

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

Vocalise – Singing Without Words

Elainse Kalinowski

In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
The Alfred University Honors Program

December 16, 2016

Under the Supervision of:

Dr. Luanne Crosby

About my Honors Thesis: Inspiration and Process

I was thinking about what I could explore for my thesis topic by considering the things which I aimed to complete during my last semester. I had a BFA Show to organize and a Senior Music Recital to prepare, so I decided it would be best to theme my thesis around my Senior Music Recital. I took an independent study on world music and learned about how different cultures sing vocables, or spiritual songs that don't contain any words. I asked Luanne Crosby about wordless songs and she showed me some wordless vocal compositions called vocalises.

Learning the melodies of the songs were not as difficult as learning the techniques for singing them. There were not many places to breathe in between wordless phrases, so I had to figure out how to sing the songs as if I was telling a story and breathe where musically it would make sense. I had to imagine what kind of message would be appropriate for the melodic phrases so I could emotionally and dynamically accommodate the compositions.

I wrote my own composition and sang it on a made up language. The song was inspired by all of the Native American, Indian and African Music I had been listening to in class. I didn't intend for it to sound like a specific region of music, but I did deliberately try to incorporate singing techniques that I don't normally use, like sliding, accenting and brighter tonality. The song also uses irregular meters and rhythms. I didn't know what to sing the song on, so I just spoke in gibberish and the phrase "Ayahiyao" seemed to stick.

Research taught me more about vocables and vocalise music, such as the significance of syllables, vowels, breathing and volume. Vocalise songs are often used as vocal warm ups to help improve singing. My Senior Music Recital is the result of four years of vocal training and self-motivated research of singing without words. The first part of my concert is a talk on and demonstration of vocalise music. The second half of my concert is a collection of songs I have



Music takes on many forms and applications in our everyday lives. People hear recordings of music artists and concerts in their homes and in public facilities, covering a wide variety of genres. Some people hear music in more simplistic forms as well, like in the sound of a garage door opening or a bird tweeting in a tree. What qualifies as authentic and acceptable music is so broad that the definition is indistinguishable beyond regional or individual aesthetic tastes. Vocal pieces generally serve to tell a story or a message through music, but singing encompasses more than just communicating a message to the listener. Vocalises are songs that are sung on no words or nonsense syllables, sometimes applied as special effects in a song, used as a vocal exercise or for emotionally or spiritually focused music. Through vocables, dynamics, tempo and technique, a vocalise can provide quality entertainment, practical application and benefits to the skill set and condition of a singer's voice.

Instruments produce a variety of pitches and timbres that musicians skillfully play to produce music. An instrument can be as simple as a stick hitting against a rock or as sophisticated as a calibrated mechanism creating predictable and consistent sounds. Of all the instruments mankind has used, the oldest and most familiar one is the human voice. "The human body has such a shape and design, making the human voice our first, and still primary, musical instrument" (Crowe, 70). Singing has a history that is as old as human civilization itself. The way singing is practiced around the world varies from culture to culture, but tradition and conventions still shape the way different cultures use the voice as an instrument. People sing to teach old stories, worship a deity, imitate found noises or simply for fun and entertainment. One of the oldest applications of singing in cultures around the world is the use of vocables.

Although vocables are described as nonsense syllables, it's hardly justifiable to call them that in some cases. In "Old MacDonald," the phrase "e-i-e-i-o" used to be "Ohio-i-o" in the 1917

publishing of "Old MacDougal" (Nettleingham, 84-85). The vocable in the song may be a nonsense phrase, but originally it was derived from a real word. Ohio is turned into a partially vocable phrase by taking the last two syllables of the word and repeating it. In regular speech adding syllables doesn't make sense, but in music words can be altered to serve the rhythms and melody of a song. "[...] Vocables can be archaic or obsolete words [...] they can imitate animal cries [...] they are a fixed, integral part of the music and poetry [...] they are genre specific in some song styles [...] they fill out melodies and weld text to songs" (Frisbie, 347). A vocalise is not necessarily just a song that has vocables, but vocables define the sounds in wordless vocal text.

Vocables take on several different forms and meanings such as onomatopoeia, interjections and elongated words in secular and religious songs. "Even syllables can have meaning, and sometimes it is the syllables, not the words, that make a song most powerful" (McDonald, Par 10). Navajo music has vocable syllables integrated in their words, but some of the nonsense syllables are based on real words. "Navaho poets greatly distort the words to make them fit their tunes" (Frisbie, 349). Similar distortions of words can be found in songs like G. F. Handel's "O sleep, why dost thou leave me?" the word "[...] wandering [...]" (measures 17-20) is elongated on the first vowel. The word itself isn't as important in the song as the musical phrase that extends it. The sound is not a vocable because the word is known, but the word itself isn't being spoken normally through the way it is being sung. The musical phrase wanders and poetically plays off the lyrics, but the integrity of the word is lost in singing the phrase. The word serves the music rather than vice versa.

Religious texts that are sung on vocables have various causes for being sung in a way that is incomprehensible. Navajo vocables are sometimes imitations of animal calls which they

address worshipped spirits. “Deities’ calls have variously termed imitative devices, examples of onomatopoeia, and musical metaphors” (Frisbie, 359). The calling upon a deity isn’t done in an understood language because the sounds are considered sacred.

The songs sung on this occasion, although it consists mostly of meaningless syllables, is, perhaps, the most important of the whole ceremony. The singers are drilled long and thoroughly in private before they are allowed to sing in public. It is said that if a single syllable is omitted or misplaced, the ceremony terminates... Visiting chanters, and others who know the song well, have sung it at other celebrations of the rite, listen attentively and, if they note an error, proclaim it (Frisbie, 373).

The words hold a musical and poetic significance so great that it is worth ceasing the music if it is sung incorrectly. The meanings of the words are not understood by language, but by significance of sounds produced. The conventions behind the pronunciation of specific syllables are so strict because the texts are believed to be and treated as holy. The idea that music can be so profoundly changed by the way it is sung is a concept that goes beyond religious belief.

Vocalise music lacks a message to be conveyed through the music except through emotions. There is no story or message being told, but there may be one expressed. In “Vocalise I” by Andre Previn, there are repeated phrases that go through a series of alterations. The key is major and becomes minor, darkening the tone of the song. The dynamics swell and increase as higher notes are introduced. The notes start climbing and descending by half steps, causing the song to evoke a feeling of growing and shrinking. The piece can sound dramatic with both broad dynamics and a fluid tempo. The melody is somewhat spooky but also very calming. A song like Fanny Mendelssohn’s “Fruling” is much more fast paced and lively, but it is known that the song is about springtime to those who understand the German lyrics. Removing lyrics leaves room for

the listener's imagination to make sense of what they are hearing and interpret the piece without subjectivity. The mystery behind the message of the melody holds enough intrigue to keep a listener invested in the piece, especially since simple phrases within the song subtly change over the course of the piece.

Aside from entertainment and provoking thought and emotion, vocalizes have a practical application in animal husbandry. Kulning is a form of high pitched singing used to call herd animals in Northern Sweden. "The main function is that of communication between the woman and the animals [...] It consists phrases of varying length and in melic styles, of parlando-like speech-song phrases with improvised words, sharp calls or real song phrases, all of them in free rhythm" (Johnson, 44). A high soprano sings loud and piercing calls to gain the attention of her animals, but she isn't merely calling to them. The woman herding is often singing her own improvised phrases to get the animals to come to her. In practice it's an effective method to get the attention of cows. The songs themselves vary, but they're generally sung loudly and at a high pitch. "Typical values for normal conversational speech are about 6cm WaC [...] singing was 18 cm WaC [...] the subglottic pressure during kulning showed values up to a maximum of no less than 60 WaC" (Johnson, 48). The air pressure the voice produces is significantly stronger and more powerful, which in excess could tire out the vocal chords.

Abdominal muscles, the diaphragm, open space in the throat and the position of the tongue and jaw all have significant effects on the way a song sounds. Rachmaninoff's "Vocalise," is a highly intensive song on a vocalist's chords. The notes are often suspended and the highest note is a C#6. The endurance a voice needs to practice and perform this piece is very high. Practicing the song incorrectly could fatigue and damage the singing voice too. "A singer does not need to 'force' or 'push' air through the vocal chords to produce a good strong sound,

doing so creates too much pressure against the chords, preventing them from operating correctly which can cause damage to the voice” (Exercises, Breathing, par 6). One of the reasons Rachmaninoff’s “Vocalise” is so vocally demanding is that it gives the singer a wide range warm up and the soprano gets a chance to practice and improve her technique. The melody is a strong composition of its own, but one of the most popular uses of a vocalise is as a vocal warm up. Many people can be naturally musical, but singing requires more than having a talented sense of pitch and rhythm. A singer must know how to use their body as an instrument, care for it, produce a consistent timbre and express musicality in phrases. From posture for breathing to tongue being forward a singer has many things they have to think about while singing. A professional singer is so familiar with their technique that singing sounds and looks effortless to them. Reaching a point of understanding with proper singing technique takes constant practice. Just as an athlete’s strength and skill is maintained through working out. Before a runner begins their run, they stretch and warm up their muscles so they don’t get strained. Vocalises do the same for the voice.

A song without any incorporated words or syllables is usually sung on a vowel. Vowels make up the part of syllables and phrases most songs are sung on. Vocal trainers teach that “[...] the singer should try to preserve as far as possible a certain spontaneously formed on a well-sounding vowel articulation position during the singing of all the other vowels, that means to learn to sing all the vowels in one vocal position” (Mayzay, par 17). Pronunciation affects the way a vowel sounds, such as “E.” The vowel “E” can create a bright and pinched sound or a darker and more open sound. Seek and pears are examples of words that use different sounding pronunciations for the letter “E,” but if a consistent vocal timbre is desired, the sound in pears can be applied to the sound in seek when the words are sung and vice versa.

Consonants are not popular to sing through because they tend to block air from escaping the mouth. Letters like "P" or "B" cannot be sung through because they are glottal stoppers that close up the voice and discontinue the producing of sound. Letters like "M" and "N" aren't glottal stoppers, but the jaws and tongue are positioned in a manner that leaves the voice unopened. "R," "W" and "Y" are sub-consonants because they make sounds that are more open like vowels. When it comes to throat space the best vowel to sing on is "A." Vocalises help singers open their subglottic space more through singing on vowels, creating good practice to improve vocal sound and range.

Songs without words are found all over the world across different cultures. They are used to fill in missing syllables for songs, in serious devotion and worship, on fields calling out to animals and to assist in improving singing capabilities. Of course, to confirm these findings on singing technique and vocalises the ideas must be put into practice.

Bibliography

- Crowe, Barbara J. *Music and Soulmaking: Toward a New Theory of Music Therapy*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2004. 70. Print.
- “Exercises for Singers Learn to Sing.” *Breathing, Pitch, Fitness, Posture - Vocal Exercises for Singers at Vocalist*. Vocalist.org.uk, 2001-16. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.
<http://www.vocalist.org.uk/exercises.html>.
- Frisbie, Charlotte J. “Vocables in Navajo Ceremonial Music.” *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1980, pp. 347–392. www.jstor.org/stable/851149.
- Handel, George F. “O sleep why dost thou leave me?” Aria: Semele, 1744. Print.
- Johnson, Anna. “Voice Physiology and Ethnomusicology: Physiological and Acoustical Studies of the Swedish Herding Song.” *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, vol. 16, 1984, pp. 42–66. www.jstor.org/stable/768202.
- Mazay. “VocTeacher.” *2.3 Dynamic aspects of the singing voice*. 2013-16. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.
http://vocteacher.mazaycom.ru/en/index.php?r=vt/material&view=2_3.
- McDonald, Kelsey. “Vocables: Not Just Meaningless Syllables.” *Macelroy5diaries*. N.p., 22 Feb. 2012. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.
<http://blogs.longwood.edu/macelroy5diaries/2012/02/22/vocables-not-just-meaningless-syllables/>.
- Mendelssohn, Fanny “Fruling.” 1836. Print.
- Nettleingham, F. T. *Tommy's Tunes*. MacDonald, Erksine Ltd. London: W. C. 1., 1917. 84-85. Print.
- Previn, Andre. “Vocalise I.” London: Chester music, 18 July 1955. Print.
- Rachmaninoff, S. “Vocalise.” *Songs Volume II with Piano Accompaniment*. London: Boosey & Hawkes. 112-115. Print.

Ayahiyao

Elaine Kalinewski

Handwritten musical notation for the first system of 'Ayahiyao'. It features a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 6/8 time signature. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. Below the staff, the lyrics 'A-ya hi yai' are written twice, each followed by a wavy line representing a vocal flourish.

*Improv drums $\frac{6}{8}$

Handwritten musical notation for the second system of 'Ayahiyao'. It features a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 6/8 time signature. The melody includes eighth and quarter notes. Below the staff, the lyrics 'hi' and 'A ya hi' are written. A large 'A' is written below the staff, and a '6/8' time signature is written at the end of the system.

Handwritten musical notation for the third system of 'Ayahiyao'. It features a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 6/8 time signature. The melody includes eighth and quarter notes. Below the staff, the lyrics 'ya hi yai' and 'A ya ya ya hi ya' are written. A large 'A' is written below the staff.

Handwritten musical notation for the fourth system of 'Ayahiyao'. It features a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 6/8 time signature. The melody includes eighth and quarter notes. Below the staff, the lyrics 'A ya ya hi ya hi ya hi' and 'A ya ya ya hi ya' are written. A large 'A' is written below the staff.

Ai A yai Rana ya hi yai om A ya

om A ya hi yai o A ya om hi yai om

yom hi yai om a yaya ya hi yai om a yaya ya

hi yai om a yaya ya hi ya hi ya hi ya hi

a yayaya hi ya ay aya-i ya ya hi ya-i

opt. other solo
 (Tune mixed with Chords) → Nyakyaom

Hi yai Hi yai

Aya hiya om Nyakyaom Nyakyaom 4x

A yayaya hi ya a yayaya

improv. melody/dynamics

hi ya a yayaya hiya hiya hiya hi

hi ya Ay ayai ya ya hi

ya hi ya

A A ya hi yat A ya

hi ya A hi A ya A