

DIANA TORTI

“The different voice”

I can assure you that I would have continued to sing for hours without problems. The hardest part for me comes now. Yes, because even if the voice I am using to speak at this moment is the same as the one I used a few moments ago, the sound I will have to use is different and it will tell, or will try to tell, the voice as a profound and universal human expression.

This conference, dedicated to "sound", gives me the opportunity to talk about a topic that is an integral part of my life, from both a human and a professional point of view. Previously, Antonio Di Micco mentioned the "sound that is not heard", the pure voice of the "vocalization" as the most ancestral, most universal human expression. The subject in question is not easy and I must say that it really made things even more difficult for me.

It is true, research on the voice has been along with me for many years, initially linked to the practice that must be done when playing a musical instrument, necessary to explore its sound possibilities and to keep in training: singing lessons, courses of in-depth study of many styles, vocal technique exercises and different repertoires to learn. Over time, an increasingly pressing need has been added to the aesthetic subject: deepening the debate of vocal expression and of self-representation. A need that prompted me to look beyond the vocal culture widespread almost everywhere, to find something that would satisfy the urgency to understand myself even more. And also, that it would allow me to relate to the reality that surrounds me also through this very intimate phenomenon, merged with my breath, my feeling and my body and which at the same time belongs to all of us. But all this was not enough to deal with "the strength of sound" (which is the title of "Per Appiam '19" the event hosting the conference) and so I rolled up my sleeves and began to read, discuss and search even more, in an attempt to rethink this theme, for which the splendid context of collective research, of which we talked about it before, it turned out to be precious.

The voice is unique to every human being. As with fingerprints, in nature, there are no two people who have the same voice: the vocal timbre of everyone is unrepeatable like every person. The sound of the voice tells our thoughts, our feelings, our affections, our identity. And by voice I don't necessarily mean words, but also a laugh, a sigh, a vocalization, something that is not necessarily linked to articulated language.

But how does the voice work? And how was it born? Leaving aside all the discussion on the evolutionary path that, starting from the first hominids, led humans to develop a vocal apparatus like the current one, the result of which is the voice, I would like to emphasize that the voice is closely linked to the body. As a singing teacher, I might say: the musical instrument is the body, and the voice is the sound product that comes out from the body.

With regard to physiology, it must be said that the vocal apparatus is the same for all human beings. The woman has slightly shorter and less thick vocal cords than those of men, but, apart from this, the vocal tract is almost identical. After inhaling, during the exhalation phase, the air passes through the larynx and the vocal cords, which are two flexible bands of muscle tissue, very small and delicate membranes, vibrate. This vibration produces sound waves that are amplified and transformed into sound, enriching and changing in the resonance chambers. The mechanisms that regulate the production of the voice are very complex and their nature is still the subject of

studies and research. Breath is clearly fundamental in this speech: the voice is air. But a fascinating aspect is how this air, in order to become a voice, finds a series of physical elements, which are part of the vocal tract, which interrupt it, almost obstruct it, leading it to transform into something else: the teeth, the tongue, lips and the palate.

Without these "incidents along the way", the voice would not be enriched with a whole series of sound possibilities (due to the pops, points of contact, closures or narrowings) that produce the wide range of sounds that a human being is able to make with the voice and that also characterize the articulated language. Reading the catalogue of an interesting exhibition held in the spring at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, entitled *Il corpo della voce*¹ I was intrigued by a statement included in the presentation of the event.

It was hypothesized that without these physical obstacles the sound emitted, being only pre-phonemic, pre-verbal, could not be defined as voice.

But what is the voice then? Is it possible that it is still considered something related only to the physiological apparatus? The voice, as an object of research and study not only from an anatomical but also from a philosophical point of view, is an area of rather recent scientific interest.

Until now there has been a lot of reticence to analyse the vocal phenomenon. Adriana Cavarero² explains the philosophical causes of this with her interesting studies on the philosophy of vocal expression, collected in the book *For more Than One Voice. Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*³. She has begun to fill this gap. Through her reflections, she tells how philosophy has always depersonalized the concept of voice and how this has led to the fact that sound and voice have been eliminated from any research into the human.

It was Plato who first set up an approach based on human voice, relegating it to an abstract and anonymous concept. The problem of philosophy - says Adriana Cavarero - has to do with "the philosophical affinity for an abstract and bodiless universality, and for the domain of a word that does not come out of any throat of flesh"⁴; there is no concern for the "singularity of each voice"⁵

This philosophical premise basically is about the elimination of the individuality of the voice of every human being. And another aspect was also denied, namely that the voice is in relationship with others, it is in relationship with another human being who listens to you and relates to you. Cavarero continues: "The price for the elimination of the physicality of the voice is thus, first of all, the elimination of the other or, better, of others (...).

And from this point on, the soul obstinately speaks with a voice that does not reverberate"⁶. On these premises, a culture was born that did not allow the development of a search capable of analyzing the vocal phenomenon, by giving it the right space in the field of human research.

We must wait for the twentieth century with its avant-garde so that the voice becomes the object of study and analysis, thanks also to the contribution of the emerging phoniatrics, to the

¹ A. Cestelli Guidi, F. R. Oppedisano (edited by), Catalogue of the exhibition *Il corpo della voce*. Carmelo Bene, Cathy Berberian, Demetrio Stratos, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Edizioni Azienda Speciale Palaexpo, Rome 2019.

² Adriana Cavarero is a philosopher and Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Verona, and she is Visiting Professor at New York University. She is considered a leading figure in feminist thought and an authoritative exponent of Arendtian studies.

³ A. Cavarero, *For more Than One Voice. Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005. Translated by Paul A. Kottam

The book was originally published in Italian under the title *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale*. Campi del sapere/Feltrinelli, Milan 2005.

⁴ Ibid, p. 8.

⁵ Ibid, p. 9.

⁶ Ibid, p. 46.

experiments in music, to the curiosity and courage of some artists, to speech therapy: research on the voice that regains its possession of the most corporeal sound, free from the word.

Centuries of silence ... incredible. Yet the voice belongs to all of us and is a feature that belongs to the human being.

Our first sound is the wail, which comes from the body and has no memory because it comes from itself. During the first year of life, it turns into something else and will become 'word'. The psychiatrist Massimo Fagioli writes in "Left 2009": «One can humiliate the reason that has made the knowledge of the matter, thinking that the cry of the newborn is not only a sign of breathing; it is the birth of the human voice which is different from the bleating of the lamb because, it is ... scientific certainty, it will become articulated language »⁷.

And even more clearly in "Left 2011": "It was said, years ago, that the bleating of the lamb always remained that way throughout life; the cry of the newborn is no longer there after a year of life and I thought the word "becomes": it becomes articulated language. (...) So I am forced to think that the cry does not "develop" in articulated language but is transformed »⁸. Then we discover that the voice is the human reality of birth, the only one, which transforms, becomes something else.

Then it will change ... and a lot. In puberty it will even become something else: a voice linked to sexual identity, male and female.

Who knows how much this diversity has helped to mark that distance between man and woman for which men have begun not to recognize women and to deny their identity ...

But let's get back to the history. For the Greeks the corporeal sphere is reserved for women and the logos, which wants to give identity but has cancelled the voice, is an exclusive characteristic of men. Women are pure voice, merely sound that does not convey human identity.

Mythology is full of female "vocal" figures intended exclusively as a sound. Think of the image of the nymph Eco, mentioned by Antonio Di Micco in his speech, who repeats the sound of the words spoken by others, a sound that is sent back from the rocky walls. It is not she who speaks first or proposes a speech, she simply repeats what she hears and these words, mixing with the original ones, overlap and take on an even different meaning. Eco's voice is pure female voice, simple acoustic resonance.

Then there is the divine Muse invoked by Homer. The poet, being blind, entrusts himself to the voice of the Muse, who, with her song, acts as an intermediary between the poet and the story. The Muses become the inspiring images of poets.

I remember a splendid article in the magazine "Il sogno della farfalla" entitled Muses, nymphs and sirens. A meeting in the bookshop *Amore e Psiche*⁹ in which Massimo Fagioli affirmed that muses are female images that represent the dream. They are mere image and therefore not very dangerous for men. Then there are the Sirens, vocal female figures, enchantress par excellence¹⁰.

⁷ M. Fagioli, *Identity and image*, in "Left 2009", L'Asino d'oro editions, Rome 2010, p. 280. ⁸ M. Fagioli, *The line and the cry*, in "Left 2011", L'Asino d'oro editions, Rome 2014, pp. 119-120.

⁸ M. Fagioli, *The line and the cry*, in "Left 2011", L'Asino d'oro editions, Rome 2014, pp. 119-120.

⁹ See M. Fagioli, *Muses, nymphs and sirens. A meeting in the bookshop*, in "Il sogno della farfalla", Nuove Edizioni Romane, 1, 2006, pp. 16-23.

¹⁰ For further information, we recommend reading the books by Eva Cantarella, an internationally renowned scholar of the ancient world, *Hippas and sirens*, UTET, 2014 and *L'ambiguo malanno. Condition and image of women in Greek and Roman antiquity*, Feltrinelli Editore, 2013. The interviews with the author of Simona Maggiorini, *Chi dice donna dice malanno* in "Left" of 20.03.2010 and Eva Cantarella on the routes of Herodotus are also very interesting, in "Left" of 08/19/2014. (N.d.C.)

Initially represented with a body that is half woman and half bird, for Homer instead they are images that are not completely devoid of meaning: in the Odyssey, for example, they tell stories and narrate with great wisdom. Over time they will be represented with different features, but now they are half fish and half women, beautiful and irresistible with their singing. The melodious voice is mischievous and seductive, pure vocality that comes from a sinuous woman's body, lacking in any semantic dimension. And this is the figure of the siren that will remain in the collective imagination as a charmer of men.

History and mythology are fascinating, but to find a more vibrant sound I must go a long way over the centuries, up to 2014. In "Left" it is a different story «(...) the term "voice" is an indistinct sound that moves in the air and is only noise if it is not heard together with the terms "man" and "woman". It is not thought of in verbal terms because articulated language, in the unconscious mind, does not exist. But, I think, it is because the human voice creates an invisible movement in the skin and throughout the body of another human being. From the skin it reaches the cerebral substance which, without saying the word which is the name that distinguishes it, creates a human reality different from its own"¹¹.

And now, I confess, I would be tempted to sing again, because the speech is getting more and more complicated. Then I am reminded of all the times that Massimo Fagioli in his writings tells of discussions and questions with Telmo Pievani, philosopher, historian, and expert in the theory of evolution: "When did men start using the voice?". Or: "When was articulated language born?". Impossible to answer, but the curiosity is huge, and I tried to read more about it.

I then came across a very interesting book called *Singing Neanderthals*, written by archaeologist Steven Mithen¹².

In this text, considered as a point of reference for experts in the field, Mithen examines and retraces numerous theories and research hypotheses that attempt to explain the evolution of the human voice in prehistoric times. The author brilliantly explains how the evolution of the voice has been the result of a series of physiological transformations in which factors such as the upright position, the consequent bipedalism, the change in eating habits with consequent modification of the vocal apparatus, are among the factors that have contributed to the development of the voice.

He hypothesizes that the first language-sounds could have been like a sort of music-related one (he called it Hmmmmm communication): a series of vocal gestures made up of vocalizations, rhythms, dynamics and modulations, on which the first groups of men built social relations among themselves.

The community is the context in which the vocal process was born and developed, and the possible scenarios may have been hunting episodes, alarms for dangers due to beasts or bad weather, daily jobs of various kinds, community celebrations, mothers in relationship with their children or the children themselves playing with each other.

Mithen gives us images that are familiar to us, in which there was a strong component of imitation and involvement of the environment and natural events, where the first hominids were living. The social context was a priority.

¹¹ M. Fagioli, *New ideas*, in "Left 2014", L'Asino d'oro editions, Rome 2017, pp. 117-118.

¹² S. Mithen, *The singing Neanderthals. The origins of music, language, mind and body*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 2006. He is an archaeologist and professor of archaeology and prehistory (University of Reading, United Kingdom). He is a pioneer of cognitive archaeology in which we find a research approach that draws on psychology, neuroscience, and the philosophy of mind for the interpretation of archaeological documentation. His most recent studies have as their object the relationship between words, thought and cultural evolution.

Regarding the question of the importance of the voice for the human being, I would like to stop for a moment to share with you a further observation. I am a singer of the jazz tradition and I have thought of all the people who, since the seventeenth century, have been forcibly deported to America from Africa.

They sang the images of the places, the smells, the feelings and the sounds of which they had been deprived by violence.

Not having the possibility of having writings or objects that reminded them of their culture of origin, they had the voice as the only means of resistance to keep the memory alive through sound, for themselves and for the whole community.

Going back to Steven Mithen, when our author questions himself and cites other studies regarding the possible link between voice and thought, we discover that unfortunately most of the traditional explanations are often linked to religion or to the usual DNA. In summary and simplifying a lot, for many researchers the answer is in the evolutionary inheritance, in a sort of genetic continuity between the first hominids and us.

I totally agree with the author in considering the importance of the social and communicative function of the voice and sounds. However, both organicist approach and genetics, despite playing an important role in research, are contents that we already know, and that do not help us in our unique and original research.

If I think of the beloved prehistoric caves, so precious for our research on humans, I see the woman inside the cave in the relationship with her child: the embrace, the warmth, the vibration of the voice and the skin.

To transmit a feeling that is not, as we well know, just listening to. A voice that is also, and above all, sensitivity, vibration, and resonance in relation to another human being.

And I cannot stop surprising myself in front of Massimo Fagioli's brilliant intuition: that thought about the cry, the sound of birth that changes over time to become a human voice. Wail that arises from biology and is fused with thought. Sound that comes from within, therefore, for which there is no lived memory, and the voice repossesses of the body.

Wail which is the first sound of every human being and that, as Massimo Fagioli says, cries out for our equality. And again, Massimo's words from 2006: «And I save her from their eager hands because I know (and they don't know) that the word equality cannot be made to die even if it has exterminated the word freedom. But it can survive only by transforming its identity when, in the infinite variation of the faces of human beings, the word of the first cry remains firm, which says, in the universal language, I am a human being. The cry is the same for everyone”¹³.

And now my voice has changed again. I could not give a name, but I felt this "expressive urgency of the first sound"¹⁴ as an overwhelming force that moved my strings, not just the vocal ones, in an attempt to express and affirm my artistic and human identity through my voice.

¹³ M. Fagioli, *And they call it fraternity*, in "Left 2006", L'Asino d'oro editions, Rome 2009, pp. 48-49.

¹⁴ On this topic I'd wish to add a personal contribution. *The expressive urgency of the first sound* represents my current research: a work on vocal identity in which the need for urgent, natural, and free singing is combined with improvisation, experienced as an expressive possibility above any stylistic connotation. It is a research that began to take shape during my academic musical journey. The sentence, specifically, refers to the title of my degree thesis carried out for the achievement of the Second Level Academic Diploma in Jazz, a.y. 2011-2012 at the "L. Refice" of Frosinone. The path was inspired by my personal research on the singer Jeanne Lee (1939-2000), an extraordinary exponent of avant-garde jazz. Thanks to the support of the speaker, the journalist Luigi Onori, an article of mine was also published in "Alias" (attached to "il manifesto", August 26, 2017, pp. 12-13) in which I describe my study dedicated to this artist.

A “singing” I would say, which I now know, was not strictly linked to music, to the artistic profession or to articulated language, but to something deeper linked to my internal non-conscious reality. A possibility that belongs to all of us, "The man of the courtyard" has no doubts: "The human species becomes such not when it manufactures the tools of its work, when it splinters a stone for hunting, but when it sings!"¹⁵.

And I would like to end with the image of women in prehistoric caves, with their first paintings and with the first human vocal sound born as "game reaction to the vitality of the newborn". The woman begins to modulate different sounds from those one that men made with beasts.

And I keep wondering if it was a female singing that aroused the strong negative reaction from the men...

The discoveries made by the anthropologist Igor Reznikoff tell us that the caves chosen to live in were the ones that resonated best. And I think therefore, about how it were even more beautiful, in there, a woman's voice...

So, I browse "Left" of February 4, 2017: "The woman acquires the articulated language like the man, the woman speaks, the voice is different, it is not clear how religion can impose the silence of the word on women. This is because the voice is different? And the memory of the Sphinx returns, that is, an animal with a woman's face, as if the human reality that upset man compared to woman were not really genitals, pregnancy and birth as the creation of another human being, but the mystery of the different voice".

¹⁵ M. Fagioli, *The man of the courtyard. Lessons 2005*, L'Asino d'oro editions, Rome 2012, pp. 124-125.