



# Vibrati

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## ***Vibrati: An Apprenticeship in Things that Matter***

By Cara Berger

I see I've never told you how I listen to music – I rest my hand lightly on the turntable and my hand vibrates, spreading waves through my whole body: that's how I hear the electricity of the vibration, the ultimate substratum in the domain of reality, and the world trembles in my hand.

Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*

It begins with acknowledging that matter only comes into being through movement. Atoms are predominantly composed of the empty space between a nucleus and the atomic particles that constantly whirl around it. And these particles themselves are in effect just waves of energy without a fixed position or solid core. This sheet of paper you are clasping – its particular texture, smell, seeming solidity – is primarily empty space. My hands typing this are also mostly comprised of empty space and movement within it. Matter is vibration in space.

I would like to think about *Vibrati* as a first step in an apprenticeship in discovering how things matter. That is, my thinking has for some time now been occupied with how the practice of performance – which is an art form of things: bodies, objects, materials and the energetic impulses between them – and theoretical ideas from eco-philosophy that urge us to reconsider the relationship between human and non-human matter(s) might coincide. I have been wondering how performance might allow us to experience human bodies as not entirely distinct from apparently non-human things that they are nonetheless made of: minerals, water, atoms, bacteria – and for this project in particular – waves and vibratory forces.

*Vibrati* explores how we might make our enmeshment with physical forces tangible through performance and what remains of the human once we do this. This does not, however, mean simply collapsing all matter into one, ignoring that through deep-seated beliefs and discursive formations we have come to see ourselves as separate from the other-than-human, even as exceptional in the world. Instead, *Vibrati* is about trying to live with difference, acknowledging it, while not seeing it as an insurmountable end point. Rather, it wants to think about the shifting frontiers of what is me and not-me, what is tangible matter and what is intangible energy, what is inside and what is outside. It is an exercise in what Karen Barad identifies as “[struggling] with coming to terms with the weightiness of the world”.<sup>1</sup>

*Vibrati* is not a solution to these debates; it is not going to provide answers. Nor will it be simply contented with asking questions. Instead, like Jacques Rancière's *ignoramus* we “venture forth into the forest of things and signs, to say what [we] have seen”,<sup>2</sup> to travail this messy and volatile terrain, willing to get it all wrong as we start our training in listening to matter and energy in the hope that Barad is right when she says that: “The future is radically open at every turn.”<sup>3</sup>

## ***Vibrati: A Vibrant History of the Voice***

By Brianna E Robertson-Kirkland

Finally we are led to propose to young singers for the purpose of instruction...that they should spurn excessive vibrato and voices that are too loud, for they are not compatible with other voices similarly pitched. Franchinus Gaffurius, 1496<sup>1</sup>

Then greatest barrier between the teacher and student is the involuntary muscles that produce the voice, muscles that have to be coaxed into fine coordination so that they can produce an even beautiful sound extending through a singer's full range. Renée Fleming, 2004<sup>2</sup>

Close your eyes and imagine the sound of an opera singer. Even if you are unfamiliar with classical music or opera, a sound should come to mind. Perhaps it is of a recorded opera voice such as Luciano Pavarotti or Andrea Bocelli. Perhaps, the only engagement you have had is watching the emergence of child prodigy on popular television talent shows such as Britain's Got Talent. The modern opera voice is easily identifiable. It is powerful, with the ability to boom across an orchestra into a large theatre. The lyrics even in a mother-tongue known to the listener may be garbled, the vowels stretched and elongated; a sacrifice in favour of power. Yet, there is something more to the sound, something that distinguishes a trained voice from the untrained. This is continuous vocal vibrato.

All voices naturally vibrate, but the chief task of the aspiring opera singer is to hone their vocal vibrato, not just for the cultivation of power but to achieve vocal uniformity of sound and timbre. No matter the pitch, high or low, a goal for the opera singer is to unite the whole vocal range, where the sound is standardised across all vocal registers. In a similar way as an athlete, the opera singer trains for several years, pushing the voice to the extreme, until the desired sound is achieved.

Honing continuous vocal vibrato has not always been the goal and examination of the vocal standards of the past has encouraged a revisit of our lost history. As the opening quote taken from the 15<sup>th</sup> century guide to music performance, *Practica Musicae*, suggests the use of vocal vibrato has a complex history and while Gaffurius may encourage singing with pure tone, a style of singing void of wide vibrato normally associated with the modern cathedral choirs, his statement comes as reaction against what was gaining popularity as ‘art eventually turned nature’.<sup>3</sup>

*Vibrati* explores these debates, emphasising the rich and complex history but also seeks to highlight that vocal vibrato is not static or standardised. It is a vibrant, powerful force that has come to represent artistic and physical achievement. But throughout history, vibrato has also represented old-age, ‘fear, cold, death, sleep and mourning’.<sup>4</sup> Years of training to cultivate such a technique, represent just that, years. With that comes an acknowledgement of maturity rather than youth-maturity.

<sup>1</sup> Karen Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Towards an Understanding of how Matter comes to Matter’ in *Material Feminisms* (eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susand Hekman): p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*: p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Barad: p. 143.

<sup>1</sup> Gaffurius, Franchinus ed. Young, Irwin 1968, *Practica Musicae*, University of Wisconsin Press, USA, p. 152

<sup>2</sup> Fleming, Renée 2004 *The Inner Voice*, Viking Penguin, USA, p. 53

<sup>3</sup> Moens-Haenen, G. "Vibrato." Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press. Web. 14 Jun. 2015. <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/29287>>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.