In between the harmonies

Reflections on relationships between the experience of singing close intervals and the cultivation of presence within movement training for performers

Introduction

In his book The Life of Lines (2015), anthropologist Tim Ingold writes that in ancient Greece harmonies were described as 'the way things [are] held together by the tension of contrary forces' (Ingold 2015: 12). The tension that Ingold is referring to has been one of the main interests throughout my training and performance career. The pull between musical intervals of close and far proximity fascinated me, the possibilities hiding in the spaces in between, as well as the impact these can have on a performer's movement qualities and presence.

When sung, intervals or harmonies as they are widely known, can evoke a range of sensations including joy, ease and discomfort. Each musical relationship carries distinct stories, songs and movements and impacts on the singer's body both through the sonic vibrations and the imaginative experiences which may arise from the melodic lines. In my early years as a vocalist, my embodied experience of vocalising specific intervals correlated with the ways relationships between two notes were described within my classical piano training. They could be harmonious or dissonant. Building on my training and work on folk singing, improvisation, somatic practices and dance, these experiences have shifted. In this writing, I wish to challenge, move beyond and recontextualize dualistic understandings of relationships between notes. In doing so, I will refer to dissonant intervals as close intervals. The choice of these words is informed by my ongoing research in the nuanced physical experiences that singing can facilitate. Considering the complexity of the embodied sensations singing can offer, I hope to reframe associations around dissonance within western performance training and to inspire further research into polyphonic song and movement training.

Using my own practice within the Moving Voice Laboratory[1] as a framework for reflection, I aim to offer a fresh perspective on bodies and their relationships to dissonance, whether that is sung, felt, imagined or performed. Through open questions, I reflect on the significance of embodying close intervals and on the possibilities present for cultivating presence within movement and voice training. These questions serve as a frame for my thinking and a metaphor for the precise, mobile and subtle experiences I am reflecting upon. My questions are doors to your own questions, specific to your practice and life.

As well as words, my exposition of these ideas involves recorded vocal elements which give a sonic body to the process I wish to present here'. You can choose to listen to these as you read or separately. Whichever you prefer, I would invite you to allow them to act as an embodied input into the enquiries of this paper.

Whilst I have done my best to include as much research relevant to my work as possible, it would defy the word-limit to include all of it. I acknowledge the work of those whose practice has had a significant impact on my thinking and practice, and I want to express my gratitude for all colleagues delivering high quality, meaningful work in our sector.

[1] The Moving Voice Laboratory is a workshop environment for researching relationships between movement and voice. Find more details see below section Moving Voice Laboratory.

Laying the foundations
Observing and reflecting on the impact sung intervals have on bodies in motion and the stories they carry has formed a significant part of my research and work. Over the years I have become increasingly fascinated by close intervals and the imaginative, energetic and performative potential hiding in the small spaces between notes. Whilst often described as unpleasant, I have found richness in the sense of conflict close intervals can create, and a spaciousness that has contributed to the growth of my performance skills and presence.

Directing my attention into their seemingly tight spaces and using the relationships proposed by the melodic lines as a framework for exploration, I have found a stronger embodied connection to my imagination, my creativity and others around me. This connection has felt distinctly different to previous experiences; it has felt fuller, electric and alive. It has felt 'profound' in the specific sense which Deikman gives to the term (Deikman, 2000), and has highlighted the interweaving relationships between presence and spirituality.

When I am present in the ways close harmonies allow me to be, I find ease in connecting with others around me and feel part of a whole. Through shifting the ways I pay attention to close harmonies, I have recognized that '[a]t its most basic, the spiritual is the experience of the connectedness that underlies reality' (Deikman 2000: 84). Deikman proposes that connectedness is the main ingredient of a spiritual living and this proposition speaks to my experience of singing, dancing, being with others in performance spaces that feel like oceans. There is a unique fluidity, listening, profound connection and a newness to each moment and whilst these qualities require rigorous training, these moments feel at ease with the flow of the world. These qualities are often specifically explored within performance environments but they are transferable to my everyday life. When allowing myself to be present and listen, I notice a shift in the qualities of my everyday life. In this sense, Deikman's proposition highlights the significance of relationships as spiritual pathways to a more present everyday experience.

Understanding me
Having studied the piano since I was 6 years old and moving on to study further at the Macedonian University in Greece, I found myself trapped in Westernized understandings of music. As a student, I felt a strong need to move to a musical world in which the tension created by close harmonies would not be swiftly resolved but celebrated and encouraged. Just before the end of my third year, I drifted from the classical and joined the folk department to study Northern Greek polyphonic music. The shift in soundscape significantly impacted on the ways I have since been perceiving and making music and movement work. The more I exposed myself to the tension offered by sung close harmonies, the more I was able to direct my attention to the spaces between them and move away from a narrow, tense experience of that friction. As I practiced embodying close intervals, I noticed a shift in my listening.

Whilst initially the space between the harmonies felt concrete, two notes with clearly defined boundaries vibrating closely to and pulling at each other, they transformed to an open-air playground of frequencies and potential. The boundaries of the notes remained clear but became porous. Perhaps finding myself in a world in which perfect tunings and defined resolutions were of little importance lifted a significant

amount of pressure and allowed this shift to take place. Perhaps my existing preconceptions of harmonies had become a boundary to paying attention to the quality of my sound and the impact it had on the present moment. This shift offered a rich space of possibilities and reflected Heidegger's view of a boundary as that from which 'something begins its presenting' (Heidegger 1971: 152). In this sense, inhabiting two notes of close proximity becomes a beginning to new possibilities.

These personal reflections clarified how the process of meeting close intervals anew had required me to retrain my attention. Rather than thinking about the notes and the tension they produced, I focused on the subtleties of the space between them. Rather than pushing to sustain the notes I had to sing, I imagined my body expanding and letting go. Similar to meditation practices, I conditioned my body to return to the present and to experience each moment anew. Rediscovering the reality of two notes vibrating together anew brought a profound connectedness to something which felt bigger than me, a whole which included other bodies, frequencies and possibilities.

Using a Mexican Nahuatlan[2] thought as a guide for theatre training, theatre director Nicolás Núñez presents the metaphor of a perforated mirror as imagery for a performer's commitment to seeing each present moment anew, and to rediscovering themselves. Relearning to be present with the relational qualities of each interval is a unique, embodied, spiritual experience that underpins our fundamental need to be connected to others. Intervals can become a 'perforated mirror' (Núñez 2019: 94) of the individual qualities of our being in relation to the world around us both within and out of performance contexts.

Intervals
SOUND FILE[3] *(click for sound)*

Twinkle, twinkle little star…
When singing Twinkle, twinkle little star, you might notice a shift in tone between the first and second twinkle. Twinkle, twinkle… This shift, space, distance is a musical interval.

Intervals can have a lot or very little space between their notes. The smallest interval used in classical Western music is a semitone. A tone is two semitones next to each other. A semitone is one step, a tone is two steps. A tone and a semitone can be created by playing or singing two notes simultaneously. This sound is considered dissonant in Western classical music contexts, with a semitone being 'the most

[2] Nahuatl is the language of the Nahua peoples in Mexico. The thought used by Nunez was:
"We have come to get to know our faces.
It is not by chance that we are here today. To be a perforated mirror.
To read ourselves like a piece of writing. To converse with our own hearts.
Here and now to look at the stars.
My heart is a flying bird." (Núñez 2019: 94)

[3] This is a sound file to accompany this writing. It is a safe link that you can click on and be redirected to my website. To play it, you must be connected to the internet. You can choose to play it whilst you read or to listen to it at a different time.

dissonant interval' (Wikipedia, n.d). Whilst there are other dissonant intervals[4] which are further apart in terms of instrument mechanics or frequency, this writing will reflect on experiences of embodying tones and semitones.

Unpicking dissonance

Within my classical piano training, intervals were defined as harmonious or dissonant. The use of the conjunction *or* highlights the sense that these two words contain two completely different sonic textures and experiences. A harmony would mostly consist of what was called a pleasant sound, and a dissonance of a disharmonious, or unpleasant sound. This distinction might have emerged due to the direct link of the Greek words for harmony and dissonance with the words agreement and disagreement.

Harmony or *armonia* in Greek derives from the verb *armozo* which means to fit together. Dissonance or *diafonia* translates as disagreement. Within Western classical practices, dissonant intervals are often perceived as inherently unpleasant. The above definitions limit intervals to the qualities of pleasantness or unpleasantness and fail to recognize the breadth of experiences one can have from listening to and embodying these sounds. Dissonance in Western music is built upon the assumption that the notes creating it will move to a harmonious resolution. So much attention is given to resolutions that it is as if the sole existence of dissonances is to be resolved to a beautifully sounding harmony. There is little space for relationships that remain in conflict for longer than what feels comfortable, or ones that remain unresolved.

Through coming into contact with dissonance, finding constructive ways of relating to it and developing strategies for 'surviving' these moments, growth is inevitable. As within Feldenkrais Method®[5], one might discover new ways of being 'through the process of confusion' (Diaz et all: 2008 88). Whilst not always easy, feeling confused, challenged, lost, scared, angry can lead to life-changing growth and transformation.

Can safe contact with discomfort support our sense of self, presence and resilience?

Theatre director Anne Bogart reflects on the significance of encountering discomfort and writes that exposure to 'discomfort and dissonance is as vital to our development as our need for food and water' (Bogart 2021: 5). By meeting discomfort, we develop strategies and tools for resolving conflict, we grow and we are given opportunities to understand our individual ways of relating to these experiences. Like children playing we learn through the doing. This learning is embodied, often subconscious, and informs our whole being. The journey to resolution requires time for internal and interpersonal exchange, an openness for encountering the unknown and a learning that goes beyond our cognitive, conscious thoughts. It is a deep process of self-discovery and growth.

[4] The augmented 4th and the diminished 5th are intervals of further proximity that are also considered dissonant.

[5] The Feldenkrais Method® is a somatic practice that uses gentle movement and directed attention to support people in developing new and effective ways of moving and living.

How do the spaces in between what you understand as dissonant or harmonious qualities feel in your body?

Considering an interval's lack of intention and emotional specificity, Western characterisations mostly reveal a narrow understanding of disagreement that places the emphasis on its uncomfortable nature and its immediate resolution. Whilst a disagreement or a close interval might contain elements of discomfort, it can also contain joy, surprise, unexpectedness, playfulness.

If we consider dissonances part of a wide spectrum of relationships, can our embodied experiences of singing, moving and being shift?

Within Eastern music practices, close intervals are more common and there is more space for close harmonies to unfold the breadth of their qualities. Ingold's definition of a harmony as the way things are held together leaves space for a multiplicity of experiences. It makes no reference to the emotional impact a harmony or dissonance can have on the listener but focuses on the tension between the forces creating the experience whether it is pleasant or unpleasant.

For me, fitting together does not rely on any specific qualities of tension, it simply contains the possibility of all of them. Fitting together is finding ways of co-existing that acknowledge and respect each of the parts' distinct qualities. Each relationship is seen as unique and is listened to carefully. Each part is experienced anew and is not restricted by past ideas or future expectations.

The practice of fitting together is simultaneously complex and simple. It requires an attention that is specific to the now and an openness that is soft, compassionate, curious, alive and present. It requires knowing the points of tension and surrendering into them, with surrendering here suggesting a willingness to follow and to discover a way through, rather than a loss of agency and self. For me, fitting together is acknowledging and existing within the wide spectrum of the nuances beyond harmonies and dissonances.

Working alongside this fitting together, I have found richness in encountering dissonance. Both within my movement, theatre and music practices I have experienced shifts in the ways I embody, perform and communicate material and an endless curiosity to dive deeper into the spaces of close harmonies.

How can movement and voice training support performers in developing tools for using dissonance as a ground for growth?

As my teaching and investigation into close harmonies deepens, I observe repeating patterns. In an attempt to sing close harmonies, a majority of performers initially tense. This tension manifests predominantly on the neck, eyebrows, shoulders, collar bone, jaw, root of the tongue, and the hips. It also impacts on their energy, relationship to other bodies and qualities of listening. I notice that their breathing can become shallower and that they can find it challenging to sustain notes, to connect to other performers and to find a creative flow.

This tension often reveals which parts of the body I, as a teacher, need to tend to more closely so they can return to a more homeostatic state. Recognising that muscles 'do not work in isolation' (Bartoskova 2021: 205) but in synergy with each other through the nervous system, this tension also directly impacts on the ways participants move, embody and tell stories. Their bodies seem trapped. The range of their movement qualities narrows, and they fall into more habitual ways of moving. The tension that Ingold refers to has a physical manifestation which feels as if the body pushes away from the conflict of the sound whilst the sound aggressively pulls the body into its vibratory sphere. Those singing often stop and begin laughing or sometimes cry as a result of the stress the tension of the notes cause them. I observe that the unnecessary tension caused by this experience is a manifestation of a performer's relationship to discomfort.

Interestingly, this is a much more common phenomenon in one-to-one sessions, while in group contexts, this anxiety can be less identifiable. It is however still subtly present. Do participants feel that they could hide their response to close harmonies amongst the other bodies? It is curious that it is often easier to access a more expansive sense of listening when embraced by a collective mass of bodies and sounds. It is as if we can use others as protective shields of our fears and expectations, and as support for moving beyond these.

What might this reveal about our communal nature as humans?

Some performers transform their discomfort to a judgement of the quality of their voice or ability to sing/vocalize and move. In these moments participants are at their most vulnerable. The closer the notes are, the more vulnerable performers can feel. These observations raise questions about the relationship between the closeness of the notes sung and the performers' sense of agency. The semitones and tones, the most intimate of intervals, come with a pull so strong that it can unearth fears, insecurities and vulnerabilities, and can make the performer lose their ground. The strong pull of the notes deprives the performers of their sense of familiarity, and they lose control of their breath. It is as if close harmonies are so intimate that those singing can lose themselves in them.

How can singing two notes have such a strong impact on people?

It is important to note that I have only observed this sense of loss of control when working with singing. When working with instrumentalists, and whilst the strong pull of the close harmonies is still there, the physical repercussions noted when singing are not present. This is perhaps due to the nature of the voice to communicate who we really are, to convey thoughts and feeling and reveal our cultural background and heritage (Berry 1973).

What do I, as a pedagogue, need to do to support participants in developing a spacious embodying of the notes and a listening that will encourage a strong sense of self?

This research has brought new perspectives on my pedagogical practice and performance making and has inspired a passion for creating spaces where presence

and resilience can be nurtured. It has also challenged engrained Western preconceptions of dissonance and has raised questions around cultural understandings of dissonance and discomfort[6]. My curiosity around close intervals led to a commitment to developing a practice that allows me to experience their relationships anew and one that will offer insights into the ways I use my body.

This work has shaped the Moving Voice Laboratory whitin which exploring dissonance is key in uncovering the potential of each performer.

Moving Voice Laboratory

The Moving Voice Laboratory is a series of workshops which provide space for performers of all disciplines to explore relationships between song, text and movement. Founded in 2016 and facilitated by me, it takes place in a variety of contexts within the UK and Europe.

Combining movement and voice technical training with improvisation and independent tasks, this work preparers performers and ensembles to tell stories through movement, text and song, and supports them to develop creative agency, cultivate presence, deepen their listening and grow their resilience. Drawing on the principles of the Russian Laboratory structures established by theatre directors Konstantin Stanislavski and Vsevolod Meyerhold in the late 1800s – early 1900s, the Moving Voice Laboratory is an environment within which new embodied knowledge can be generated (Brown 2019). The training is interdisciplinary and moves away from body-mind and voice-mind dualisms, working with the body as a whole.

Following the essence of the laboratory spaces, it creates a contained space within which 'intertwining practices, territories, pedagogies and ideologies' (Brown 2019: i) can meet and grow. It is a space of exchange, experimentation and transformation. Drawing on their personal stories, participants build upon and utilize their skills to share performative material that serves as 'a provocation for the spectator' (Wolford 1997: 8) and themselves. For me, Wolford's provocation implies the ability to share stories that challenge established understandings of everyday life and raise questions around existing ecological and socio-political structures. Through training performers to carefully tune into their stories and their relationships with their every day, the Moving Voice Laboratory supports them to develop the ability to be present in performance.

How can shifting narratives around dissonance inform relationships between bodies and stories, and nurture presence?

Nurturing presence requires simultaneously employing attention and letting go of it. Recognising that attention both 'modifies and is modified by what it attends' (Home-Cook 2015: 39), the process of growing presence entails the fundamental qualities of an attention that is both precise and lose, circular and linear, feeding into and being fed by each moment. This attention does not employ a narrow concentration that aims to analyze, memorize or criticize a singular phenomenon. Rather, it is an attention that engages the performer in embodied, interpersonal and active ways.

[6] Discomfort here is used to describe the unease and friction that can emerge out of singing close intervals and is not referring to physical or emotional distress.

Paying attention to be present is an experience that engages all the senses, it is a 'dynamic embodied attending in the world' (Home-Cook 2015: 37). Recognising the challenges of inhabiting dynamic, embodied ways of being due to contemporary sedentary, screen-focused living, the Moving Voice Laboratory is a process that invites participants to consider slowing down, paying attention to what already *is* and allowing for new possibilities to emerge.

The how

To facilitate such a process curate pedagogical structures which are flexible and responsive. Drawing on my ongoing movement, voice, somatic practice and performance experiences I offer participants skills that respond to the performative needs of the(ir) now.

The Moving Voice Laboratory training combines somatic practices, contemporary dance, improvisation and psychophysical practices, and voice training which includes singing, text delivery and improvisation. In her book 'Somatic Voices', Christina Kapadocha explains that the term somatic describes 'any process that emerges from the state of being or having a living body' (Kapadocha 2021: 2). The combination of training offered within the laboratory works with the body as a whole beyond mind-body and voice-body dualisms. We work with the body as an organism that is continuously evolving.

Within this work, my research on close intervals is prominent. Through teaching a variety of choral, polyphonic songs from Greece, Bulgaria, Georgia, Scotland and Ireland, I draw participants' attention to the relational qualities of the melodic lines within the performative materials we use. Clashing, cutting, weaving, pulling, mirroring, echoing, imitating, contradicting, contrasting, supporting, blocking are some examples of the ways a melodic line can relate to another within these songs. Further to Ingold's contrary forces, polyphonic songs incorporate complex relationships that echo those of our everyday lives. Using the principles of these meetings as beginning points, participants explore relationships between their movements, imagination, stories, songs and the other bodies around them.

It is striking to witness preconceptions around these relational qualities manifesting on bodies in motion. Often unconsciously, performers will embody movement behaviours that feel distant from and contrary to their intentions. In these moments, societal and cultural embodied habits become apparent, and performers are invited to notice them. The process of noticing can challenge them and make them more vulnerable. Building on Chambers-Coe's proposition that creative flow is experienced as 'vibrational currents *in* and *between* bodies' (Chambers-Coe 2023: 167) in these moments, the energetic currents in and between bodies become disrupted. Their attention and listening narrow, the connection and non-verbal communication weakens, and their creativity is inhibited. As with singing close harmonies, performers lose the sense of spaciousness in their bodies and in between each other. It is in these moments of observation that presence can be nurtured.

Can you notice without judging and trying to change?

By guiding performers' attention to recognising existing behavioural patterns that might inhibit their creative agency, and by offering them strategies through which

they can allow their attention to wander in new territories, transformation can happen.

What can we learn from the movement of the sung voices about the ways we relate to and resolve conflict, or about the ways we chose to relate to others within a movement context?

When sharing polyphonic songs with the Moving Voice Laboratory ensembles, I create complex harmonious arrangements. The vocal warm-ups include sung, sustained close intervals in which participants are encouraged to feel the pulling tensions between the two notes, and to trust the process of learning through exposure to dissonance. Within a few sessions a shift is already taking place. With regular exposure, relaxation techniques and rigorous training of attention, the spaces in between the notes open up for them, too. They begin to breathe in the vibratory spaces between the notes and to hear new possibilities. The way they listen to each other and themselves begins to expand. It becomes more active, spacious, trusting, confident, curious, attentive and precise. The retreating attitude towards the initial fear and discomfort of a sound is replaced by calmness of mind and a welcoming spirit. The sounds 'touch each other' (Olsen 2021: 31) differently. Olsen discusses the power of the voice to touch and how this touch can vary in intention and impact. It is as if in the moments of shift of listening, the sonic touch becomes clearer and easier to feel.

Physically this shift becomes apparent, too. There is a rekindled passion for play, exploration, exchange and connection. The vulnerability of the bodies in the space is more present than ever before but is welcomed and held by everyone. I see bodies moving in new ways which seem more honest, connected and resilient. I see bodies that yearn for connection, bodies that are present. Reflecting on actor trainer Nicolás Núñes' psychophysical training practice, scholar Deborah Middleton writes that being present is a performer's means of 'energetic, emotional, imaginative power' (Middleton 2019: 159). Nurturing presence fuels bodies to be creative, dynamic and confident.

I observe that this shift happens when each participant begins to listen to the sound they actually make in relationship to each other, and stop looking for the sound they think is expected of them. By lifting expectations and nurturing presence the boundaries of the notes become penetrable. The notes invite new ways of engaging with them and their intervals transform into spaces from which something emerges. This *something* is the clarity and acceptance of each individual presence.

The ensemble carries a sound that balances the individual voices and a collective unified sound. They move as one with individuals confidently taking space within the ensemble. The close harmonies become precise, light and carry an intriguing, complex tension. Their movements are rooted in the imaginative space of the ensemble. Often towards the end of the process, the melodic lines and the bodies seem to move in new ways, not forced together but entangled. The moving bodies are free, and their stories interwoven with each other. There is ease, playfulness and space. Kapadocka's observation of the problematic 'distancing between voicer and listener' (Kapadocha 2021: 175) is, in these moments, dissolved and everyone is involved in a seamless exchange of offering and receiving.

As I sit and observe this process I am reminded of my young child. I see her in everyone, her genuine curiosity, her desire to play, discover and build relationships and her ability to create and inhabit worlds effortlessly. I wonder when we lose these abilities, and remark on how easy it now seems to find them again. I see people who care about each other, the process and their environment. Directing our attention to the qualities of the spaces between us, our meetings, our conflicts and dissonances will awaken our desire to be present again and will support us in finding resilience.

Witnessing the unfolding of the individual presence in the Moving Voice Laboratory space, I understand that my work is to be a safeguard; to guide participant's attention to what already exists in their bodies and to safely support them to explore the spaces and stories they carry. In stepping back from a facilitating that aims to solely develop technical skills, I see others more clearly and feel part of a whole. The subtleties, complexity and beauty of each performer flood the space and each individual is seen clearly. Their unconscious is present now, too, through the ways they hold their bodies, and the energy of the ensemble is electric. Participants' 'multiple aspects of being' are present and the performers carry a 'sense of integrated wholeness' (Chambers-Coe 2023: 160). This integrated wholeness is presence. Being present in such connected, free and playful ways is an acknowledgement of our aliveness. The meetings of the harmonies and the bodies can become metaphors for a fuller, more present living.

Conclusion

The distance between sung notes can offer new perspectives on the ways bodies move. Through learning how to listen closely to what they have to offer, performers can pay attention in embodied, active ways that strengthen their presence and resilience. This is an integral element of existing in and beyond close harmonies and of inhabiting a presence that is interwoven throughout every single moment.

Facilitating spaces in which performers can cultivate these qualities seems pertinent in times when presence is challenged by ecological and socio-political structures, infoxication[7] and individualism. Through the Moving Voice Laboratory, I have re-encountered anew the significance of the processes of learning and have drawn my attention away from the final destinations of my journeys. Rather than yearning for resolutions, I inhabit and embody experiences as a means for growth that is in-tune with the world around me and my needs. I encounter each session anew and each person as a well of possibilities for change.

Within this context, the learning that takes place is embodied and touches on fundamental qualities of living. The most important quality is, for me, connecting to others in dynamic and embodied ways. It is my hope that by participating in communal structures and activities such as singing and moving together, we can allow for new embodied, ecological and political possibilities to emerge. Within these emergent possibilities, bodies can confidently move and connect in ways which are harmonious, and dissonant, and all the qualities in between.

[7] 'Information overload (also known as infobesity, infoxication, or information anxiety,) is the difficulty in understanding an issue and effectively making decisions when one has too much information (TMI) about that issue.' (Wikipedia n.d.)

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