

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. 2015. *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*.

Reviewed by Lucie Vágnerová

One challenge of writing about music has often been summed up with the question “where is the music?” The asker gets at the impossibility of isolating the musical text to be studied. Viewed in a more nuanced way, the question complicates the way musical sound functions in time: the way materials vibrate, the way sound emerges, the way it travels, and the way it is heard—processes that cannot happen irrespective of sounding bodies, resonant spaces, media of transmission and transduction, listeners’ physiologies, and their cultural biases and training. Considering how commonplace the question is in music studies, “where is the music?” seldom rises above a qualifying aside, something we say on the way to opening a score or judging a particular performance. Our disciplines would indeed have to look different if we understood the complex answers as a methodological imperative. Nina Sun Eidsheim’s *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* models what it might look like if music scholars were to stop overwriting physical evidence of sounding with cultural idea(s) of what sound *should* be. Eidsheim’s book is sensitive to bodies, attentive to physics, and mindful of encultured practices of listening and sounding. It is a much-needed meeting point for musicology, sound studies, philosophy of sound, performance studies, vocal pedagogy, and those interested in theorizing difference in music.

Eidsheim lays out her task in terms of debunking “four naturalized ideas about singing, listening, sound, and music that commonly underlie musical perceptions and discourses:” 1) “the privileging of air” over other mediums sound travels through, 2) the imagination of sounding as linear and visual, 3) “the presumption that sound is stable, knowable, and defined a priori,” and 4) the confinement of music to sound and silence (22).

The opening chapter, titled “Music’s Material Dependency,” revolves around the underwater opera projects of Juliana Snapper. Singing in bathtubs and swimming pools, the classically trained, experimentally inclined composer-vocalist forgoes her in-control operatic voice in favor of exploring the loss of control, the taxing effort of singing underwater, and the multisensory acuity of underwater performance. Snapper started singing underwater in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, seeking renewed physical intimacy between voice and medium. The heightened sensorial quality of Snapper’s practice propels Eidsheim’s argument that the mediation of

sound is never purely, or even primarily auditory: ascending bubbles, visible strain, and the tactile perception of some frequencies and the recession of others underwater make for compelling evidence. The point is that “the non-sonic is [particularly] amplified” in Snapper’s performance, but that it is always at play in music.

In Chapter 2, “The Acoustic Mediation of Voice, Self, and Others,” Eidsheim argues that our evaluation of acoustic systems is borne out of a naive notion that sound is a purely acoustic phenomenon. Through discourses and practices surrounding recording, concert culture, and musical pedagogy, we manufacture what Eidsheim terms a “figure of sound.” The FoS, a central operative term of the book, is part of the cultural and disciplinary baggage of music scholarship, which conventionally approaches sound as a fixed object that deals in aesthetics and that ought to be appraised according to a set analytical basis. Building on scholarship on concert hall acoustics, notably the work of Emily Thompson, Michal Forsyth, and Leo Leroy Beranek, Eidsheim shows that we have trained ourselves to dismiss the role of acoustics in sounding. Whenever we fail to think away acoustic difference, she writes, we fault performances as “somehow wrong” (69). Eidsheim contrasts two stagings of Meredith Monk’s *Songs of Ascension*, one in a double-helix staircase within a tower by the artist Ann Hamilton, the other at the vast Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. Investigating her own experience of the latter as awkward and lacking, Eidsheim connects our psychoacoustic conditioning to our politics of difference: “when confronted with these types of anomalous acoustic experiences, will I explore or reject them?” she asks, and continues: “do we explore or reject anomalous encounters with other human beings?” (94). This compelling analysis of listening in terms of normalizing and pathologizing gestures would have been well served by a greater engagement of the field of disability studies in music, even if it came at the expense of the chapter’s second case study, Christopher Cerrone’s “postacoustic” (91) opera performed through headphones.

Chapter 3, “Music as Action: Singing Happens before Sound,” takes on the place of the signifier in theories of the voice, a topic with a colossal history in and out of music studies. Eidsheim proffers several technologies of vocal failure—Richard Serra’s piece *Boomerang*, the voice-garbling gadget called the SpeechJammer, and the stutter of failed transmission over Skype—to argue that next to sound’s transmission and relationship to space, we have naturalized its signifying properties. The core of the chapter belongs to Eidsheim’s own *Body Music* and the collaborative *Noisy Clothes*, which dictate different bodily contortions to vary the pathways of sound production instead of notating sound. A kind of table of corporeal

preparations for *Body Music* illustrates Eidsheim's approach to the voice as "internal corporeal choreography" (111), which contemplates the voice beyond vocal chords. The table tabulates "air shapers," such as "Full-body fall (release legs)" that are to be performed with "filters," such as "short, explosive k-p-t" (113). Repositioning the work of scholars, particularly feminist musicologists, who advocate for increased attention to the body in music, Eidsheim proposes thinking about music as a mere "aftereffect" of bodily action.

Eidsheim builds on her previous research and over two decades of teaching voice in chapter 4, "All Voice, All Ears: From the Figure of Sound to the Practice of Music." The FoS is held together by human bodily discipline. "A human body [thus] optimized to deliver the sound concept ... corroborates naturalized conceptions of sound, music, and voice," (133) she writes. To battle this, Eidsheim takes a stand against metaphor-based instruction, such as "inhale as through you are smelling a rose" (137), as well as instruction based in imitating an imagined sonic ideal. She offers that asking singers to sing according to notation is akin to asking ice skaters to skate according to a notation of particular skating sounds (139). Instead, she asks that music studies acknowledge corporeal action, like art historians once had to when Jackson Pollock invented action painting (101–103). It is not clear to me what pedagogy based around "inner choreography" (139) might look like outside of experimental music, and particularly how it might work for classical vocal pedagogy. Then again, as an intellectual and experimental exercise, it is especially generative for rethinking approaches to some of the most canonical repertory.

*Sensing Sound* concludes with a theory of music as an action that is materially propagated: a practice of vibration (155) that depends for its life on the very materials that actually vibrate, in all their difference. Understanding musicking—Christopher Small's term that Eidsheim adopts throughout the book—as "a constellation of corporeal activities," takes the body from the margins to the center of music. This perspective, says Eidsheim, enables scholars of music to better answer questions that their disciplines set out to answer in the first place: "how does music do what it does?" (162), and, more specifically, why does it affect different listeners in different ways? Paying attention to the materials that vibrate, writes Eidsheim, allows us to understand this difference.

For all her attunement to materiality, it is important to stress that Eidsheim understands music as relational and as a practice that we use to define ourselves. She acknowledges her debt to a rich body of work dealing with the bodily experience of music, such as the work of Carolyn Abbate, Judith O. Becker, Suzanne G. Cusick, Hannah Bosma, and Elisabeth Le

Guin. With reference to feminist musicology of the body, however, she also cautions that saying that bodies matter is not enough: in Eidsheim's purview, bodies precede and define music. *Sensing Sound* also engages the burgeoning discipline of sound studies, particularly the work of Jonathan Sterne, Mara Mills, Emily Thompson, and Emily Dolan, and voice studies—the work of Annette Schlichter, Steven Connor, James Q. Davies, Olivia Bloechl, Brian Kane, and Bonnie Gordon.

Eidsheim's case studies involve repertoires that she herself repeatedly describes as “extreme,” but they invite us to reframe questions surrounding musicmaking wholesale. The purpose of the extreme is to de-essentialize what we perceive as normal—here, Eidsheim gestures to the work of Stuart Hall via José Esteban Muñoz's writings on “disidentification” (8) in explicitly racialized drag performances. In the absence of ascending bubbles, however, the critical task is made more difficult. Eidsheim's framing of sounding and listening in terms of bodily and social difference is a generative, albeit faint, thread in the book that could act as a point of connection to repertoires beyond the contemporary-extreme.

For example, that the book's case studies largely comprise music by women is, I think, a notable gesture to the genealogy of women artists who have long explored issues of embodiment, and understood sound as more than auditory. I found myself wishing for the late Pauline Oliveros to have a greater role in Eidsheim's account: Oliveros is mentioned briefly as a great influence on Snapper's work, but her important catalogue of communal vocal exercises, which had indeterminate musical results, could have been expanded upon. Oliveros's seminal collaboration with Stuart Dempster, who joined the composer in the Fort Worden underground cistern with a forty-five second reverberation time, would have provided a neat reference point in the chapter on acoustics. Another source of historical depth could have been the long catalogue of sound art that deals directly with the vibratory practices in Eidsheim's purview: notable in this regard is the work of the sound artist Christine Sun Kim, who was born deaf, and who explores the material qualities of sounding as well as what she terms “sonic etiquette.” Among an older generation of sound artists, Christina Kubisch's city walks with electromagnetic headphones, Maryanne Amacher's psychoacoustic illusions of sound, Alvin Lucier's work beyond *I am Sitting in a Room* (the latter two are only briefly mentioned in footnotes) kept popping into my head as I was reading. The vocal orientation of Eidsheim's book leaves some question marks around the uses of her theory for non-vocal music, and in sound art, there are ample opportunities to explore vibrational practice beyond the voice.

At times, Eidsheim's overwhelming focus on music happening in the

Los Angeles area begs for some greater connection to place and time. Why here? Why now? *Sensing Sound* is not a history and not quite ethnography, in spite of being inspired by Clifford Geertz's "thick description" method. However, Eidsheim's trust in her empirical experience and expertise as (an LA-based) listener, vocalist, composer, and voice teacher pays off. She walks the walk of her theory of sound. When she takes "a group of graduate students to the Standard Hotel in downtown Los Angeles" (41) to sing and listen underwater in the rooftop saltwater swimming pool, she stresses tactile feeling as a way of knowing and models experimental pedagogy in the process. When she shares an account of a lengthy debate with her collaborators about plans for a system of corporeal notation for *Body Music*, she negates the perception of notation as fixed and impartial. Even when identifying the "awkwardness" of her listening experience to Monk's *Songs*, Eidsheim demonstrates the value of attunement to feeling for musicology.

The twenty-six photographs reproduced in the book beautifully complement the text. They all show sound in Eidsheim's sense of sounding. Particularly striking are several shots of Snapper singing underwater, in a bathtub, in a small tank, and in an Olympic size pool. The footnotes are a treasure trove of references to older performances that the reader might already be familiar with (e.g. the work of Marina Abramović) and additional insights (e.g. a meditation on vocal ideals in *American Idol*).

The book speaks to a number of growing areas of music studies, such as literature on music, sound, and violence, work on the body that takes into account questions of pleasure, disability, embodiment, and technology, and critical histories of vocal pedagogy. It also offers theoretical and practical reorientations and potential exercises for vocalists. Those involved with the work of Juliana Snapper, Ron Athey, Meredith Monk, Christopher Cerrone, Elodie Blanchard, Alba Fernanda Triana, Richard Serra, and Nancy Holt would also find much of interest. Finally, Eidsheim raises an original critical lens to studies of notation and organology. If the "figure of sound" became a common point of reference for our disciplines, cautioning us not to fall for the magnetism of ossified musical values, our disciplines would be better for it. Finally, Eidsheim's theory of music as a practice of vibration posits an answer to our opening question, "where is the music?" Eidsheim might have challenged, complicated, and rethought our object of study, but at least she found it.

