

# Intervocal Figures: a classed and queered voicing-dancer in Instant Composition.

Robert Vesty, *Class Concerns*, 2023

## Introduction

1. I want to talk about voice. It's through the voice, that I hear class existing all around me. Voice is such a fundamental way we encounter and fix ideas to do with class. But I want to go beyond simply considering accent (which is where the discussion relating to class often lands) and consider voice more fully by thinking of the mobility of voice and how listening and other receiving practices help produce voicings.
2. I'll do this with reference to Instant Composition (IC), an improvisatory performance mode in dance or movement-based practice. And I'll use the concept of 'intervocality' articulated by Ann Cahill and Christine Hamel as a lens through which to explore the complex interplay of voicings between performers and audience. I'm particularly interested in how such a lens might bring into relief the way that the intersectional markers of class (and I extend my discussion also to queerness here) are produced *and* received in what might be understood as an intervocalic performance space.
3. I'm talking from a practitioner-academic position, and I cast myself as a voicing-dancer figure. Although I originally trained as an actor, over the past decade or so, my performance practice as well as the research led by it, has been rooted in dance and movement-based improvisation that utilises the voice in the form of non-verbal vocal sounds, gibberish nonsense, single words, sung speech, non-linear narrative and poetic text. Pieces may be solo or ensemble and often performed in a studio setting for anywhere between several minutes to an hour; often with performers claiming that they enter the performance space with no prior plan. This interdisciplinary mode straddles theatre and dance but belongs to a set of practices that have been variously described as physical theatre improvisation, immediate choreography or, as I do here, Instant Composition.
4. Here, I'm building on my practice-led PhD research project — *Material Words for Voicing Dancers* — where I was keen to establish an analytical framework that could take account of

the relational and embedded way in which vocal material is co-constructed in Instant Composition. I critiqued ‘embodiment’ and argued for a sensuous ecological approach to understanding voice and speech in dance improvisation that conceived the space as enlivened not just acoustically, but through an ensounded (or envoiced) form of looking-and-listening. So, using ‘intervocality’ represents an extension in my thinking around all this and I’m going to end up arguing, perhaps more fully than I did in my thesis, that there are ethical considerations that might reconsider how we think of the uniqueness and agency of voice captured by the trope of ‘finding ones voice’. I think we need to disrupt our understanding of individual notions of identity formation and emphasise the collective response-ability we have for listening to and receiving each other’s voicings.

### Intervocality and the Voicing-Dancing Figure

1. So, Intervocality! [SLIDE] In *Sounding Bodies: Identity, Injustice, and the Voice*, published 2021, Cahill and Hamel introduce the concept of intervocality to refer to the ‘fact that not only are voices always enacted within a context of social relations, but that sonorous qualities of voices are shaped by those social relations, including how voices are received and interpreted’ (26). By replacing intersubjectivity with intervocality, Cahill and Hamel succeed in *revocalising* human relations in a similar vein to those working within Voice Studies - an emerging field within Theatre and Performance Studies.
2. Such a revocalisation of ontological relations takes account of the fact that the voice, as Konstantinos Thomaidis and others have pointed out, is never singular — “*the voice does not exist*” (*Voice Studies* 4), because it has plural and multiple dimensions. As sound, the voice is performed by a body that is never abstract but always in material co-production — embedded in, yet unfixed by, “complex gendered histories . . . physiologies and by the ideologies in which they partake” (*Theatre & Voice* 46). As Cahill and Hamel put it, ‘a voiced human does not have *a* voice, but is provided a set of sonorous, vocal possibilities by the situating material environment’ (*Sounding Bodies* 29), thus making any notion of the singularity of voice ‘entirely illusory’ (31).
3. To encounter the concept of intervocality through performance is, for me, instructive given its heightened performative value as a place where voicings are mobile, multiply expressive and manipulated. But I would argue that improvisatory modes of performance, and especially that of the voicing-dancing figure, offers a particular opportunity to amplify

intervocality's workings. Very often, in scripted or even conventional theatre 'improv', vocal manipulation serves as a vehicle for assuming different characters within a predefined scenario. However, in Instant Composition, the voicing-dancer is less defined by the more singularly pronounced character transformations observed elsewhere. Crucially, I draw a distinction between the material body and the character body. By 'material body', I refer to the less fictive concerns of the corporeal self. By 'character body', I am referring to the overtly performative, fictive presentation of self that undergoes, in theatrical terms, a transformation to appear other. So, this voicing-dancer is a stage figure who may be nameless, is not defined in psychophysical terms, and has the potential to carry multiple human and non-human characteristics in overtly ambiguous terms.

#### EXAMPLE

#### [Show clip]

4. Is the figure you see conjured here a singular one? If so, is this figure 'Mikhail' or is it 'Robert'? I suggest that in this example, sonority is not simply produced by a singular notion of character that uses the material body as a conduit; rather character(s) emanate pluralistically from the confluence of the material-character body. In Instant Composition, the voicing-dancer is creating and occupying, however opaquely, autobiographical spaces, where individual histories, herstories, theirstories, converge without disavowing fictional and imaginal worlds. This voicing-dancing figure carries traces of the past, both in terms of their own vocal evolution and in respect of their broader socio-cultural contexts. In this instance, it would be fair to suggest that the audience might anchor their core perception of this figure in the material body, rather than (or at least as much as) the character body.
  
5. And we can understand these events of 'co-construction' further by taking account of the particularities of improvisatory performance. Unlike pre-scripted material, improvisatory material makes the performance event one where performer and audience are engaged in its co-creation in a way that is doubly marked by their simultaneous encounter with it. We see process and product arriving together. This, crucially, both de-privileges the performer and further muddies the waters of meaning and representation. I would suggest that unlike pre-scripted material, in Instant Composition, a more egalitarian community of meaning-makers is forged through the event of listening in performance. With such an onus on the audience as listeners, they become co-poets.

6. However, like voicing, listening is neither a singular act, nor a homogenous one and it too is defined by its social and political matrices. The activity of listening is culturally defined and differentiated — gendered, racialised, classed, sexualised and so on. For example, Jennifer Stoeber has observed the sonic-line of racialised listening, offering the ‘listening-ear’ as a construct to critique dominant normative practices of listening. Akin to the gaze, her term points to “listening’s epistemological function as a modality of racial discernment” often through the singular prism of white elite masculinity (*The Sonic Color Line* 31). Lisbeth Lipari makes associated observations about listening but works towards an ethics of ‘interlistening’, which challenges a speech-centric perspective that has underplayed the “interaction, interdependence, intersubjectivity etc.” (*Listening, Thinking, Being* 9) of speaking-and-listening. In Lipari’s conception, listening is emphasised as a form of speaking “that resonates with echoes of everything we have ever heard, thought, seen, touched, said, and read throughout our lives” (9). Ethically, functionally, and aesthetically, voicing dancers and audience alike are compelled to develop and cultivate the skill of actively listening to each other in an intervocalic space.

### Class and Queerness: Intervocality's Intersectional Lens

1. Now, I don’t know how you variously read the voicing-dancer figure you have just witnessed through the video. I know you know it’s me, and you might already have constructed a decent picture of who I am and where I’m coming from, not least because you have been encountering my voicings over the past several minutes. To me, I sound a bit poshy and seem to evoke an atmosphere of plush learnedness. Even so, I daresay that in terms of class and queerness, the semiotics of the piece are not overt. Certainly, this is not an example (as we’ve seen in abundance elsewhere over the past couple of days) of work that references class. I’m sure a lot more information is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn about my social standing or my sexual slash gender identity. But, for me, that is not the point. For me, the currency of considering performance through an intervocalic lens, in the context of concerns about identity (class, sexual or otherwise), finds its value from the repeated attempts (and failures) to resolve its open-endedness. I’m saying that our desire or habit to ‘close off’, ‘resolve’, and ‘conclude’ the judgements we make about other people’s identities ‘trumps’ any desire to keep asking questions about them and embrace contradiction. This way, the notion of ‘the self’ or even ‘selves’ (plural) is troubled. Instead,

by taking an intervocal perspective, the notion of self is collectivised and with that comes an ethical imperative to do these voicings justice by receiving them with care and generosity.

2. For Cahill and Hamel,

What is needed is not a delinking of voice and identity, or a draining of vocal meanings related to membership in specific social groups (including, and maybe especially, marginalized social groups), but a recognition of vocal identity as a complex site of one's embodied, relational sense of self, as well as a site where structural injustices can be instantiated, perpetuated, and challenged. (56)

3. Following this, I suggest that the voicing-dancer in Instant Composition provides a dynamic site for considering intervocality in action where a community of listeners can practice an attunement that not only embraces but rehearses vocal mobility, ambiguity and multiplicity.

### Autobiographical bit - freestyle

*50-year-old voice.*

*I spent my **early childhood** in England, 'up north' in Lancashire living in the predominantly working-class industrial towns of Burnley and Colne. After long-term unemployment associated with the recession of the early 1980s, my dad secured a job 'down south' and we got a council-house transfer to rural Essex where, aged 9, my broad Lancashire accent really stood out.*

*Through my early teens, I adopted an 'estuary' accent before, as a young adult first on a Drama and Theatre Arts course at Birmingham University and then at drama school (Welsh College), I learned how to speak in Received Pronunciation (RP). At various points since, I have come to both revere and revile that ability for vocal adaptation.*

*More recently, I've come to consider this adaptation beyond the phonetic modulations we associate with accent to also take account of **volume, tonality and timbre**. Just a few months ago, I re-listened to my 21-year-old voice after digitising an old tape of an interview I conducted with the playwright Arnold Wesker back in 1995. I'd been prompted to recover the interview after peer-reviewing an early manuscript of *Theatre & Class* – an upcoming edition in Methuen's long-running 'Theatre &' series. As well as being happy to revisit an old conversation about arts, class and access, (my undergrad dissertation had been about Wesker and Clive*

*Barker's collaboration with the Trades Union Congress with the Centre 42 project of the late 1960s and early 1970s), I was shocked to hear how unmodulated my voice appeared to sound. I was surprised by its lack of range in terms of pitch. It sounded flat and oddly deep and inarticulate. And I don't think this was only to do with feeling intimidated by the occasion of interviewing a famous British playwright, but also to do with a lack of vocal confidence shaped by class and stifled by queerness.*

*To some extent, I associate that lack of confidence (and the associated imposter syndrome which remains with me even now) with my education. In our house, we didn't have books, we just had the TV on all the time. I certainly constructed a narrative that because of this my educational development was second-rate. Perhaps, on some level, I felt that continuing my practice and study of theatre at university (first generation) would offer me an escape route from a social class I didn't feel at home in.*

*But as Richard Hoggart noted in his now seminal *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), social mobility can lead one to feel 'anxious and uprooted' because a working-class child who moves towards middle class destinations as an adult is often left feeling as if they straddle both classes, while feeling they don't quite belong in either. In terms of my queerness, I now also hear my muted expression of that part of my identity. But that 21-year-old voice was also socially modulated by its 'closetedness' (I had yet to come out as gay to myself let alone anyone else) and the backdrop to this was the hostile environment of Thatcher's Section 28 policy.*

1. To return to 'intervocality', my voicing was an embodiment not only of inhibited class and sexual identity but of socially normative gender expression. As Cahill and Hamel observe:

The lived experiences of puberty, including vocal changes, are always refracted through culturally dominant and intersecting assumptions about one's gendered identity, social standing, and relationships. Contemporary social pressures to identify clearly, consistently, and normatively with one side of the gender binary, combined with voice's central role in expressing that identity, result in a social mandate to sound gendered, to register sonorously as clearly either male or female; that mandate shapes how the pubescent voiced body adapts to and takes up new vocal capacities and limitations. (87)

2. It only takes a small intellectual leap to see how voicing is imbricated in a web of social injustice that continues to regulate it across intersectional lines. Voicings are received and regulated by others (according to dominant, cisnormative sonorous standards) as much as they are produced by individuals. There is a collective authoring that renders sonority intervocal and, often, oppressive. ***As an aside, I'm increasingly interested in the politics of***

***volume – who takes up space with their raised voices or even shouting? Or when does raising ones voice or shouting enact moments of solidarity?***

## Closing

1. To round all this up, I suggest that the concept of intervocality can enrich the analysis of the voicing-dancer in Instant Composition, in ways hitherto overlooked while also explaining how we can come together and be with each other to rehearse a queering of expectations of how a person is supposed to sound through their voicings. To counter oppressive and regulatory forces, I agree with Cahill and Hamel's call for vocal justice that can begin to cultivate a generosity in our receiving practices.
2. We need to be with voicing as it moves.
3. And we see this happening in Instant Composition which, for me at least, emerges as a dynamic site where intersecting identities are negotiated and articulated intervocally. The performer, individual notions of identity formation and the attendant trope of 'finding one's voice' are all decentred.
4. Instead, attention shifts to the situated, relational connectedness of human beings who reach out to each other in what has become an ensounded, envociced and intervocalic space that models how we might practice listening generously and carefully in everyday life as well.