisation choirs, then what is the purpose of public presentation? In what ways are such concerts liberating for those who perform them? In what ways might the balance between risk and reward be maintained, and how do the three participants in this study mitigate those risks in the effort of bringing positive effects to their choir members?

These questions stem, once again, from my experiences as a primary school music teacher. In an environment where concerts are an expected outcome of semesters spent in the
music room, recitals function as a type of exam in which students demonstrate to their greater community the results of their diligent efforts. Still, musicality and performance ability are not necessarily related. Students demonstrate their position on a spectrum of readiness at the arbitrary date of a recital. The performance exhibited at the moment of a concert does not always reflect the skill set of the individual. Indeed, it is just one venue among many in which to evaluate the trajectory of a musical education. The institution where I worked also prioritized a theoretical value for intrinsic learning. I suspect it is commonplace for teachers coaxing nervous performers at every level of education to deliberate on how best to balance risk, reward and responsibility. What service does the act of performing responsive communal creativity provide in the process of developing agency? Orff pedagogy places a tremendous importance on improvisation as a fundamental educational activity, for this is where “as in no other class activity, the students demonstrate their musical independence from the teacher” (Frazee 31). Meanwhile, performance is incorporated into many music programs as much as a means of providing positive accountability in addition to other motivating factors, which may be as concrete as fundraising or the promotion of school programming. Leaving economic issues of remuneration and visibility aside, this chapter attends to the socio-cultural impacts of public performances of vocal improvisation.

Titled “Reverberation” in accordance with Merriam-Webster’s second definition (“an effect or impact that commonly resembles an echo”), this chapter intends to invoke the phenomenon of ripples through cultural attitudes. Responses provided by Duncan, Minton and Tonelli indicate one function of concert production is to create a social impact by presenting a radical form of music making in public arenas. Data gathered in this study implies that recreating
initiating moments of inspiration, such as those experienced by the participants themselves, is also a motivating factor. The facilitators participating in this study realized this goal in their initial acts of opening up workshops to the public; guiding the members of their respective choirs to improvise in the public sphere allows for yet another facet of vocal agency. Risk and reward appear to beget further engagement with risk and reward—“from each according to his ability to each according to his need” (Marx 1875). The reference to Marx is meant to reflect the political significance of performing extended singing technique discovered in responses gathered here. Performance is the moment in which aesthetic priorities of self-acceptance, responsive listening and collaborative creative output become a social stance through the legitimizing framework of the concert stage. This chapter amends the adage “the personal is political” by considering how the personal becoming public is political and examines how public performances validate artistic works, regardless of the content within the form. In doing so, presentations consolidate core principles enacted by the ensemble on stage. Furthermore, the presence of an audience provides a valuable service, not only in the act of witnessing, but through the possibility of continuance constituted by their exposure to the art work presented.

Examination of the motives behind the public performance of improvised singing asks us to revisit Phil Minton’s Feral Choir, when he identifies their public concerts as expanding his music experiences while also functioning as a significant reward. It is possible for such evolution to transpire without the presence of an audience; yet, factors specific to public performance produce results unavailable within the confines of a workshop or a rehearsal environment. In my own teaching experience, I often promoted recitals as an act of celebration, a time to share with our community the skills we had acquired in the classroom. There is a certain amount of
“showing off” that transpires at a performance, where skills are consolidated under the pressure of public observation and the immediacy of a live production.

Improvised music brings unique elements into consideration with regards to staged performances. In traditional concerts memorized materials demonstrate the ability of performers to reproduce a work, even if it is one of their own compositions. The performances studied here are distinct as demonstrations of improvisation skills in action: trust, responsiveness, exploration and acceptance. Once again, avoiding binary comparisons, improvised performance is no more virtuous than a performance of prepared material, but differentiation between styles supports an analysis of liberatory pedagogy. Fischlin and Heble remark on the social influence of artistic generation as a cultural product in and of itself. “Improvisation provides a significant testing ground for models of encounter that span individual voice and agency,” they write in *The Other Side of Nowhere*. They recognize the ability of these acts to demonstrate “how to sustain discourse (or not) in the face of the multiple agencies and contingencies that come together as embodied, public, performative practice” (89). With regard to extended vocal technique and soundsinging choirs the agency they refer to is offered in the creation of one whole artistic product from a multitude of voices despite diversity. Liminality between individuals and collectives constitutes much of the reward experienced by musical ensembles. Minton cites “the positive joy of singing together” as a key benefit of participating in the Feral Choir. But surely it is possible to enjoy the positive aspects of the “sustained discourse” of singing together without the experience of public performance. So, when is this experience of performance liberatory for those on stage? When and why is it of benefit to those whom Minton identifies as having” no
intention of becoming professional vocal improvisers,” particularly in this genre of unfixed output which falls outside dominant cultural norms?

Performance is a celebration, as well as a test, of the singers' ability to realize possible music while reacting to specific instructions. The “liveness” of performance offers a level of risk not available in the workshop environment, and as a result, requires trust. The trust I am referring to here is not only the trust of the choir leader or fellow singers, but trust in one's inherent musicality. Each choir makes use of cues and signals, structured activities, and frames of reference, which they have practiced. For example, when the conductor gestures the cue for “louder” choir members know to increase their volume. The relative value of how much louder is open for interpretation by the individuals within the group. Similarly, there may be a gesture representing “sacred” or “angry” sounds. Again, the semantic meanings of these gestures are understood across the group, while sonic interpretation remains open to each individual member. Skills practiced in these performances are embodied expressions of individuality within a collective. Peters reminds us that “Improvisation requires a powerful memory: memory of the parameters of an instrument, of the body, of available technology, the parameters of a work’s structure and one’s place within it at any one time, the parameters of an idiom, a genre and its history, its possibilities” (82). Referring again to Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of “flow,” performance provides a test and a celebration of the choir members’ ability to recall and present the concepts exercised in workshops where their ability is matched with the challenge of the task at hand. Responsiveness to the resultant sonic environment in real time is another factor at play. Each of these factors draw upon the traditions established by conventional choral performances.
Christine Duncan has extensive experience in both traditional choirs and improvisational ensembles. Her parents are worship and choir leaders. She remarks, “Sometimes there are moments in choir performances where it’s amazing how much it sounds like the same euphoric group ‘sounding’ to me, albeit not in a Christian context… in my own way, I seem to be carrying on the family tradition.” Multiple individuals attempting to create a “unified” sound out of diverse voices within view of an audience is a tradition imbued with meaning, one ritualized through the convention of the concert. Such rituals define communities, just as they represent the cultures of those who produce and enjoy them.

Performance Studies scholar Peggy Phelan focuses on the interplay between two distinct communities: performers and audience during ritualized presentations. She proposes that performers and audiences define themselves in a relationship that is both reliant on and oppositional to performers at the moment of production:

Identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other—which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In that declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, the loss of not-being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-seeing, self-being (*Unmarked* 24).

This theory articulates politics of difference enacted through performances. In regard to this study, traditional concert singers define their community of practice as trained and “talented” exceptions from the non-singing public who are concurrently defining themselves as cultural connoisseurs. These dynamics might concur with improvised singing concerts as well. Such performances stand in contrast to Duncan's background in ecumenical performance traditions.
which incorporate the congregation. In her response to my interview questions, she writes, “I spent so many years in environments of group vocal freedom in my church experiences, in the format of praise and worship services, also prayer meetings and revival meetings, where a lot of unselfconscious, group vocal ‘sounding’ occurred.” Phelan’s theory of co-dependency gains significant new dimensions when applied to interactive performances.

Inclusion of the audience as an act of defiance of differentiations made in traditional performances was in evidence at the 2018 edition of the Guelph Jazz Festival where The Element Choir participated in a production of Sung Ra with the Rakestar Arkestra. The concert began with the choir overtaking the audience from the back of the theatre and ended with a procession inviting members of the audience to join the mass. Celebratory inclusions like these pay tribute to aesthetics promoted throughout jazz composer and bandleader Sun Ra’s career. Ra is a strong historical example of how improvisatory aesthetics influence western performance conventions. Saxophonist John Sobol remarked during the post-concert talk-back, “As much as we all love the tradition of be-bop, sometimes it can be a little bit of [a] straitjacket. But in Ra's music, there are always doors opening everywhere and light shining through them, and it's great fun walking through them” (“Sung Ra” 3:05). Integration of politics and performance in Sun Ra’s concerts is the subject of many scholarly articles drawing from the deep well of his artistic output. For example, Anthony Reed examines Ra’s “combinatory aesthetic” and his reparative politics in the article “After the End of the World: Sun Ra and the Grammar of Utopia.” Reed marks the tradition of performance techniques as a public political stance: “More than artistic self-expression, Ra’s performance is exegetical, drawing attention to conditions of narrative and the forms of acceptable and exceptional life” (122). Parade formats with audience engagement
comprised standard practice as part of an ongoing denial of categorization in the Arkestra’s performances. Ra’s biographer John F. Szwed makes connections between the Arkestra’s performances and ritual practices, writing, “A performance like this would require multiple levels of readings, and a fuller understanding of different genres, different forms of media, and different styles of playing” (336). Performances incorporating the audience are complex social sites translating the concept of embracing new possibilities into the action of including the unknown performer. Breaking with the tradition of reserving the stage for trained experts makes strong statements about privilege and access. Szwed acknowledges the extra-musical impact of Ra's performance practices, noting that Ra was “a musician who…attempted to take his audiences beyond the realm of the aesthetic to those of the ethical and moral” (xviii). The implication in such performances is that the community now extends to include the audience; rather than perform an act otherness an act of solidarity is required.

Far-reaching undertakings such as this propose risks for the audience as well as for the performers extending invitations. Here, again, discrepancies in power must be considered. One party has the authority to initiate while invitees might recoil from unexpected responsibility. Stephen Miles, a member of the experimental music ensemble New Music New College in Florida, reflects on these dynamics in his article “Agency and Domination in Communicative Performance.” Miles identifies “ironically, the very practices that we employ to empower our audience—altering performance rituals, destabilizing the performance space, employing interactive compositional structures—can take the form of domination” (2). Should an audience member wish to play a traditional role, observing rather than participating, what allowances are present to accommodate democratic decision making in performances which break the fourth
wall? Definitive answers must be found on a case by case basis. All the same, the presence of these power dynamics demonstrates performances as political sites broadcasting personal values in public discourse where they may be adopted or resisted to various degrees.

Spontaneity is not the only condition under which the invitation to expand the community of improvisers may experience challenges. Difficulties encountered in attempts to build these groups of improvisational choirs reveal deep-seated cultural expectations of performance traditions. Inclusive performances can be hampered by resistance or entropy. The collaborators in the Sung Ra Arkestra project of 2018 acknowledged difficulties drawing participants from the Guelph community in order to build the choral component of the performance: “Buy in was a bit of a hurdle. Maybe it was the somewhat eccentric or radical nature of the material, but it speaks to some of the challenges of inviting people to take risks, especially in public” (Scott Thomson, Sung Ra Talkback 11:44). Such reticence is a public response which contests the liberal philosophy suggested by an improvisational choir. The performance was intended from the outset to activate the local community by holding a premise of accessibility. The discrepancy between the understanding of the musicians extending the invitation and the public who was invited to participate is representative of dominant perceptions of jazz improvisation. The proposal of inherent musicality and open-access to artistic expression is radical enough to be dismissed by communities, even in the free-jazz friendly city of Guelph. Inviting members of the public to perform works by Sun Ra is a realistic proposition for the musicians in this instance due to their privileged knowledge of the universality of human musical capacity contained within the work. As Thomson indicates, such a premise is not a given in a culture where concepts of virtuosity prevail. From within their community of practice musicians may overlook the
precautions that they regularly employ in their professional work in order to engage in the radical act of performing improvisational music.

These precautions include the structures and procedural practices discussed in Chapter 2, which are employed to support musical expression and performance. Duncan remarks on how the structure of The Element Choir is capable of providing a scaffolded experience even for unrehearsed participants:

If you get on stage with this kind of thing going on and there's a lot of people who are really clear and confident, and they know what they're doing, or at least they appear to know what they're doing it's very easy just to join in and follow your neighbours. I don't know why or how it works, but it seems to work consistently. (Sung Ra Talk Back, Duncan 10:50)

These comments reveal a welcoming and faithful approach—one containing confidence born from her experience with numerous successful performances. She is reassuring at the same time as she concedes absolute knowledge of the mechanics of the consistent successes of The Element Choir. The goals of The Element Choir are structural rather than formal; therefore, Duncan can relinquish control over outputs, focusing instead on method. This approach invokes the concept of play: a structure within which exploration is the means to many possible outcomes. Gary Peters considers this value for playfulness fundamental to the labour of the improviser, advocating “it is part of the improviser's task to produce this playful space…by entering the space of the work and working ceaselessly to ‘unravel’ it, with an ironic agility able to keep the permanent parabasis aesthetically productive and disruptive” (109). Peters’ statement mirrors the goals articulated by Minton in Chapter 1 where “serious, trustful and playful” exchange results in
desirable musical outcomes. When musical exploration materializes by way of playful and trusting attitudes, the benefit of performance is the occupation of public space lending social validation to radical understandings of music making.

The social virtue of performing extended vocal technique in a public arena is an exchange of cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu outlines the means by which class status impacts aesthetic distinctions resulting in hierarchies of cultural endeavours. His theory of cultural agency recognizes the mobility of activities across a cultural hierarchy:

In fact, one can never entirely escape from the hierarchy of legitimacies. Because the meaning and value of a cultural object varies according to the system of objects in which it is placed. Detective stories, science fiction or strip cartoons may be entirely prestigious cultural assets, or be reduced to their ordinary value, depending on whether they are associated with avant-garde literature or music—in which case they appear as manifestations of daring and freedom or combine to form a constellation typical of middle-brow taste—when they appear as what they are, simple substitutes for legitimate assets. (Distinction 88)

Vocal improvisation holds a dynamic place in the hierarchy of legitimacy. The participants in this study hold a high degree of value on a process they consider accessible. Staging public performances of soundsinging marks vocal improvisations as “manifestations of daring acts of freedom.” Simultaneously, these performances maintain the political stance that musicality, vocalization in particular, is accessible embodied knowledge present in common behaviors such as language, laughter, sobbing or grunting. Extended vocal technique executed by non-professionals within the framework of traditional staged concerts legitimizes vocal
improvisation, disrupting notions of expertise as a requirement for access to musical capacity. Miles recognizes this reflection on dialogical performances of experimental music: “Our objective has always been to legitimate experimental artistic practices through a reflexive approach to the production of discourse, performance, and composition” (3). Concert scenarios provide a means of legitimizing extranormal artistic practices while allowing for disruption of the cultural conventions regarding who is deserving of audience.

Such disruptions call into question the current social mobility of vocal improvisation in itself. Tonelli’s work on the policing of voices in instances where soundsinging receives derisive comments and liken it with death, suffering and other undesirable states indicates a popular instinct to reject unorthodox activity. Admittedly, the genre enjoys an elite avant-garde status at the same time. Whichever reception the work of these choirs may receive at a given moment, perpetual mobility up and down the hierarchy of legitimacy is concurrently at play. A special issue of the journal Poetics, focusing on ‘emerging cultural capital,’ presents a theory put forth by the editorial team made up of sociologists Friedman, Hanquinet, Miles and Savage, who update the Bourdeiusian model. They observe that “Contemporary forms of highbrow distinction…have integrated new aesthetic criteria (e.g. playfulness, eclecticism, social reflexivity) which symbolize a shift from modernism to postmodernism” (3). Freidman et al. advocate for methodological pluralism to understand emerging cultural capital across new forms, but this comment suggests currently “highbrow” culture is under the influence of improvisational aesthetics. Increased cultural value for playfulness, eclecticism and social reflexivity exemplified in musical models of improvisation is indicative of the dynamic status of such activities.
Interplay between high and low cultural activities transpires in the ritual of The Concert, presenting vocal improvisors as informed musicians in the recognizable framework of public performance. A concert is a scenario in which participants, both those on stage and those in the audience, act out prescribed roles in accordance with cultural norms. In traditionally exclusive “high society” concerts, professionals on stage are differentiated from the audience who performs the role of consumer or connoisseur. Diana Taylor remarks how such rituals cement social roles, stating “performances such as ritual might restrict participation to those initiated in certain practices. Participating in the ritual might help cement membership in the group, or further reinforce social subcategorizations, exclusions, and stereotypes” (Performance 19). In European or Western traditions musicians engage directly with music while spectators demonstrate their ability to appreciate such engagement, establishing two distinct modes of musical literacy. However, Taylor's theory asserts that these frameworks are “not limited to mimetic repetition. It also includes the possibility of change, critique, and creativity within frameworks of repetition” (19). Duncan, Minton and Tonelli demonstrate Taylor’s theory by providing a critique of traditional concert scenarios as a central component of their concerts. The act of presenting “non-professional” musicians as informed vocal agents is one method of this critique. Role reversals such as this inform other acts of disruption. As Duncan calls on choir members to develop the gestural vocabulary of The Element Choir, Chris Tonelli employs methods of sharing authority over musical components. His Vocal Exploration choirs often rotate conducting duties, and he regularly engages audience members with spontaneous invitations to take the helm. Tonelli understands this is arts as politics in praxis.
People often in music situations feel like they need special skills to participate and one of the reasons why I create these choirs is I want to create spaces that are absolutely open to anyone and one that there’s no barrier to participation. I think that immediately putting someone in this role of the conductor, this role that’s often seen as the sign or pinnacle of exclusivity; the conductor is the leader of a musical ensemble. If someone can immediately take over this conductor role and actually make something valuable with…with very little training…a couple of seconds…that is a kind of musical inclusivity that is ultimately radical. I think it’s a great demonstration of inclusivity, and I think it can be a moving experience for people to be in that position.

Tonelli’s act of employing impromptu conductors from the audience disrupts traditional concert scenarios on multiple levels. Not only is he providing access and initiating audience engagement in transcendent ways, but the presence of immediacy dispels several conventional understandings of musical capacity and achievement. Recognition of interaction and influence between the performers and the audience reflects Taylor's theory of the scenario as a specific type of performance allowing for socio-political statements. She writes,

…Because scenarios are about “us,” we need to factor ourselves in the picture—as participants, spectators, or witnesses we need to “be there”, part of the act of transfer. Thus the scenario precludes a certain kind of distancing and places spectators within its frame, implicating “us” in its ethics and politics. Bad scenarios blind us—they’re all about percepticide, or self-blinding. Good
scenarios heighten our awareness and encourage us to act to change the plotline in positive ways. (*Performance* 141-142)

Vocal improvisation choirs encourage audiences to change the plotline of traditional notions of musical elitism. Choirs comprised of “non-professional” musicians who engage directly with audiences activate a heightened awareness of musical possibility. Duncan, Minton and Tonelli create public presentations of embodied knowledge of extended vocal technique demonstrating a range of human sounds in artistically expressive and satisfying ways. Broadcasting accessible singing initiates an act of transfer –a reverberation available to spectators.

The potential significance of such reverberation is far-reaching. Negotiation of dichotomies separating audience and choir destresses notions of productivity and consumption within entertainment culture. Traditional roles of labour and service transactions become more democratic. Building on Taylor's theory of scenarios, I suggest that these performances are suggestive, perhaps even prescriptive. She states, “Scenarios, as portable, flexible frameworks for thinking and doing, have become privileged sites for modelling a wide range of practices” (137). The behaviour modelled by the choir is a corporeal act and defiance of conventional ideas of singing. As much as a conventional vocal performance consolidates concepts of what it means to sing, the concerts organized by Duncan, Minton and Tonelli advocate for their own styles of vocal exploration. Taylor writes, “Beliefs and conventions are passed on through bodily practices, and so are all sorts of assumptions and presuppositions including how we understand bodies” (32). If this is so, then the public work of bodies performing vocal explorations in collaborative contexts puts forth new understandings of the body. This understanding activates Tonelli’s earlier assertion that individuals have a right to explore the full capacity of their vocal
apparatus. Just as his position supports a political stance within society, it also intimates a strategical position regarding vocal competence. Tonelli’s position implies that values placed on vocal performances are cultural rather than universal.

Cultural value for vocal performance is demonstrated in a chapter titled “The Vocal Body” written by Konstantinos Thomaidis in the book *The Body in Performance*. Thomaidis’ essay surrounds reflections on a workshop he gave to three collaborators, two of whom were opera singers and one a theatre actor. It was his task to help the three participants achieve some parity in vocal expression. This work led him to reflect on ways in which the “mechanistic paradigm” limits vocal capacity. He writes

Traditional *bel canto* training categorizes performers in specific voice/character types and addresses the problem of the breaks in a manner specifically targeted at each voice type. This categorization is known as *Fach*, from the German word that translates as ‘pocket’ or ‘case’. In a sense, the operatic singer is ‘pigeon-holed’ in terms of their range, timbre, volume and even character. However, recent research reveals that *Fach* is more of a cultural precept than an anatomical fact. While it is true that “the predominant range of an individual’s voice is predetermined by the anatomy of the vocal mechanism” (Davies and Jahn, 2004:9), the same laryngologists forewarn that “such classifications should only be regarded as a guide and are artificial (13). It is then the pedagogical environment and choices made by the teacher(s), as well as the trainee’s individual aesthetics and aspirations, that contribute considerably to the final range employed by the voicer. (89)
Thomaidis goes on to cite both Korean Pansori and American Blues music as genres where different aesthetic values produce entirely different qualitative outcomes in vocal performances. His perspective is congruent with Tonelli’s comments encouraging people to explore the full range of human vocal possibilities. Inclusion and diversity are central themes in Tonelli’s work on voice. His comments reflect a strong sense of social responsibility towards making space for others, creating communities of inclusivity and demonstrating the diversity of the voice. Public performance is one method by which he activates these prerogatives, and his earlier statements reveal his evaluation: this has radical social benefits.

Likewise, Duncan recognizes a human imperative to engage with the broader functions of our voice as having physical benefits. When asked why she is professionally engaged in encouraging others to extend their understanding of voice and breath work, she replies “…just the healing and health properties alone, makes it worthwhile,” before elaborating with several examples of recovery from injuries she has witnessed being aided by breath and voice work. In fact, Duncan uses elements of extended singing technique with all her vocal students “with the goal of having more intimacy with the body as the instrument, and more facility in crafting their vocal and sound placement.” Literature regarding trauma and healing supports Duncan’s observations of the therapeutic effects of singing. The Polyvagal theory introduced by Stephen Porges in 1994 addresses the biology of safety and danger and the “interplay between the visceral experiences of our own bodies and the voices and faces of people around us” (Van der Kolk 80). This theory underscores the importance of reciprocity in social interactions, a factor commonly found in musical collaboration. Trauma recovery expert Bessel Van Der Kolk discusses how the Polyvagal theory led to therapists becoming “more open to the value of other
age-old nonpharmacological approaches to healthcare” among which he lists group singing as well as other activities which “rely on interpersonal rhythms, visceral awareness and vocal and facial communication which help shift people out of fight/flight states…and increase their capacity to manage relationships” (88). The cultural impact of people who regularly practice vocal exploration enjoying the rewards that Duncan has observed through her teaching practice could be significant. Tonelli’s comments on the relationship between capacity and imperative can be understood as politically advocating for a liberatory practice. They may also be interpreted through the lens of somatic practice, as resistance from vocal atrophy. The interdisciplinary nature of his comments is not unique within the field of improvisation studies. Much of the philosophy and theory surrounding improvisational practices exemplifies its function as a discipline of liminality or interchangeability. This principle is at play again when Duncan’s observations of the physical benefits of agency over one’s voice interact with Tonelli’s assertions that exercising such agency is a socio-political imperative. The implications of enhanced vocal capacity towards increased personal health allows for agency in very literal ways. Vocal improvisation performances publicize new ways of being healthy and productive by suggesting a broader range of expression.

The impact of performance on public discourse regarding vocal capacity is an essential function of demonstrations and scenarios. Taylor is specific when defining the reach of scenarios when affecting change:

Though not predictive in function, scenarios tempt participants to extrapolate that what is determines what will be. Participants can play out the multiple variables in search for “likely” outcomes. The more persuasive the scenarios put forth, the
more likely participants buy into them as a viable way of making sense of the world. (140-141)

Duncan, Minton and Tonelli have all witnessed the phenomenon described here by Taylor. The power of persuasiveness found in the diversity of the voice is remarked on by Minton in an interview conducted by Chris Tonelli:

The voice has so many associations. The voice is never innocent, but then again, it's never guilty. I've never heard sounds that mean something. I'll go to Louis Armstrong's voice…Aesthetically, in European culture, Christian culture, this is not a sound we hear. We don't hear it at all. For me, this has always been a little bit of a chance to juxtapose all these different sounds that aren't the sound that is supposed to be happening, or the sound that one person expects coming from a human voice, or a human. (6)

Minton’s evocation of Armstrong’s voice in this context makes a readily understandable example of the political reverberations initiated by the quality of a new vocal possibility. In another section of the same interview, Minton mentions the dominance of the A440 tuning convention of Western instrumental music. He refers to it as a form of “musical oppression” in light of the unfixed nature of the human voice (10). Both Minton and Maggie Nicols, a participant in the same interview, acknowledge that the jazz genre, of which Armstrong was an originator, was an influential model by which they began their respective practices. Armstrong's vocal example changed conventional understandings of virtuosity. This cultural shift was political and artistic at the same time. The impact described by Minton in this example is yet another instance of public performance resulting in cultural growth due to interaction between performers and audience.
The ability for performances to impact social change transpires through dynamic exchange between audience and artists. Performances of soundsinging create exchange between these groups in both immediate and prolonged ways. Tonelli expresses his belief in this phenomenon by describing his group as a practice of embracing difference. His comments mirror those of jazz saxophonist Darius Jones when he claims the voice provides lessons in diversity (Voice, 2018). While Tonelli acknowledges the political function of public demonstrations of soundsinging, he also comments on the self-sustaining results coming from such concerts, indicating they serve as a form of outreach.

I think another reason I perform publicly with the group is because you create relationships that way. People who happen across the group might be your next member of the group, so it's important to perform publicly to let others know that these kinds of practices and spaces exist and that they're welcome in those kinds of practices and spaces.

Once again, there are interchanges between personal and political realms. Tonelli’s comments imply public performance is not only a matter of providing an example by which observers may expand their understanding of vocal capacity. It is also the means by which the public is invited to put their new understanding into practice. The expansion of the community facilitates social agency via consolidation, validation and continuation. The promise of public performance is the possibility of continuance. Duncan has also experienced this dynamic expansion, particularly after the Element Choir enjoyed an invitation to perform with Canadian Polaris-Prize winning vocalist Tanya Tagaq. When asked what the value of public presentation might be for the members of the choir she responds,
I guess the more we do large stage, large exposure performances, the more we will be attractive as an ensemble…This group is really a community, almost family in certain respects, and as such, any performance where the vibe is great, where the connection and communication is happening, and where we feel we are transported as a group, is definitely a priority, regardless of the context.

These comments place Duncan in the midst of her community, in solidarity in the acts of connection and communication. While she acknowledges her role as a guide, she is careful not to make assumptions about what benefits her choir members might draw from the performing. She is willing, though, to share her own observations about the reverberant effects of participating in the choir.

I do know that I watch individuals change over time, become more confident, have more ease with the myriad sound world we operate in, exhibit more boldness in performance, take on sharing and teaching this language to others, and one other very interesting thing - over the years I’ve seen people in this community find each other and form other musical and artistic relationships and connections, that don’t necessarily overlap with the choir itself.

The confidence provided by the positive experiences of participating in the Element Choir beget even more ensembles, of various sizes. As a result, places emerge where musicians can take their new understanding of the “myriad sound world” and create new collaborations. Again, continuance presents itself as a significant benefit to public presentation.

The notion of continuance brings us full circle to consider the points of initiation first described by the participants in this study. Here we see how public presentation assisted in
generating more points of contact, both physical and temporal, where others might feel the pulse of recognition, the excitement accompanying an open invitation to reconsider what the human voice is capable of. Of course, this work is not easily achieved, and affirmative responses cannot be taken for granted. Yet, the odds of proliferation increase with each act of public presentation. As John Sobol said in response to Scott Thomson's remarks on the impediments inherent to activating a community through invitations to risky behaviour, “I think that risk-taking is something that you nurture…in a community, and this festival is certainly doing that…next time when you invite us back I dare say that the members of the audience will be the first ones to sign up” (“Sung Ra” 12:10). Sobol’s comments met with the most agreeable of audience reactions.

Public performances of personal understandings arrived at through the practice of extended vocal technique by the choirs in this study and their conductors are events with political impact. By presenting reflexive performances of expanded possible functions of human vocal sounds, choir participants demonstrate new understandings of interaction, collaboration and capacity within a musical context. In doing so, they challenge traditional hegemonic paradigms bent on limiting access to musical expression. By engaging their audience on a variety of levels, they initiate discourse weighing new considerations against prescribed reactions. Traditional frameworks make claims of legitimacy, allow for radical recontextualizations, and create suggestive scenarios. Communities are defined through these acts of public engagement even while they expand. This expansion provides an opportunity for the conversation to continue in new locations, through new acts of initiation toward the discovery of new possibilities.
CONCLUSION—Sound Waves

Patterns in Improvisational Pedagogy

The use of one’s voice as an act of agency has extended past metaphorical meaning into critical applications. Popular culture reflects this shift, providing examples of individuals able to articulate their positionality and find platforms for dissemination of their views become agents of cultural change. Whether Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* stands as compelling testimony to her experience as a black woman in America, or Tanya Tagaq’s visceral performances force audiences to confront issues of colonization in Canada, embodied performances of vocal expression continue to stimulate social discourse. In the political arena, the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements demonstrate the ability of public testimony to combat cultural erasure. Likewise, populist movements benefit from new platforms such as Twitter where worldwide publication of unedited points of view results in socio-political actions. Who gets to use their voice, where and how, is a matter of pivotal importance in cultural construction. Articulate and informed musical vocal practices provide reliable models for social interactions. These models transcend metaphor by becoming critical engagements with the capacity to inform other areas. The importance of the initial research question, “Why is the invitation to sing experienced differently depending on one's positionality within the dialogue?” lies in the authentic experiences of individuals who are being invited to add their voices to democratic processes both in classrooms and in the world at large. If music teachers are aware that they hold positions of power, with the capacity to ignite lifelong passion or inflict terminal trauma endangering the student’s relationship with singing, then pedagogical practices hold valuable lessons for other institutional power structures. Through this examination of three experienced vocal improvisers and their positive facilitation practices,
hopeful suggestions emerge that may begin to address blind spots inherently present in hegemonic social structures.

The emergent trends tracked within this small sample, while congruent with several larger studies which focus on improvisational pedagogy, contribute new data specifically concerning the voice as an embodied instrument from which we cannot separate ourselves. The integrated nature of the vocal instrument with the body, and the liminal nature of the voice itself, that moment where embodied knowledge becomes disembodied as it travels beyond our physical being, are central factors of discoveries made in this study. Lessons of dynamic truth and fluid practices exemplified by Duncan, Minton and Tonelli’s work can be adopted towards satisfying teaching experiences across disciplines.

The personal experiences of these facilitators illustrate the pragmatic implementation of improvisational techniques reflecting core values. Directed attention raises awareness of interactions between individual agents and environmental conditions, both internal and external. Additionally, these components can be combined to provide diverse resources and perspectives. Attendance engendering respect is a consideration the conscientious teacher must to be aware of. Nonetheless, the influence of directed attention on power dynamics within music classrooms promises to nurture a student’s relationship with learning outputs, granting individuals authority over their creative educational process. Participants in this study indicate that the effect of directed attention is an expanded capacity for responsive creativity and contributions. Differentiation between listening with the intent to hear, rather than with the intent to provide planned responses, makes a significant impact on learning processes. For example, readers can consider times they posed a question with a premeditated answer intended. By contrast, open-
ended classroom conversations lead to dialogic learning experiences. Such comparisons help illustrate the influence of directed attention and deep listening on pedagogical practices. The motivation for such experiences need not stem from the desire to benefit our students. Instead, our responsive contributions keep fresh the creative spark required for engaged careers in education.

Engagement born of an appreciation for individual diversity and unconventional discoveries leads to broader imagined possibilities. The practice of engaged listening and authentic responsiveness resists conformity within learning strategies. Possibilities explored, considered, and evaluated for potential application direct decisions made during educational explorations. This practice requires the “yes, and…” attitude made famous by Keith Johnstone and improv theatre. Incorporating this positive attitude ultimately results in the praxis of acceptance, promising simultaneous capacity for inclusion of “others.” Radical impacts on world-view and socio-political perspectives result from personal engagement with these artistic practices.

Responding to improvisational imperatives, communities of practice emerge, creating new avenues of further inclusion. Structures supporting organic interactions with art practices normalize and proliferate cultural activities such as vocal improvisation. Extended engagement with vocal exploration outside exclusive environments prompts new applications and further understanding of uses for voice. Embodied practices implemented throughout everyday life assist in transferring acceptance and inclusion into the social sphere.

Somatic understanding of one’s vocal capacities arrived at through regular application increases facility with this embodied tool. Further understanding of individual mechanics and
faculties results in self-care, trust and increased esteem within practitioners. Embodied knowledge serves as dependable agency within spontaneous scenarios. Confidence in one’s abilities ensures increased contributions in conversations, both musical and communal.

Increased contributions facilitate dialogical learning experiences. Communities of practice become environments where members accompany one another through inquiry and share discoveries. The balance between enthusiasm for such discoveries and detached consideration with regards to assessments and adjustments allows members of these communities to create collectively. Co-creation allowing each contributor to negotiate and realize personal interests within larger outputs, such as ensemble music, contains the most significant possibility for mutually satisfying results.

As individual members apply somatic knowledge of their voice towards direct engagement with musical outputs, power discrepancies decrease. Value assessments of contributions are allowed to shift from a product to a process basis. In this environment authority over musicality is based on commitment and interest as opposed to seniority. Instructors become facilitators valued on their capacity to create such direct engagement rather than their ability to impart abstract concepts.

In the capacity of facilitation, vocal pedagogues can employ dynamic status positions to create safe spaces for students to explore their authority under experienced leadership. Conversely, students can address the invitation of facilitators by taking mutual responsibility for musical outputs and evaluative processes which serve to inform future choices. Status switching abilities within a dynamic improvisation training are allyship in praxis. Collaborative endeavours with flexible roles available to contributors allow for rejuvenation, as well as discovery.
Maximizing the function of the social status see-saw disrupts binaries, holding powerful implications for social structures immediate and protracted.

Demonstrating these value shifts in public makes bold statements about the possibilities of human interactions. By staging concerts of soundsinging and extended vocal technique, performers suggest the availability of alternate engagements with the voice to audience members. These acts demonstrate inclusive values within the context of vocal performance, rejecting notions of shame and conformity. Public exhibitions of vocal improvisation offer invitation and suggest accessibility to modalities of singing which are de-marginalized through performance. Following political imperatives to “stand up and be heard” vocal improvisation concerts establish deserving skill-sets within an act of consolidation.

Concerts provide legitimation of soundsinging practices by presenting vocal improvisers within traditional frameworks reserved for the musically elite. This scenario allows for the disruption of traditional attitudes towards music, presenting concepts of improvisational pedagogy within recognizable formats. Here audiences may be engaged by unexpected sounds and gestures, by inclusive practices such as breaking the fourth wall, or by being granted authority and incorporating themselves in the presentation. The legitimizing platform of the concert allows for the cultural agency of marginalized sonic expression through the implications of who deserves attention and why.

Audience members who are willing to embrace these questions in practical ways offer the possibility of continuance, either through their direct engagement or by way of the impact made on their outlook. Further study focusing on audience experience is required for these possibilities to be understood. However, the implications of these ripples of continuance mirror the original
incidences which inspired the participants in this study. It is possible for this analysis to return to its point of origin.

Processes enacting inclusive practice, reacquainting participants with atrophied capacities, provide powerful models for methods applicable in revolutionary change. How we learn new ideas or reclaim lost ones can inform cultural practices where individuals look to rewrite hegemonic roles assigned to them without due process.

In the classroom, passionate teachers who wish to share their inspiration can employ improvisational pedagogy across activities, using dialogic learning methods to maximize student satisfaction. In larger arenas we may track the processes exhibited by Duncan, Minton and Tonelli, to consider what other concepts we would like to naturalize, centralize and include in our ethos. Responses provided by these three accomplished vocal improvisers mark a process by which marginalized realities move to central positions within cultural norms. The capacity for performance practices to advocate for unique perspectives overlooked or erased by dominant culture is evidenced by the process of these individuals to create communities where frightening propositions become empowering tools of playful self-realization. Within their accounts the role of improvisation to answer fundamental questions of identity becomes clear. Who one is, and what one can do is not a matter of fixed definition, but a constant exploration of possibilities repeatedly rearranged in response to the demands of the moment. Under conditions of marginalization and erasure, our presence is a testimony to diversity, and our voices are enactments of our presence. When we practice engaging with our understanding of our “being” within supportive communities, we gain the capacity for that “being.” When we perform ourselves engaging with self-expression in public arenas, we break the silence, insisting on our
existence, mobilizing that fact from margin to centre. The cyclical process of rehearsal and performance exemplified in improvisation practices resists static notions that a single appearance will fix and end the conversation. Improvising communities performing improvisation insist upon continued discourse and sustained negotiation.

From initial pulsating curiosity to resonant collaborations, into reverberant performances of new possibilities, vocal improvisation stands as a working pedagogical model for the movement of marginalized realities towards central manifestation within cultural conversations. Revolutionary movements of such magnitude are often idealized. Historical accounts focus on individual leadership or flashpoint events that pivot the course of history, or game-changing technology which galvanizes power. Alternatively, vocal improvisation practices suggest other resources comprise agency. Giving the villain the last word, we can recall Ursula the sea witch’s sarcastic prompt to Arial: “It won’t take much/ Just your voice!”. Ironically enough, it turns out she was right.
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Interview Transcriptions

Interview with Christine Duncan:

Part A (The Personal):

**Reaching way back to an interview with Hal Hill from 1998, I read that you spoke about the similarities between martial arts, Tai Chi in particular, and Jazz improvisation. You said that they share the discipline of listening. Can you share your thoughts about listening while making sound, or in order to make sound?**

I believe listening is as important as the sound I am making, if not more important. Listening is essential for connecting musically with whoever I am playing with, and also for energetic connection with the audience. The other very important and related thing is space, or silence, which can be more difficult to find and trust than sound, in performance, and requires sophisticated listening skills to negotiate. Claude Debussy said that the music is in the silence between notes, and this really resonates with me. These days my performances are largely based around improvisation, and I believe listening is one of the most important factors in successful improvisation. I consider listening and awareness to be very connected and experience them in a variety of ways. I practice 4 specific awareness designations, which came from doing 5 years of pretty intense internal martial arts study with Sam Masich (Sam Masich Internal Arts), and this is the way he described it: external, specific awareness - where you can focus clearly on a single thing, or a specific area of the external environment, external, general awareness - where you can soften the focus and take in the environmental information in a more general way. Taking a “sound walk,” for example, is great for exploring this kind of awareness. Then there is internal, general awareness - being able to check in or listen internally to your own body, feelings,
Appendix

sensations, thoughts, etc., in a non-specific way. It’s almost meditative in nature, although this can happen quickly, and even while you are engaged in other activities, if the habit is formed. Finally, there is internal, specific awareness, which is the ability to listen in and become aware of specific thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and also to aim your thought and intention into the body in specific ways. This can be combined with breath work for healing and stress relief purposes, as well. All of this information, and this kind of listening practice informs my music making, and my intention is to have all of these perspectives available to me in as much of my life as I can, including the experiences of making music.

**You speak of the transformative powers of vocal improvisation. What type of risks and rewards do you experience through your practice?**

I guess I am an habitual risk taker, particularly in performance. In an improvised music context, there is always the risk that things will fall flat, that the musical connection won’t be there with the other players, that the audience will not be on board with what is happening, and in fact, may even become hostile, in extreme circumstances.

Improvised vocal performance is risky business. There is no structure to hide behind, and particularly with the use of extended vocal techniques, the range of sounds can make the listener uncomfortable, or even anger them. When lyrics are removed from the picture, when song structure is removed, and when the voice is no longer used for beautiful, or comforting, pleasurable, or even recognizable melodic information, the listener can feel unsafe. Extended voice practice explores a lot of the ‘unsafe’ vocal sounds, the sounds that we don’t trot out in public. These fall into the category of incidental sounds, body sounds, unintentional and even unconscious sounds, the sounds people make when they are not in control, and there can be embarrassment and shame attached to this kind of sound making. It can also make people feel
like voyeurs to experience listening to this kind of thing, and there can be guilt attached to that as well. Listeners can also be shocked or triggered when experiencing this kind of ‘sounding’ and they will make choices about how to respond to that.

The key for me is to be able to be transparent enough to follow the musical muse and allow people to witness my process as it unfolds, without trying to curate their experience, or necessarily shield myself from the truth of the musical journey. I do not feel unprotected, or unsafe though; part of this comes from the ability to channel energy and be totally absorbed by the experience of the music making. The more it feels honest, the less I need to be attached to it. Also, I realize that I cannot take responsibility for the choices of anyone else. If people choose to be open to this kind of experience or closed to it/angered by it, etc., that is their responsibility. I do, on the other hand, take responsibility to hold the space in which this exchange can occur, and invite people into the experience. I am also willing to talk to people afterward, and/or help debrief if necessary. My friend Brad Muirhead (trombonist, composer) once said to me that part of the role of art is to challenge - to challenge the people experiencing it, and to challenge the people making it. I like that. I believe that we are constantly being transformed, and every art experience we engage in alters us, even on a molecular level, regardless of our responses.

The rewards for me are as much about spiritual growth and path as anything else. I have been performing for almost all of my life and cannot separate my music/art making from my spiritual path, so when I think of this in terms of rewards, I guess it comes down to quality of life, and reinforcing my core sense of myself and relationship to that.

You’ve spoken of your interest in the voice as an instrument. The breadth of sounds you engage with are often visceral and unorthodox. Have you ever experienced policing of
your voice, being told that you might be damaging your instrument? What’s your response?

I have experienced criticism, derision and outright mockery at times, often from listeners who were triggered somehow by their listening experience. This still comes up from time to time. When I was younger, I did experience some policing, but took it upon myself to study the vocal instrument in depth, and for many years have been a voice teacher, specializing in vocal technique, so that is not really a part of my experience any longer.

Part B (Collaboration):

Your work with the Element Choir evolved from an in-depth process of research and development. What aesthetic or experiential values are important to you in collaborative work?

Since I don’t separate my spiritual path from my artistic one, my aesthetic and values are combined in this aspect as well. I value listening, honesty, clarity, sensitivity, growth, love, trust, engagement, connection, taking responsibility for choices, and also musical/artistic and personal chemistry. If I like a person and like their art, it’s likely I’ll like collaborating with them. Another thing is that as an improviser, I tend to have a compositional sensibility, and often I make the best music with others who function the same way.

In a much more recent interview with Jonathan Bunce, for Musicworks you spoke of the importance of maintaining relationships in music practice and being honorable in them. What do you feel are your responsibilities to the members of the Element Choir?

I think the most important thing is to make them feel safe and engaged, in performance contexts. The Element Choir (and any improvising choir I train and work with) is made up of participants with varied levels of experience, both in public performance, and in making this kind
of music, or even making music at all. I bring them into the environment, teach them the language for this kind of music making, and need them to feel free and willing to follow me in performance. There has to be trust established for this to fly. I endeavour to be clear in my communication, consistent in the way I deal with the members of the group, on and off stage, connect with people on an individual level as well as a group level, treat them equally, with respect and dignity, delegate where I can, check in with them on an individual level if needed, and even when discipline is required, handle that in a respectful, discrete and honest fashion. I don’t pretend to have all the answers, and will ask for input from the group, if an answer is needed that I don’t have. I have even added new cues offered by Element Choir members, in problem solving situations. I care for them, am truly happy to see them and work with them and do my best to make sure they have the best experience possible when working with me. I take responsibility for the process and the relationship(s). This enables us to have some pretty amazing and even transformative musical experiences together, which only deepens the relationship, and makes everyone more confident and skilled. Win win!!

In that same article you spoke of providing security in order to facilitate risk taking. What are some pragmatic steps you take to ease the tension between the desire to take risks and the need for security? How do you assist that dynamic?

Often, I’m in a position these days where I need to get people to ‘buy in’ very quickly. I have a few ways of approaching this hurdle. First of all, I tend to come off as very clear, confident, warm, and inviting in my approach to training and working with groups. I give people permission to say no to me, and don’t expect too much from any individual, unless they are willing to take more of a risk in the situation. I make sure they know they are in control of their own experiences in this environment. I’m very good at reading people and group dynamics, so it
usually doesn’t take too long to figure out who is willing to be pushed a bit more, and who is not. I freely demonstrate the cues and the sounds with my own voice, and use my ability to entertain and also my sense of humor to diffuse anxiety and nervousness, and to draw people in. The system I’m working with is very intuitive, and I tend to be quite clear and consistent with the signals and cues, so people are able to connect what they are seeing to the sounds they are making, quickly and efficiently. I keep reiterating that people need to be the ‘stewards’ of their own vocal instruments, and that they can always say no to me, even in performance. I make offers, not demands. I assure them that I have their backs, and as an experienced vocal improviser, even if the choir didn’t show up at all (God forbid!), the bottom line is that I could do the show without them, and it would be fine. I also let them know, that in this kind of group ‘sounding’, their own individual voices won’t be distinguishable from the group, and likely won’t even be heard, unless they choose to make it so.

When it comes to a continuing working relationship (as in the Element Choir), I do tend to check in with people here and there, to see how their individual journey is developing. For example, when people are new to the choir, they are often not interested in being featured as soloists. Over time, I will keep checking in with them, even on stage, to see if they are willing to step out in that way. Due to our relationship, they are aware that they can still always decline an offer, but I will make those offers more often, and then usually check in with them offstage, to make sure they are okay with me asking.

Part C (Presentation):

Your origins in music-making come from the church and I’ve heard you reference that experience as a foundational one in your jazz improvisation. Did you experience a sense of sonic homecoming as you realized the Element Choir?
Yes, I really did. I spent so many years in environments of group vocal freedom in my church experiences, in the format of praise and worship services, also prayer meetings and revival meetings, where a lot of unselfconscious, group vocal ‘sounding’ occurred. My dad is a preacher and a singer, and that kind of use of the voice - for oration, teaching, exhortation, urging, inspiring, and entertaining, is also pretty hard wired into me. Sometimes there are moments in choir performances where it’s amazing how much it sounds like the same euphoric group ‘sounding’ to me, albeit not in a Christian context, and it’s not lost on me how similar my role is to that of my father, in relation to the choir. Also, my mom is a singer, multi-instrumentalist, was a worship leader, and choir leader. Again, in my own way, I seem to be carrying on the family tradition.

Relating back to the issue of making unorthodox sounds with the voice, what do you understand to be the virtue in encouraging others to use their instrument in this way?

Going back to my own experience of energy and breath work, as connected with Tai Chi and internal martial arts study, just the healing and health properties alone, make it worthwhile. I had a voice student once, who had sustained a head injury in an automobile accident, and was dealing with chronic pain issues as a result. We got her breathing and toning into the injured area of her body, and over a period of time her pain levels shifted dramatically, and her healing process sped up. Another friend and mentor of mine, Bob Murphy (pianist, composer) fractured a vertebra in a bicycle accident, and was told by his specialist that he would be bedridden and immobile for at least a month, while it healed. He used this same information to breathe and sound into the injured area, and by the end of a month, he was not only on his feet, he was back riding his bike, his back completely mended. The doctor said it was a miracle.
For people who are interested in the voice as an instrument, and particularly in improvising, exploring the instrument and the potential for various sounds can expand the vocal toolkit exponentially. Even when I’m working with singers who are not interested in extended voice practice per se, I do like to get them to explore different ways of placing breath and finding resonance in different areas of the body, with the goal of having more intimacy with the body as the instrument, and also more facility in crafting their vocal sound and placement. When people come to me with specific vocal/performance problems, this kind of information can be very useful as release work, and often elements of it address vocal issues as well.

The Element Choir has enjoyed some very notable performances such as the Polaris awards with Tanya Tagaq and an appearance at Massey Hall. What value do you think the participants in the choir gain from public presentation?

I guess the more we do large stage, large exposure performances, the more we will be attractive as an ensemble, and we’ll get better gigs, which benefits everyone. As a group, the priority is not necessarily this kind of gig, although I certainly am grateful for the exposure and opportunities, and there are members of the choir who are super chuffed about getting to perform with an artist like Tanya Tagaq. This group is really a community, almost family in certain respects, and as such, any performance where the vibe is great, where the connection and communication is happening, and where we feel we are transported as a group, is definitely a priority, regardless of the context. Each person in the choir is the arbiter of their own experience. I can facilitate and create the space, take care of them in the process, and sometimes experience what feels like brilliant performances, but the value gained for each individual is their own, and I can’t necessarily speak to that. I do know that I watch individuals change over time, become more confident, have more ease with the myriad sound world we operate in, exhibit more
boldness in performance, take on sharing and teaching this language to others, and one other very interesting thing - over the years I’ve seen people in this community find each other and form other musical and artistic relationships and connections, that don’t necessarily overlap with the choir itself. I’m a community builder, and as I move forward with my own process and journey, I want to bring as many people with me as possible, and work toward more excellent musical and artistic expression in any way I/we can.
Interview with Phil Minton

Part A (the personal)

Your practice is referred to as “extended vocal technique” and often employs sounds that we make in other locations in our daily vocalizations, for example laughing, crying or coughing. How did you come to bring these sounds into a “musical practice”?

I never use coughing intentionally and I sometimes use voice placings that are near to crying and laughing but with no emotional content. I do use the laughing sound as a warm up exercise when I do feral choir workshops and that becomes infectious and that produces genuine laughter among the participants.

In an interview by Chris Tonelli conducted at the Symposium on Voice, Agency, and Improvisation that took place in Guelph, Ontario on June 26, 2014, he introduces you and your work as an engagement with the “politics of play.” Kenneth Goldsmith also refers to the presence of child-like behaviour in your performance. Can you share your experience as an artist who incorporates playful, and naturally responsive sounds in their work?

I have a 13-month-old grandson called Luca. At this moment, Luca, myself, his parents and other members of my family are on holiday sharing a large house.

The little lad has just started walking and has great fun peeping around corners playing peep a boo, or, I'm here, now I'm not. This game he finds hysterically amusing and sometimes he falls over because he's laughing so much, it's like he knows that it's a game and no one is going to leave him all alone, he trusts us. Or when we pretend to attack him with gentle tickles, you don't even have to touch him before he's whaling with laughter. He trusts us, he knows that we are never going to hurt him, that would be ridiculous.
When I'm playing with other improvising musicians, I find that the most interesting and profound music happens when there is a serious, trusting and playful counterpoint of ridiculous ideas. Yes, I suppose trusting the ones you play with could be called child-like.

**What challenges and what rewards do you experience through your vocal improvisation practice?**

It’s still hard to be taken seriously in some quarters, that does not bother me anymore because I know there’s a multitude of people in the world that love what I and other improvising singers are doing.

**Part B (Collaboration):**

*When you collaborate with instrumentalists such as Roger Turner and John Butcher, how do you see your role as the vocalist within that context and how might that be different from vocal only collaborations, such as those you’ve performed with Chris Tonelli and Maggie Nicols?*

There is no difference, I hear instruments as other voices.

*In your vocal only collaborations, such as the one with Maggie Nicols, Phil Minton and Gabriel Dharmoo for Guelph in 2014, your physical gestures imply a lot of listening. Your eyes are often closed, and your brow is furrowed indicating focus. What are you listening for?*

I’m always surprised when I see film of me performing and sometimes embarrassed “what a prat” it’s only concentration, if I start to think what I look like I can’t find the music, I’d be a hopeless opera or pop singer.
I’ve attended your workshops and you have developed some structures and games in order to encourage participants towards playful extended vocal technique. Why are these structures necessary as part of the process in engaging others in this practice?

Most of the participants in my workshops have no intention of becoming professional vocal improvisers but are very happy to be part of a collective performance of “the feral choir.” They have often never used their voices in a so-called unorthodox manner, so the games and structures are merely springboards to other sounds.

Part C (Presentation):

In your interview with Chris, you mentioned feeling unsatisfied with the early incarnations of the Feral Choir, but it was the feedback from the participants that encouraged you to keep exploring the possibilities of the project. When you collaborate as a facilitator what experiences are you trying to provide for those participants?

the positive joy of singing together

The Feral Choir could be a workshop only experience, but public performance is integrated into the project. What value do you feel performance brings to the experience in addition to the workshop component?

I think that the feral choir nearly always produces music that I’ve never heard before and that’s one of the motivations for me to continue

As a facilitator of extended vocal technique, you encourage your participants to engage in unorthodox vocal behavior and place it in a public setting. What responsibility do you take for their sense of safety in this process? How do you communicate that to them?
Yes, I do worry that folk will get over excited and damage their voices. As far as I know this has only happened once, and now if I hear a potential candidate for damage, I lead them away from that placing. I do address this issue in the workshops prior to the performances and a lot of singers say after the concerts that their voices feel more relaxed and flexible.
Interview with Chris Tonelli

Part A (The Personal):

You’ve often referred to Paul Dutton’s influence on you. In your essay “Ableism and the Reception of Soundsinging” you mark your adoption of his terminology for vocal improvisation and in a video performance at a tribute concert for Dutton, you remark that he changed the course of your work as a musician. Can you talk about your decision to move from conventional vocal work towards soundsinging, and Paul’s guidance in that decision?

Hi Carey, I’m going answer your questions on recording rather than typing them out. Your first question is about Paul guiding my decision to move from as you put it conventional vocal work towards soundsinging. (pause) It was three factors I think that played this role. Paul was one of the three.

The first was having a space to do improvisation in the first place. I was at Trent University and Ellen Waterman had organized a regular free improvisation space that was open to anyone that wanted to make music improvisationally and I started participating in that on the guitar… I’d played a lot of jazz guitar and I was improvising on the guitar and using my voice a little bit in that context as well as using found objects that were around the space… it happened that we were using a space that had a lot of junk and things lying around that became part of the improvisation. I was using my voice a bit in those contexts inspired by a singer that I really loved that came out of rock music that I’d discovered when I was a teenager, Mike Patton, he had an album called Adult Themes for Voice, and that album that was composed entirely of vocal, processed vocal sounds that he, I guess, he was making recordings of just voice based, processed
voice-based pieces on a four track, um so that inspired me a little bit to use my voice. But when Ellen brought Paul Dutton to Peterborough and I saw him for the first time, that’s when I stopped bringing my guitar. I just lost interest in using guitar in those contexts because I thought it was so extraordinary that one could just use their raw voice as an instrument and improvise with unconventional sounds. I just fell in love instantly with the kind of performance that he did, and I went to Toronto a few times from Peterborough to see him perform and found it utterly compelling, this sort of theatre of the body as it’s surprising itself with this sort of exploration of unconventional sounds. I also interviewed Paul when I first met him, so I did have the chance to sit down with him and talk a little bit about his practice and that was influential as well. And so that was Paul’s influence.

**What practices have you engaged in to develop your skills in this unconventional technique?**

Um I just sing. I sing a lot. I mostly sing in improvising contexts with other people, or solo, by myself I listen a lot as well of course to other improvising vocalists and get excited by specific sounds and try to use those sounds and so that’s really my practice is to find my own sounds in the process of exploration and to be inspired by others who are using unconventional sounds.

**In the essay mentioned above you speak about the embarrassing effects of being a soundsinger, and of watching soundsingers. What do you enjoy about using your body this way?**

…what I enjoy about using my body in that way is that my body can be used in that way and should be used in that way and that the prohibitions on exploring your voice freely are prohibitions that I’m happy to not have because I’ve encountered a space where I can use my
voice in that way it just its pleasurable to find sounds, it’s pleasurable to be free with your voice. Luckily I don’t have the kinds of self-conscious feelings I think that some people do when they’re making these sounds, because I’ve been making them for a long time and I think I was excited by other people who were making them when I first started making them myself so that prohibition wasn’t there for me. So if that’s what you mean by embarrassment I have never really had to deal with those kinds of feelings because I never found them to be embarrassing, those kinds of sounds.

Part B (Collaboration):

Your collaboration with Maggie Nicols, Phil Minton and Gabriel Dharmoo for Guelph in 2014 stands out in a number of ways. It’s a rather long collaboration, with a lot of synchronous or harmonious moments. You stand shoulder to shoulder and for the most part you all have your eyes closed. There is also a lot of movement and gesture. It appears as if you employ the same techniques and share a lot of aesthetic values. What can you tell me about this collaboration?

Well, as you know I brought Phil and Maggie to Guelph for the Symposium that you were a part of. As it happened there was this opportunity to perform for the launch of the Guelph Jazz Fest and I was excited about the opportunity to perform with two of my vocal heroes, and Gabriel Dharmoo is someone that I interviewed for my research and he came down to Guelph for that so I involved him as well because I knew that he would be excited about that and … Phil and Maggie are vocalists that I’ve definitely been inspired by for a long time and so I’ve definitely been informed by their language. I think when you are creating music of any kind you borrow aesthetic language from the people that you are inspired by and so we do share a language but what I enjoy also about free improvised vocal music is that in a lot of context you can exceed
that language or exceed what some people to be the boundaries of that language. Maggie Nicols especially is someone who moves in and out of abstract unconventional sounds and song and melodic singing so in that performance there was a little bit of song and speech perhaps but not a lot and different context will bring out different kinds of vocalization and so the sameness that your pointing to there, um probably had something to do with the context in which we’re performing and the assumptions we had about each other. I guess what else I can tell you about that collaboration is just that it was a beautiful highlight for me. It’s always really wonderful to be able to sing with people whose voices you’ve enjoyed for so long on recording or in other live performances you seen. So that’s always a nice memory for me.

The four of you are listening intently to one another, while also producing sound.

What role does responsiveness play in your approach to soundsinging?

Improvisation demands…well no it doesn’t demand…When you’re improvising being aware of the others around you is generally a choice you’re going to make when you’re an experienced improviser because in most cases the responsiveness is part of the joy, that’s why you improvise with others because you want to hear them and you want to be heard and you want to create something together. Um…I have improvised and I’ve talked to other improvisors who’ve been in situations where they’ve consciously not reacted to the things that others were doing, or consciously decided to…what am I trying to say…yeah what I said already…made the conscious choice not to respond -so that’s an option as well -it’s an option I don’t think you’d use as frequently generally as an improviser, but you can and I think it can produce interesting effects, but when you’re in a situation like I was I there, where I’m singing with singers that I’ve long appreciated, then of course I’d want to attend to what they’re doing and free myself without thought to want to be able to respond immediately to what they’re doing. I think I can probably
say that in that situation I followed more than I led but I think there were a few moments even
within that situation with these very well established singers where I felt comfortable leading as
well because I think there is a real generosity in the way that both of them improvise and I don’t
think either of them are hung up on hierarchies of competence. That can happen in a lot of
improvising communities. I probably have never felt it with another vocalist that I have
performed with any way and that’s one of the things that I think might be specific to
soundsinging rather than other forms of improvisation. Sometimes I think it can be very
hierarchical improvisation communities and relationships.

You also work as an educator and facilitator with the Vocal Exploration Choir.
You’ve conducted these groups in at least 3 different cities that I am aware of. Why is that
function of your work important to you?

Well this comes out of my post-doctoral research. The more vocalists I had a chance to
speak with the more I came to understand that a lot of the vocalists I loved and respected and
was studying had devoted a great deal of their time to creating a space for others in ways that
they don’t normally in their lives and I think that that’s had a profoundly empowering effect on a
lot of individuals that they’ve worked with. And so since I was lucky enough to have the post-
doctoral support that I had to study the work of these singers, I felt obliged to continue their
work and create those spaces myself and it’s utterly rewarding every time I’ve devoted my time
to creating these kinds of spaces beautiful things happen uh either in terms of individuals being
very moved and valuing having that space finding it transformative in some way, or for the
relationships you build. I meet wonderful people through creating these spaces and it just gives
you another group of people to improvise with as well. Magical things happen when you
improvise and that’s why the work’s important to me.
Part C (Presentation):

These choirs have had public performances, which are documented on your YouTube channel. What is the purpose of taking these groups to the streets?

I think for me one of the purposes of publicly performing with these groups is because the kinds of sounds that we embrace I think do work in the world. Groups that embrace difference encourage others to embrace difference and I think we need a world where people are encouraged to see value in things that they don’t normally see value in and so I think there’s a political function to sharing these sounds publicly. I think another reason I perform publicly with the group is because you create relationships that way. People who happen across the group might be your next member of the group so it’s important to perform publicly to let others know that these kinds of practices and spaces exist and that they’re welcome in those kinds of practices and spaces.

Relating back to the issue of people feeling compelled to police or discourage soundsingers, how do you prepare your choir members for the possibilities of negative interactions?

I don’t think I do. Other than the fact that we have workshop sessions and in those workshop sessions we’re always having discussions about what happened during the improvisations, but I guess in those discussions, but I guess we haven’t really talked much about that. I don’t think I do. That’s the answer.

In your public performances at Noorderzon you invited passersby to conduct. What was your intention in that exercise?

I like allowing others to conduct to encourage them to see the practice and the choir as fun as something that can easily include any one. People often in music situations feel like they
need special skills to participate and one of the reasons why I create these choirs is I want to create spaces that are absolutely open to anyone and one that there’s no barrier to participation and I think that immediately putting someone in this role of the conductor this role that’s often seen as the sign or pinnacle of exclusivity, the conductor is the leader of a musical ensemble if someone can immediately take over this conductor role and actually make something valuable with very few tools with very little training right a couple seconds, thirty seconds with me giving them a couple of tools that is a kind of musical inclusivity that is ultimately radical. Anyone can do [this] and to know that there are ensembles where you can experience that kind of joy and that kind of trust, if the ensemble members are going to follow you it’s because they want to, because they give themselves over to you and they trust the conductor. I think it’s a great demonstration of inclusivity and I think it can be a moving experience for people to be in that position.