

Sing, O Muse: Vocality as Contemplative Practice

Sing, O Muse...
 Begin where it begins
 Sing as you have always sung
 Tell it for our time

— Penton (2022), original poetry / lyrics excerpt from my song ‘Muse’ inspired by Robert Fagles’ translation of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. (1996: 58-9)

This offering is a creative reflection on my practice with accompanying theoretical threads, musings, and considerations. My writing is a hybrid autoethnographic and poetic-postcritical¹ engagement that traverses the liminal spaces between my creative process and personal contemplative practices. The reader will find first-person engagements with my studio-centered voice methods accompanied by a sensitivity to spiritual aspects of creative work. Original poetic verses are imbricated with theoretical strands, embracing the fragility of a discipline-specific practice. I am not presenting an academic argument in the traditional sense, rather, I hope to offer the reader a glimpse into my creative and contemplative landscape and how devotion and inspiration sustain me in our deeply uncertain times—and that this ‘subtle work of the heart’ (Fripp 1982: 04:50) may do the same for others.

My creative work is centered in music, in an embodied vocal practice that embraces the movement of poetry and breath through the voice and body. In working with vocality² and original poetic text, I often draw on creative and contemporary re-imaginings of ancient Aegean-inspired spiritual practices and cosmogony (thus the impulse for the title of this piece) as well as taking inspiration from mythology, fairytale and literature of the Western canon, from global shared sacred story, and the cycle of the seasons. This work is intertwined with my contemplative spiritual considerations and shares space with imaginative and literary points of enquiry.³ Contemplative movement, visual

¹ I align with postcritical theorists such as Rita Felski (2015). In her enquiry, Felski explores the limitations of the critical tradition with its suspicious and disenchanted purview: ‘as if the only way to make sense of something were to assume the role of an eagle-eyed detective tracking down the invisible forces and maleficent entities that have conjured it into being’ (27). In attending academic talks Felski notes that one ‘has learned to expect the inevitable question: “But what about power?”’ and she posits that new questions are in order, such as “But what about love?”’ (17). With this in mind, I am, firstly, a practitioner and then a theorist only if the theory inspires and supports my ongoing creative work. I am highly engaged in the practice of music and I am far less active within the confines of the theoretical dimensions related to practice. In my writing, this positionality is supported by the imbrication of original poetics (often including music media) with practical reflections and accompanying theoretical concerns (academic resources share equal space with popular writers and artists). For a deeper engagement with my perspective on postcritical discourse, please see the chapter in my thesis, ‘Postopera, the Postdramatic & New Opera Practices: A Theoretical Framework’ (Penton 2021: 5).

² To orient the reader, my use of the term ‘vocality’ is defined as ‘the extensive range of sound of the human voice – from singing to conventional speech and extra-vocalic expressions: “a spectrum of utterances broader than lyrics-based singing” with a focus upon the “bodily aspects of vocal utterance, beyond its linguistic content”’ (Karantonis and Verstraete 2014, 4 in Penton 2021: 10).

³ My vocal music projects (solo and collaborative live performance and media works), variously, have embraced the heroines of Greco-Roman tragedy: *Ottavia* and *Klytemnestra*; the mytho-historical figure of Sappho; the composition of original hymns to the Muse and to the god Apollo (inspired by Homer’s *The Odyssey* and the *Homeric Hymn to*

art as process-practice, and journaling are also part of my daily work. These foundational approaches form a reciprocal framework for my voice and music practice.⁴

I begin with the idea of discipleship. The Latin root of the word ‘disciple’ and ‘discipline’ is *discipulus* ‘pupil’ or ‘student’—a person who devotes themselves to learning. The word ‘devote’ is found in the Latin for ‘dedicate’ and ‘vow.’ Devotion, then, is an act of love but something more—it is a *commitment* to love. As a dedicant of music, with voice as my primary instrument, when addressing music I might ask, ‘How shall I sing of you who are in all ways worthy of singing?’ (Merrill 2011: 205). This question spurs me to embark on the task to realize a creative vision. Thus begins an alchemical process, one that is personal, creative, and technical; a process that meets the demands of music, or rather, rises to the calling of the Muse.

I re-envision and re-imagine artistic discipleship by centering the artist as disciple of the Muse. I define the Muse variously: as an energy signature of a creative discipline, as a metaphor for the impulse and inspiration behind my creative work, as my relationship with music, and as a real anthropomorphic spiritual presence. Each of these expressions evoke and invoke the Muse as Mystery. John Keats expressed this paradox as ‘Negative Capability,’ that is, the artist’s ability to simultaneously hold creative / poetic truth with rationality: being ‘capable of uncertainties [...] without reaching after fact & reason’ (1817: n.pag.). For the artist-practitioner—myself, writing experientially from a studio-centered, creative-autoethnographic purview—the presence of the Muse evolves and morphs as an inspired, externally perceived sacred source as well as an internal guide intrinsic to the human psyche and to the creative process.

Discipleship and its intertwined devotional practice require attention, awareness, and compassion toward self and others. Discursive energies surrounding the concepts of discipleship and discipline may have strict, constricted, hierarchical, or punitive associations. I hope to reclaim and recontextualize discipleship as a process that embodies a devotional commitment to a practice rather than serving as a model for a goal-oriented paradigm or hierarchy of achievement. The paradox is that a discipline does foster achievement of personally defined goals and acquisition of skillsets. However, these achievements are received from a process of devoted learning—received as unexpected and un-strived for gifts—the blossoms and fruits of a dedicated journey.

In a traditional teacher-student model, learning usually takes place under the tutelage of an accomplished or wise educator. What if this teacher is the instrument itself? The voice itself? The body itself? The creative process itself? My practice is wholly intuitive, mystical, embodied, experiential, and experimental. The mystical dimension of singing and voicing is a practice in relationship to Mystery. As such, vocality is an expressive, embodied overflowing—a technical yet heart-centered discipline. Through the poetic sonority that emanates from and reverberates

Apollo, respectively); a Brothers Grimm-based song cycle; a number of music and video projects for the solstices and equinoxes; and many micro-operas including works rooted in the sacred cosmogony of the Western canon. See my portfolio of performance and music media works at mishapenton.com/projects (Penton 2024).

⁴ My movement practice is a hybrid of traditional fitness exercise, walking in nature, yoga, and Eastern meditation-inspired movement. Physical wellness is as essential to my vocal practice as mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness. My visual art practice is currently a whimsical and ephemeral daily watercolor practice of putting pigment to paper—the shapes and splashes and whirls of color are directly informed by the physicality of movement with attention to breath that initiates movement > that initiates sound. In addition, I keep a digital journal of daily musings and creative reflections.

beyond my being, the expressive resonances of language are ‘ways for the human body to sing the world’s praises and in the last resort to live it’ (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002: 218).⁵

As evidenced by the previous citation, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s writing beautifully expresses ideas regarding our delicate, ephemeral, corporal experience of being as well as addressing poetry’s ineffability. As a singer who works closely with the sonority of words—that is, the meaning-making processes present in the sound of language beyond-before denotative or referential meaning—it is this poetic sonority that vibrates through my body and out into the world. Breath wakes the voice and moves sound through my being to meet yours: ‘poetry...is essentially a variety of existence’ (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002: 174).⁶

Although this kind of embodied engagement is central to artistic and creative practices, Western philosophic discourse continues a considerable emphasis on analysis of the semantic rather than on lived experience. I continue to draw inspiration from thinkers such as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous,⁷ writers whose labyrinthine expressions circumvent and undermine signification by illuminating the meaning-making inherent in the embodied poetic. Jill Marsden, likewise, offers a contrast to the disembodied semantic via her engagement with Friedrich Nietzsche, noting the ecstatic dimension of creative expression wherein ideas arise through a ‘corporeal intelligence’ making it ‘difficult to say whether it is thought which enraptures the body or the body which enraptures thought’ (2002: 74). Along these lines, Adriana Cavarero, another theorist central to my work, writes that the vocal experience and its relational embodied practices subvert ‘philosophical canons’ and contrast ‘the tendency of philosophy to focus on the necessarily abstract semantic component of language, at the expense of its material and corporeal vocal component’ (2023: 10:43).

The vocal theoretical often (and surprisingly) neglects to centralize the artist-practitioner’s corporeal knowledge.⁸ In contrast, my life as an artist is fully engaged in the bodily experience of vocality. Abstraction removes me from experience. Abstraction relegates vocality and music to the theoretical, negating the expressivity of poetry and sidelining sonorous meaning-making processes—after all, ‘The world is not what I think, but what I live through’ (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002: xviii-xix). This concern and support for our embodied being-ness, speaks to me deeply—it often keeps me afloat, bolstering me spiritually and thus creatively. I become *inspired* in its Latin (*inspirare*) and Ancient Greek (*πνέω* / *pnéō* / numa) sense, that is, infused with spirit and breathed by a universal energy.

Inspiration is sometimes dismissed due to the propagation of trite wellness and self-care axioms on social media. Yet, for the artist, inspiration is a mindset to cultivate. Inspiration facilitates alignment with creative intention, that is, alignment with the Muse. Mindset nourishes the artist’s work and directly affects the ability to collaborate and to share work with each other and with our broader communities. This sharing of creative processes and accompanying outcomes is paramount in a world that may feel chaotic and overwhelming. Many of us feel that we are

⁵ See the chapter ‘Vocality & Embodiment’ in my thesis for a closer look at my work in relationship to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s writing (Penton 2021: 24-30).

⁶ The reader will find this Merleau-Ponty citation realized as a micro-opera vocal media work and can be accessed at my Vimeo page: <https://vimeo.com/497786123> (Penton 2021: 29). I have composed many micro-vocal works as well as pieces created as citations for imbricated written-media texts, including in my Ph.D. thesis.

⁷ I often return to the writings of Adriana Cavarero, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva as I have yet to find contemporary theorists whose work inspires me in the same way.

⁸ There are, of course, exceptions to this neglect as more practitioner-scholars are writing about their experiences. The work of singers and artistic researchers Elisabeth Belgrano, Päivi Järviö, and Fides Krucker come to the fore for me here.

teetering on the precipice of an unknown and catastrophic future. However, imagining and then creating the world we desire is the only way forward. On social media, I often use the hashtag #StayInspired to remind myself and others that we are in service to creative inspiration.

One of my favorite definitions of creativity is from Elizabeth Gilbert:

Q: What is creativity?

A: The relationship between a human being and the mysteries of inspiration
(2015: ix)

Robert Fripp, the English rock guitarist writes extensively about his life as a professional musician and craftsman in service to music, ‘In a musical sense, acquired musical skill is an instrument placed at the service of the Muse’ (2006: n.pag.). For decades, Fripp’s work has inspired me to continue my own. So, I, too, have set about acquiring the skill to realize a creative vision that is tasked me by the Muse, and this skill acquisition is a practical and a mystical discipline. Fripp asks,

How does the musician open themselves to this relationship with music? And for that, one needs a discipline, that is, a body of techniques which enables you to develop this relationship with music: training the body, mind, and the heart. (03:32)

For Fripp, the sensitive training of the heart is rooted in mediative practice, in the cultivation of awareness, attentiveness, and care in all facets of one’s life. Likewise, discipline and its companion, devotion, is central: there is no way forward for an artist without a daily commitment that serves the work, whether that form is solo, collaborative, or communal:

Discipline enables us to hold ourselves in front of a challenge, or a task.
The work is in meeting the challenge, not acquiring the discipline.
But until we have acquired the discipline, our proper work has not begun.
So, until then, our work is to acquire discipline; in the knowledge that this is not an end in itself, only the means to an end.’ (Fripp 2001: 15.37)

And this end is ‘Where music comes not only to visit occasionally, but comes to live’ (Fripp 1982: 02:30). The subtle work of the heart is essential and when the three disciplines come together and are working, ‘music begins to play the musician’ (04:50). It is this understanding gained through the embodied experience of a disciplinary practice that becomes more than a series of techniques to acquire skill—it is not, after all, ‘only the means to an end.’ Without a ‘true’ mindset—an aligned devotional aspiration—the artist may become lost in our world that is at once all beauty and terror and chaos and wonder. This heart-centered practice of awareness and attentiveness expands, fills, and spills forth, infusing collaborators and community with a kind of healing and inspiration unavailable otherwise. It’s no surprise, then, that I find solace, joy, and energetic reinforcement in aphorisms such as, ‘In strange and uncertain times, a reasonable person might despair. But Hope is unreasonable, and Love is greater even than this’ (Fripp 2022b: n.pag.).

Here, dear reader, allow me to sigh a soft dream-song close to your ear:

Night⁹
 The moon hides
 She perches
 Wingèd
 On my rooftop
 She holds a deck of cards
 Between slender palms
 Her skin is all iridescent light and shadow
 Speckled with the birth of stars
 She pulls a card
 And without looking
 Releases it from her fingertips
 It floats down my dark chimney
 And slides to a landing on the cold hearth
 Whisper-like
 Breath-like
 Song-like
 I reach down
 And pick up the small rectangle of paper
 I lift it to the glow of my lamp
 Its image shows an open doorway
 I turn it over:
 ‘Creative events reach back from the future and draw us towards them’
 (Fripp 2022a: n.pag.)

I bring attention to my breath and how my voice gently touches sound (Linklater [1976] 2006: 227). I lightly vocalize: my voice swoops and rises and falls in easy siren waves. As the sound flows through my torso, arms, and legs, my body responds with movement—an *aaaahhhhhh* travels from deep in my belly, vibrates the sides of my rib cage, and escapes through my fingers as I stretch skyward. The vocal tones continue to resonate through my bones and stream out of my hands and feet, sending fan-like energy waves up and out from the crown of my head. My sound becomes the impulse for movement and through this resonant and breath filled experience, ideas and emotions that may have been in stasis or knotted begin to loosen. Tim Ingold brings this related and lovely idea:

sound, like breath, is experienced as a movement of coming and going, inspiration and expiration. If that is so, then we should say of the body, as it sings, hums, whistles or speaks, that it is *ensounded*. (2011: 139)

⁹ This is an original poem except for the Fripp citation at the end of the poem.

I am *ensounded* and energy moves but not randomly: there is a wisdom and intelligence behind the free-form expression. Expressivity infuses my vocal improvisations that are at the heart of my compositional approach—and I step into:

Breath: a river¹⁰
 I step into its stream
 And release my body to the flow
 I am immersed
 My voice touches the surface
 Sound ripples
 Breath breathes me
 Music sings me
 My 'world exists in a universe of possible music'
 (Merleau-Ponty [1948] 2004: 99)

I direct my attention to the interplay of my internal experiences and the relationality of my body in space. Movement segues into spontaneous vocal sounding. Through this attentiveness, I settle into my grounded energy and listen: body wisdom emerges. As Maxine Sheets-Johnstone writes, the 'complexities and subtleties of kinesthetic experience' ([2009] 2010: 11) come to the fore. Through attentiveness and awareness, I try to make sense of my devotion to expressivity and to music—my body moves and sounds in time and space and the world around me shifts and morphs in amazing, terrifying, and seemingly unprecedented ways. There is respite and ease in 'how thinking in movement is at the core of our sense-making' (12), that is, movement is the foundation of how we make sense of the world (11). Without movement there is no vibration, no sound, no voice. My voice is unseen movement. My instrument is my body and yet I cannot see my voice. The presence of my voice is in the air that vibrates to create sound, enfolding me in its waves.

On a summer day in New England, I experience an expressive arts workshop with a small group of like-minded seekers:

Light streams through translucent curtains¹¹
 Warming my
 Feet
 Bare feet
 I *breathe*
 Tiptoe prance swoosh
breathe
 and
 Dash saunter scoot
 Savor
breathe

¹⁰ This is an original poem except for the Merleau-Ponty citation at the end of the poem.

¹¹ This is an original poem except for the Merleau-Ponty citation at the end of the poem.

Across the honey-hued wood floor
 And then —
 A pause and a pivot:
 A sigh
 My voice catches the morning sun
 And swirls and shimmers
 In blue and yellow and gold
 ‘Like crystal, like metal and many other substances, I am a sonorous being’
 (Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1968: 144)¹²

My embodied sonorous language—the language that my body speaks—offers glimpses of voice-body and psyche as ‘not separate entities but mysteriously a totality’ (Whitehouse [1958] 1999: 42). The insights that arise are sometimes playful and sometimes profound but feel like authentic inner knowing.

I am voicing the energy of movement

In paying attention to ideas and inspirations that come through my practice, my energy feels grounded, centered, wise, and joyful. My voice and movement practices evoke a *beginning energy* or *blank canvas energy*, preparing for the creative tasks ahead. I notice the rise and fall of my breath and this reminds me to pause and to tune into the energetic qualities of the moment—to notice what feels easy or resisted in an assessment of now-ness. Developing this kind of awareness sets the conditions for creative work to emerge and nourishes each phase of an artistic journey. I have a sense that conditions are optimally set for the work ahead.

Through tuning into my body, I notice my edges and boundaries. I strike a delicate balance between intensity and self-compassion, technique and exploration, and craft and wellness. My intuitive energy systems feel aligned and an inner knowing is foregrounded, affirming that I am doing the work that is meant to be done—work only I am capable of as a unique conduit for the creative process, just as every artist has their own work to do. Richard Shusterman’s concept of somaesthetics speaks to this experience. It is somaesthetic awareness that permeates my work with an embodied groundedness in the experiential and spiritual details of creative practice. For Shusterman, somaesthetics subverts the semantic reinforcement of mind-body duality and, instead, offers ‘an aesthetic discipline which pragmatically unites the somatic and the spiritual through the integrated exercise of body and mind’ (2000: xiii). Shusterman’s focus on corporeal understanding is concerned ‘not with saying but with *doing*’ and conceives somaesthetics ‘as a comprehensive philosophical discipline concerned with self-knowledge and self-care’ (276).

How an artist cares for themselves is an act of self-compassion interwoven with the creative task and entwined with how the work emerges into the shared space of our world. Because my voice-body-voice are one, caring for my instrument is also caring for my body. There is no separation between my creative inspiration, artistic ideas, body, voice / voice-body, psyche, and the technical details of bringing work to fruition. My concern is ‘not with saying but with *doing*’, and this *doing* is why my writing, such as what you are reading here, is often filled with poetic engagements. I blur the boundaries between concept, theory, analysis, and my creative

¹² This is another Merleau-Ponty citation that I realized as a micro-opera vocal media work and can be accessed at my Vimeo page: <https://vimeo.com/497786134> (Penton 2021: 27).

contributions. If I am honest, I seek a destruction of those boundaries. The magic is in the doing of the thing, not in the talking about the doing. Nor is it in the theorizing. Nor the analysis of the doing.¹³ The meaning is in the work itself and in our experiential engagement with sharing our practices. Merleau-Ponty puts it this way: an art work's

nature is to be seen or heard and no attempt to define or analyze it, however valuable that may be afterwards as a way of taking stock of this experience, can ever stand in place of the direct perceptual experience. ([1948] 2004: 95)

Susan Sontag famously confronted analysis and interpretation in the arts,¹⁴ offering instead the experience of transience in an encounter with the 'luminousness of the thing in Itself' (1966: 9).

Luminous! Luminous! Luminous!

That is the word.

In closing, I leave you with a reflection, an invitation, an invocation...

My journey is a personal and a mystical one:
An act of faith in Music
An act of faith in the work that is entrusted to me
An act of faith in a disillusioned world

Here in Texas
When the cicadas¹⁵ sing their long summer songs
I open my window and sing into the void of night
We sing together
We cannot see each other

¹³ I align with composer John Croft whose articles, 'Composition is Not Research' (2015) and 'Composing, researching, and ways of talking' (2016) set off a firestorm in music academia (predominantly in the United Kingdom). Croft writes that, 'the very idea that musical composition [I expand this to include all of my creative work] is a form of research is a category error: music is a domain of thought whose cognitive dimension lies in embodiment, revelation or presentation, but not in investigation and description' (2015: 6). Embodiment! And 'revelation' is the magic word for me—that is, to reveal, often through an encounter with the divine. Relatedly, in arts and humanities academia, it is the relentless ontological enquiry and ideological value judgments accompanied by 'the piercing but one-eyed gaze of critique' (Felski 2015: 17) that is so toxic to creative expression—in effect, twisting an artist's work into an apologia.

¹⁴ Sontag calls interpretation impoverishing and depleting: a 'revenge of the intellect upon the world' (4). Even in 1966, she saw the dangers of art as 'content'—a word we use so freely on social media today—making creative work 'into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories' (6). This categorization, in effect, makes creative work fodder for advertising algorithms and AI learning models.

¹⁵ I am thinking here of the tale of the cicadas recounted in Plato's *Phaedrus*. The cicadas, once men who were so intoxicated with song that they forgot to eat or drink and thus died. The Muses turned them into cicadas, creatures who could sing all day and night without need of nourishment, with their sole job being to report to the Muses which humans were duly offering work in their honor (see Ferrari: 26).

We cannot discern the way ahead

We sing
For the Muse is listening

We sing
For this is our offering

We sing
For our world
In desperate need of inspired magic

May our creations be luminous

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