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The Arduous and the Ordinary: Embodying the Conversational Voice in the Long Nineteenth Century[1]

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> If the public speaker's voice may be improved, much to his own comfort and pleasure, as well as that of his audience, why not improve the voice for conversation as well?
>
> —John Poole Sandlands, *The Voice and Public Speaking*, 1880

Nineteenth-century Europe saw the emergence of an impressive stream of publications on vocal health and beauty. Large numbers of experts from different backgrounds devoted themselves to new ways to study the human voice. Their ambitions were fuelled by institutional innovation, such as the founding of national and royal conservatories. They were also inspired by scientific revolutions like the invention of the laryngoscope and the discovery of a speech centre in the brain, and by technical developments such as the invention of photography and audio recording. The field of knowledge that arose from their work was a varied one, including 'stammering professors', teachers of canto, surgeons, therapists, phonologists, elocutionists, and so on. Despite this multiplicity they found common ground in approaching the voice as a physically produced and material phenomenon. In other words, they largely centred the organs of speech. The field also helped to articulate humanity in a world increasingly understood as ruled by evolution. Not only the throat but the human brain, which was deemed superior within such evolutionary discourses, became the centre of attention for those interested in voice production and vocal health. Most experts also agreed that theirs was a wide, varied and multiplex field of knowledge: the human voice could be studied from many angles, partly because it served many different functions. As French physician André Castex noted in 1894, for example, 'The spoken voice has many uses: simple

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conversation, reading aloud, recitation, declamation.'[2] Conversation may be described as 'simple' in his classification but often was not very easy to define. Among the many possible functions and uses of the voice, including both song and speech, conversation was often assumed to be the most natural (that is, intuitive) one. However, conversation's social connotations, and its close association with the sort of wit and propriety connected to the upper middle classes, also questioned this idea of natural ease. The conversational voice of the nineteenth-century drawing room, it seems, was expected to sound natural and ordinary – and precisely because of that needed to be produced arduously, through careful cultivation and practice.

In this article I want to focus less on the socially and culturally produced norms surrounding conversational style or context, and more on the conversational voice as it was produced and heard within earshot of nineteenth-century (self-styled) experts on vocal health and hygiene.[3] Drawing on scientific and educational collections of works on vocal health and beauty, based in Paris, London and Leipzig, I turn my attention not towards the specific national, linguistic or artistic norms produced in these three centres of knowledge on vocal health. Rather, this study aims to reflect some of the fluidity and diversity of the audible and embodied aspects of vocal practice throughout the long nineteenth century in Western Europe. Focusing on the acoustic features of conversation and the embodied practices of its production does not make this any less of a cultural history, though. On the contrary, expectations, performances and disciplinary frameworks for the sound of the conversational voice – while often described as purely natural – were heavily shaped by the social status connected to the particular bodies that produced that voice. Moreover, the practices of vocal production itself – breathing, managing pitch, adjusting timbre – are historically and culturally defined as well. In a sense, these manuals detailing the physical practices connected to vocal health and control attend to what Roland Barthes has since called the 'grain' of the voice, the presence of the body in vocal sound, and, often, attempts to discipline that body in the service of sound. Scholars have, in the wake of Barthes's reflections, drawn attention to the implications of this 'grain' for voices' abilities to articulate different identities. And while the performative aspect of vocalization and its connection to social categories like gender and race have been studied more thoroughly for the singing voice, they apply to conversational tones as well, as I argue in the following.[4]

To address the acoustic and embodied qualities of the historical conversational voice, we have to draw on a different source base than the one that has been collected to attend to the singing voice. Musicological

work like that of Freya Jarman, Naomi André, Anke Charton and Nina Eidsheim has drawn on musical recordings and sheet music as well as descriptions and critiques of musical performances to lay bare not only changes in singing performance over time but also the cultural expectations that shaped both listening ears and singing voices. Their work offers useful clues to understand the socially and culturally performative character of the human voice, which operates at the interface between immaterial ideas about articulating beauty, identity or belonging and the very physical act of producing sound. Addressing conversation, which was understood as natural and therefore seemed to be unbound by the demands of a composer, or the expectations of vocal beauty, requires a methodological framework that conceives of vocalizing and hearing/listening in a different, aesthetically agnostic way. In the sections that follow, I therefore lean on the methods developed in the field of sound studies – and most notably on the historically informed contributions of Steven Connor, Ana María Ochoa Gautier and Jonathan Sterne to that field – to sketch out an 'acoustic' history of the conversational voice.[5] I first examine how that conversational voice was defined by experts and what other types of vocalization it was distinguished from, thus – like Ochoa Gautier – positing various practices of listening or 'aurality' as tools to produce knowledge.[6] Second, I focus on the tension between the assumed natural character of the conversational voice and the many suggestions to cultivate it, analysing the ways in which authors and speakers mobilized their culturally specific 'audile techniques' to effectively 'make' conversation.[7] And finally, I show how these conversational voices articulated specific gendered, aged, ethnic, or otheridentities for and through the bodies they inhabited. Approaching the conversational voice as what Connor has termed 'voice-in-body'[8] allows me to re-evaluate its precarious balance between natural ease and arduous cultivation. The uneven distribution of both those qualities among speakers was closely connected to (changing) attitudes about biology and evolution, and therefore informed thinking about the inherent humanity of voice and conversation.

The Ease of the Conversational Voice

Perhaps because of its assumed modest nature, the history of conversation is not widely discussed in historiography. This notion of the 'natural' ease of conversation is a modern one, however: as Peter Burke and other historians of early modern politeness and even earlier courtly conduct have shown, conversation had long been regarded as an art. Numerous conduct manuals document the many rules and skills one needed to master to shine in early modern conversation, which was considered to

be at the heart of (elite) society.[9] This tradition did not simply disappear in the nineteenth century, despite the narrative that conversation was (and is) a 'dying art' in modern times. Histories of conversation focusing on the stylistic and intellectual elements of its practice, like Stephen Miller's intellectual and literary history of conversation and Theodore Zeldin's historically contextualized call for more (or better) conversation, show that while the eighteenth century may have been the pinnacle of conversation as an art form, its practice changed rather than disappeared, partly through the inclusion of a broader range of people in what could be understood as 'conversation'.[10] The salon continued to be a place to cultivate conversation in the nineteenth century, for example, particularly for women, for whom it would also become a place to express the political opinions they could not vocalize in the chamber of representatives.[11] Nevertheless, by the nineteenth century, conversation seems to have been thought about less as an 'art' and more as the result of a natural talent, not bound by strict rules as rhetoric was, but loosely practised according to unwritten expectations connected to one's status and class. In John Picker's history of Victorian soundscapes, conversation is by no means absent, but it is not a central concern: it is a constant murmur accompanying the real central innovations in the nineteenth-century soundscape: the arrival of the phonograph, the din of the modern city, the silence of the study.[12]

To address precisely this aspect of conversation as a practice that was more or less taken for granted, I am turning to a source base that does not focus so much on conduct and the arts of politeness and society but rather on publications in the sciences and education. This presents some problems: elocutionary treatises, singing manuals, scientific explorations, and so on are normative, declamatory texts. While some of them may very well have sparked conversation, the contents of those conversations have largely remained undocumented. However, at the more acoustic level of the voice, they do provide descriptions of conversational practice. Often they even reveal more about it than about the genres of speech and song they aimed to ameliorate most (oratory, declamation). Because of their interest in the 'natural' voice, unspoiled by faulty breathing, modern diseases or overcultivation, many authors turned to conversation as the context in which uncultivated vocalization was most likely to occur. As Ana María Ochoa Gautier has suggested, in this period the 'voice was ambiguously located between "nature" and "culture", and this was central for what those terms meant'.[13] The scientific treatises and pedagogical works I use as my primary sources allow for the kind of approach Ochoa Gautier terms 'aural': one 'in which sound appears simultaneously as a force that constitutes the world and a medium for constructing

knowledge'.[14] Most experts of the time favoured more formal forms of vocalization like oratory and song as they constructed knowledge through sounding practices, but conversation often served as the unconscious backdrop of that work. Conversation, in its apparent naturalness and innocence, was the context in which a careful listener could learn things about a speaker that might be concealed or manipulated in more public forms of speech. French phoniatrist Marc Colombat, for example, in his 1857 *Treatise upon the Diseases and Hygiene of the Organ of the Voice*, noted:

> To a delicate ear, the voice of the individual may teach many things with regard to his temperament, character, moral qualities and states of mind. It is certain that the condition of the mind exerts a marked influence over the organ of the voice, which always varies according to circumstances. We may therefore say with Gretry that if man cannot conceal himself in his conversation, he has not yet learned to disguise his intonations.[15]

Although conversation was not the main focus of any of these works, their interest in vocal health, human social behaviour and the voice's capacity to articulate things like nationality, temperament or social status created a space in which the embodied characteristics and practices of conversation were pulled into view.

Perhaps partly because their main interest lay elsewhere, most of the experts concerned with the voice defined conversation by outlining what it was *not*. It was not the great feat of practice and endurance required for public speech or oratory; it was not the aesthetic performance required in song or declamation; it was 'just' conversation. This type of comparison led many to conclude that, physically and vocally at least, conversation was characterized by a comparative ease. According to Emil Behnke, for example, a pioneer of speech therapy around the turn of the twentieth century, 'Voice use in public speaking and in the semi-public work of teaching is as different from ordinary conversation as rowing is from mere paddling, or as racing is from walking.'[16] Richard Faulkner struck a more precise note in his statement on 'ordinary' conversation as part of his study on the tonsils at the beginning of the twentieth century:

> During ordinary conversation, there is developed, in one hour, an energy of about 48 kilogrammeters, that is to say, that to speak during one hour is not more fatiguing than to lift at each second a weight of 13 grammes, one meter high: a lady in trifling with her fan, or a professor gesticulating with a piece of chalk, exerts an energy much greater. To pronounce a discourse in a large room, the energy is more considerable, but it is not enormous; it is, on an average of 200 kilogrammeters per hour; an employee of a railroad performs a greater work in lifting from the ground on to his shoulder, four packages of 50 kilogrammes. We have compared

> subsequently the energy developed in conversing by the voice of a man and that of a woman, and have found that women are fatigued, in talking, four times less than a man. We can then comprehend how children who have a larynx narrower than their mothers, can talk for several hours without taking a rest.[17]

Faulkner's systematic approach not only shows a difference in the nature of various forms of speech, distinguishing 'ordinary' conversation from more laborious forms of vocalization, but also hints towards intersectional hierarchies of embodied speakers, identifying not only gender and age as elements that had a profound influence on the vocal organs but class and profession as well. Although most attention in scientific and elocutionary manuals went to 'professional' speakers (that is, adult men who engaged in public speech), observations like Faulkner's show to what extent good speech was noted, identified and found important in different layers of society. Therefore, it was not only on stage or in the pulpit that vocal qualities were noted.[18] Ordinary conversation, too, distinguished good speakers from bad ones and bore testimony to a speaker's management of the voice. Frederick Helmore, in what was essentially a self-help book for readers with impeded speech, noted:

> In conversation the pitch of the voice varies very considerably – some voices are very elastic, others are endowed with great power of imitation; but the extent to which the necessary variations for effective reading and speaking can be carried depends very much upon practice.[19]

Moreover, while ordinary conversation appeared as a counterpoint to public speech, it was also contrasted to silence. Walter Yearsley, in his method to 'cure' stammering, drew a firm line between mere vocalization and conversation, and only defined the latter as incompatible with a curative silence:

> Silence, so far as relating to the cure, means, no attempt to converse with anyone, under any circumstance (and this must be observed) for a period of at least seven days … In the presence of others, he must be dumb … Silence does not imply that the pupil is debarred from any speech whatever during this course, but that he shall not practice conversation with others.[20]

Although physical ease in conversation was assumed for most bodies, emotional or mental ease was another matter altogether. For the middle-class stammerers Yearsley addressed in his courses, this meant that conversation was not ordinary at all but rather a 'way to develop ability in speech and to crush out timidity and cowardice'.[21]

One possible explanation for the assumptions of ease and naturalness of the conversational voice is that the practice of conversation mapped so easily onto interpretations of the prime function of the human voice: sociability. This was, according to many experts, how human vocalization distinguished itself from animal sound production.[22] Unlike animals, humans were – in numerous citations and (mis)translations of ancient Greek wisdom – intrinsically social beings. In nineteenth-century parlance, this became a biological rather than a philosophical or political dictum.[23] Humans' innate sociability, for these experts, seemed lodged in the throat, predicated on evolutionary success and the result of evolved and superior vocal organs. Or, as J. Farrar put it more poetically in 1881, 'on these two little and insignificant-looking strings [the vocal cords] depend many of the blessings of life: – such as the charms of vocal music, the numerous delights and untold benefits of social intercourse.'[24] Those delights were present in public speech: 'the telling words and impassioned language of a master orator, who, may be, thrills our whole soul with multitudinous emotions, – such as joy, fear, sorrow, religious or political fervour, love, hate, &c.' But they were even more present in conversation: 'the lightning-like contact of mind with mind, the passage of sparks of wit between man and man, the edifying and mind-polishing effects of rational and thoughtful conversation (one of the greatest pleasures of society).'[25] Although Farrar explicitly addressed a non-specialist audience of orators, clergy, vocalists and others, his work, too, is interlaced with references to comparative and evolutionary biology. The 'insignificant-looking strings', whilst undeniably part of the 'natural' body, were presented as a relatively recent addition to human anatomy – suggesting that the forebears of humans had had to do without speech before they gained the requisite level of civilization through evolution. Moreover, a slight sense of anxiety hung over this new, unstable image of biology, as evolution gained could also be lost. The spread of Darwinism as a lens through which human bodies and behaviours could be understood – not only in scientific contexts but far beyond them – is well documented for the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[26] It is hardly surprising that in the field of vocal health, centrally concerned with both human physiology and that most human of skills, language, both ideas about evolution, with its attendant ideas of human superiority, and fears about the erosion of that superiority were present. As Bill Luckin has argued, discourses of degeneration in Britain in the long nineteenth century legitimized the darker side of evolutionary discourses by 'interactions between moral and medico-environmental values'.[27] In the study of speech, the medical and moral were, of course, already intrinsically intertwined, as the physical process of vocalization

was read as an externalization of an authentic self,[28] which made speech a privileged, and contested, site of humans' status as a particularly evolved and civilized species. The threat of degeneration was a minor concern in Farrar's discourse, but the loss of speech would, according to him,

> [be] like the three days of Egyptian darkness, be one to be felt. In short, human life, now that we have tasted of the sweets of vocal intercourse, would be so comparatively dull, tame, and blank, that any efforts to describe it, even faintly, would be sheer mockery.[29]

If the ability to speak set humans apart from animals, the ability to speak well served as a means to distinguish among humans. Or, as William Gardiner had put it in 1832, 'As the organs of speech differ as widely in form as men differ in their faces, it is not wonderful there should be great dissimilarity in our methods of talking.'[30] Such differences, attributed largely to ethnicity, would gain and lose different meanings and explanations over the course of the nineteenth century.[31] Evolutionary explanations would eventually come to replace those based in climate theory to underpin discourses of European superiority. Nevertheless, older logics of climatic and environmental influences on the vocal organs would continue to circulate into the twentieth century, pointing at subtle cultural differences 'heard' as differences in vocal practice. As Nina Eidsheim has shown in her work on Black American voices and timbre, 'a culturally derived system of race renders a given vibrational field attached to a person as a *white voice*, a *black voice* – that is, "in tune" with expected correlations between skin color and vocal timbre'.[32] These culturally derived systems are historically and geographically specific, and the weight given to skin colour specifically as an indicator of ethnicity changed throughout the nineteenth century. The ethnicities heard 'in' nineteenth-century voices were informed, at least partly, by reigning ideas on evolution and the racial 'hierarchies' connected to it – and those were not only colonial in nature. According to Frederick Helmore, 'Intonations vary in different localities. The Scotch, for instance, often use the rising inflection where an Englishman would use the falling. In some countries conversation is carried on almost in monotone.'[33] Theodore Schmauk, writing with considerably more conviction in 1890, noted:

> No nation in the civilized world speaks its language so abominably as the English. Familiar conversation is carried on in inarticulate smudges of sound which are allowed to pass current for something, as worn out shillings are accepted as representatives of twelve-pence. When English people begin to study singing, they are astonished to find that they have never learned to speak.[34]

Cultivated Conversation

Schmauk did not consider the English to be beyond hope, though. 'The sound of the English language is by no means as bad as it is made to appear,' he conceded.[35] But mastery would have to be acquired. In this section I focus on the practices of training and cultivation various authors prescribed to consciously create the ostensibly naturally given skills involved in conversation. This required the development of two types of expertise, related to listening, on the one hand, and to vocalizing, on the other. As Schmauk indicated, the 'ordinary' character of the conversational voice was not to be confused with a lack of refinement:

> It is a great mistake to think that perfect habits of speech come naturally. The ordinary conversation of the majority of people, both young and old, and even that of nurses and teachers, is incredibly slipshod. To say nothing of a refined accent and finished articulation, their tone-production is frequently very faulty. And so the college graduate who can work out the most intricate problems in mechanics or acoustics, who has been in training for the boat race, who has given years to the acquirement of many languages, who can play on many instruments – from a flute to a pipe-organ – actually does not know how to manage the instrument in his own throat, and has never tried to learn to speak.[36]

Whilst Helmore was less scathing in his views on English conversational voices, he concurred with this need for cultivation and exercise, noting that 'it is only after long practice, regulated by the power of imitation, that the up and down, conventional intonation of ordinary conversation is acquired'.[37] This was even true, according to choirmaster Henry Harper Hulbert, for those who were gifted with a naturally pleasant voice engaging in equally natural conversation:

> The ordinary conversational voice is often regarded as the natural voice; it is, however, seldom free from defects. A pleasant, musical, conversational voice is a most valuable asset; but however richly the speaker may be endowed by Nature, it is possible to improve the voice by bringing into prominence the good qualities and removing the defects.[38]

It is striking that in all these assessments of pleasant, underdeveloped and other voices, the assumed ability of both authors and readers to 'hear' identity, skill and natural grace in a voice was never questioned. Colombat fully trusted his audience to share his abilities (and categorizations) to learn by listening – one only needed a 'delicate ear'. Likewise, Helmore's suggestion that exercising the conversational voice was a matter of imitation rested on the assumption that anyone would be able to hear, recognize and interpret 'best practices' of

conversational tone. In fact, of course, a lot of tacit knowledge on the part of both readers and authors was assumed, and the documents bear witness to something akin to the 'audile techniques' Jonathan Sterne has identified to be at work among engineers working in early sound technology. These techniques are culturally specific listening skills, particular to their place and time. Sterne's analysis focuses on a world of mediated sound, and therefore the audile techniques he distinguished in *The Audible Past* are largely connected to the type of listening that developed in response to new technologies. For 'my' nineteenth-century scientists, however, audile techniques were more closely related to the sort of musical education middle-class Europeans would have had.[39] They were also connected to largely non-acoustic methods to mediate sound, like transcription, print and description. The introduction of acoustic replay and electronic amplification and broadcast would thoroughly change conversational audile as well as vocal techniques later in the twentieth century. The influence of the microphone on political speech, discussed by Greg Goodale, and more broadly the rise of 'intimate' vocal sounds transmitted electronically on the radio, over the telephone or in jazz clubs, analysed by Karin Martensen, shows just how profound the impact of recording and mediation was on the material production of vocal sound.[40] As Karin Bijsterveld has pointed out, underlining the importance of various means of transmitting sounds technologically, 'listening cannot be studied in isolation from the other senses. Its historically embedded relations with other sensory modalities, especially tactile and visual modalities, are crucial.'[41]

The historically embedded nature of these experiences was invisible, and perhaps unimaginable, to nineteenth-century experts on the voice, however. Like their twentieth-century counterparts, they strove towards synthetic and systematic scientific practice.[42] To do so, they mobilized highly located and individual experiences (their patients' and their own) and made these observations subject to debates with an increasingly global community of potential colleagues, and readers – thus constructing an argument of 'universal' civilization and health on the basis of their situated sonic knowledge. The need to cultivate the voice was therefore not presented as a matter of individual needs, agency or choice but rather as a sort of universal biological and societal diagnosis. Although the practices required for, and the projected results of, a cultivated conversational voice were comparable to what was also becoming the norm on stage,[43] to 'act naturally' in daily life was seen as a matter of not only propriety but also health. Developing one's conversational vocal skills was necessary from a hygienic point of view, as André Castex among others noted in a 1894 manual entitled *Hygiene of the Speaking and Singing*

Voice. Attending to vocal development and cultivation would not only improve the speaker's personal health but promote vocal health and development more generally, and, conversely, neglecting practice and exercise carried the threat of 'loss' of the voice on account of contravening the rules of physiology and nature. 'If the vocal apparatus functions according to nature and physiology, its means will develop, but if it functions unnaturally, and ignorant of good methods, the voice is lost.'[44] In addition to these universalist claims of health and hygiene, the need to train the conversational voice was also presented as a social requirement. As physical education and voice teacher Lewis Monroe noted in 1869, learning to manage technical aspects of speech such as applying force in different ways was important to one's social fluency: 'A due degree of [median stress] in ordinary conversation distinguishes the man of culture from the boor.'[45] The audile technique expected from the reading audience therefore went beyond practices of listening to recognize acoustic and vocal patterns but also extended to discernment regarding the social quality of certain sounds (and was therefore closely connected to tacit knowledge dependent on class-based sensibilities and norms, for example). Not being a 'boor' was, after all, a state of being rather than an isolated practice – and it therefore required constant exercise. This is perhaps why middle-class sociability was thought to be so closely related to conversation, or even acquired through it. A good, healthy voice required the sort of daily exercise that was also insisted on for practices of politeness, propriety and one's presence in society.[46]

Given the close connection between the listening skills presupposed in these manuals and treatises on and notions of middle-class propriety and cultivation, it is no surprise that the 'sound' of a good conversational voice was often described in musical terms. This was a discourse that readers were expected to be familiar with. It was also, as Alexandra Hui has demonstrated, prevalent in nineteenth-century scientific practices of sonic diagnosis and expertise more broadly. The quality of the conversational voice was therefore often related or contrasted to that of the singing voice: 'There is considerable difference between the speaking and the singing voice … The chief differences between speech and song are in musical quality, stability and duration, pitch, and pace.'[47] Conversation, like other forms of vocalization, was 'heard' and represented as a sequence of varying pitches:

> The pitch of the speaking voice may be roughly represented by five notes; the middle note of the voice is the pitch used in ordinary salutations, as 'Good morning', 'How are you?', 'Ladies and gentlemen', etc. This pitch

> should be used by the speaker when he does not wish to awaken any special sentiment in his audience. Raising the pitch may be said to elevate the spirits, lowering the pitch to depress the spirits. As the speaker works up his subject and becomes more earnest, he raises the pitch; but if he makes a somewhat unimportant statement, he lowers his pitch. These are the pitches nearest to the middle note, one just above which suggests excitement, and one just below usually used for parenthetical clauses. If the sentiment is very joyful a higher pitch still is used, and if very solemn or sad a still lower pitch. While it is excellent to begin a speech with the middle pitch, and to keep that pitch as the fundamental note running throughout the speech, it is necessary to change into one of the other four pitches as the changing sentiments demand. The brilliant conversationalist will accomplish this quite easily and naturally in ordinary talking.[48]

Pitch, combined with stress and accent, made for a recognizable pattern of speech that could be distinguished as 'conversational' and different from oratory. It also made it distinguishable as the kind of sounds that were more likely to issue from some throats than others. Hulbert's description of easy and fluid pitch changes within a reasonably large ambit of pitches (four pitches represent a clear departure from a monotone) points towards an expectation of significant musicality in conversation. This seems to suggest that the type of speech pattern associated with conversation, and thus the performative construct of the conversational voice itself, was imagined as intrinsically feminine. Physiologists and laryngologists had gone to great lengths to classify human larynges and vocal cords and had come to clear binary conclusions about the differences between male and female vocal organs. The latter, they agreed, were smaller and less angular, which made them more flexible.[49] This meant that women, on average, expended less energy in managing and manipulating their voice. An organ suited to flexibility more than force, and for daily use rather than isolated feats of endurance: the female larynx appeared to be made for conversation as the male larynx appeared 'naturally' suited for public speech.

Vessels of Conversation

This interpretation of female physiology as particularly suited for conversation endured even as women increasingly took to public (and political) platforms for speech. As, for example, Joy Damousie and Helen Sunderland have demonstrated, women learned and practised rhetoric and debating increasingly more often from the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards.[50] Although anxieties around female political participation surfaced regularly in this period, their presence in places of public political, moral and scholarly debate had become

sufficiently common by the time Hulbert wrote his work on voice training in 1910 to no longer be shocking. Nevertheless, handbooks focusing on vocal cultivation continued to associate female speech almost exclusively with either domestic or artistic spaces. According to Ralph Dunstan, author of a practical manual of vocal exercises, the association between a well-managed, melodious voice and femininity was so strong it even discouraged men from cultivating their tones at all:

> Unfortunately, many young men seem to imagine that it is unmanly to attempt to sweeten their voices either in ordinary conversation or more public utterance, and they constantly speak in a hoarse, gruff, indistinct voice which is not only ineffective, but absolutely distressing to the listener – as if manliness lay in *brusqueness* and in 'good sense and good taste could not be one'.[51]

As these imaginary gruff talkers in Dunstan's work suggest, the development of a 'sweet' voice was understood within a binary framework in which the vocal organs were trained to produce 'a' (that is, one) voice that would be lodged in the speaker's throat and connected closely to his or her identity. This framework was not only binary but heteronormative too. The voice developed in conversation, by women, was remarked on by these (mainly male) authors as having a peculiar attractiveness for men. 'It has to be admitted', Marc Colombat noted in 1833, 'that in the art of conversation, in subtle observation and the perfection of language, women – to their credit – surpass us greatly.'[52] Likewise, surgeon and speech therapist Thomas Bartlett credited 'that fairest of Nature's creations' with a superior gift for speech in general and conversation in particular in his 1839 'practical' handbook on stammering:

> For can a bosom exist that would not throb with increased pleasure to promote the chaste and gentle influence of female charms? That would not gladly smooth away any rugged or unseemly blemishes which would weaken their bland and benign sway over our affections? That would not seek to alleviate the unspeakable pangs produced by a sense of defect and inferiority in a delicate and sensitive mind? Now what, in somber earnest, among the whole catalogue of graces and external blandishments is comparable in their estimation, or in ours, to that gift, so especially the property of the sex, and which exercises so powerful an influence on man – a free and brilliant conversation?[53]

The (masculine neutral) 'we' addressed in these analyses was clearly expected to share the sensory and emotional response suggested by the authors, who – writing early in the nineteenth century – placed their remarks largely in a context of enduring 'natural philosophy'.[54]

Notions of anatomy, climate and old traditions of vocal mastery vie for primacy in these descriptions of female superiority in the cultivation of the conversational voice. As an anonymous 'physician' noted in 1843, women's flexible organs were made more than given, and the constant practice of conversation played an important part in the formation of these organs.[55] William Gardiner, in *The Music of Nature*, took this argument even further, suggesting that the simple practice of daily life was surpassed by conscious cultivation. Because the 'speaking voice is a more complicated machine than the singing voice', he contended, it was more developed in more civilized societies. Women, seen as guardians of propriety and civilization, excelled at it in the middle-class drawing room.[56] And women who had been lucky enough to be trained in matters of sociability and good taste shone even brighter:

> There is a charm, a tasteful manner of pronouncing our language, never heard but in the conversation of educated women. Perhaps this excellence may be attributed to their knowledge of Italian, and their acquaintance with music, but, more than all, to the dexterity and neatness of articulation which they possess. It may be remarked, that of late years we have been discarding the rougher tones of our language, for those more soft and flexible, and, as society improves, the English probably will acquire a polish that may vie with the languages of the East. If we consult the unalloyed expressions of nature, we find them nearly devoid of harsh consonantal sounds. Every traveler, who has listened to the conversation of savages, has made this remark.[57]

These expressions were charming and tasteful but, as Gardiner remarked, not 'natural'.

More than men, perhaps, women walked the narrow line between norms of naturalness and civilization in conversation throughout the nineteenth century. And the balance between the two certainly seems to have shifted in this period – not only did women enter new arenas of public speech with new vocal skills, but as the 'early modern' taste for art and for the perfectability of vocal machinery gave way to an evolutionary perspective, the work of perfecting nature was seemingly attributed to biology itself. Therefore, the cultural work that went into cultivating and managing the voice was gradually hidden. As Steven Connor has suggested, voices can be understood only in relation to their materiality and spatiality: 'The voice is the agent of the articulated body, for it traverses and connects the different parts of me, lungs, trachaea, larynx, palate, tongue, lips.'[58] It is therefore no surprise that changes in the wider fields of comparative and evolutionary biology had an impact on

laryngology, phoniatry, et cetera.[59] Moreover, as the voice and the human body ceased to be understood as mechanical clockworks, classic biology also lost some of its trustworthiness as a reliable way to observe the world.[60] In the field of laryngology, this shift was exemplified most by the invention and introduction of the laryngoscope, whereas previously vocal quality and health had been judged by ear; careful visual observation came to replace practices of listening. Later in the century, 'listening for' a diagnosis of conversational voice made a comeback – performed by increasingly sophisticated machines.[61]

In 1892 Richard L. Garner took a gramophone to the Cincinnati Zoo to 'record the sounds of the monkeys'.[62] Garner's study *The Speech of Monkeys* clearly demonstrates the ambiguous place of the human body and ideas of evolution in research on the voice and speech. Attributing to monkeys a faculty for speech clearly placed them in some sort of kinship relation with humans – and Garner stressed throughout his book that he assumed that humans and apes could engage in some form of communication and sociability. His experiments largely consisted of recording the sounds of one individual monkey and then replaying them to another one, whose reactions were read as a recognition of the recorded 'voice' as a form of speech informed by species and natural instinct. Whereas the monkeys' voice and ears are presented as perfect representations of and witnesses to their own species, however, human ears and voices appear as decidedly unsatisfactory. Garner finds it very difficult to distinguish or reproduce any of the speech sounds of his research subjects and prefers to use the gramophone to document and later 'speak' to the monkeys.

Conversely, the ability to cultivate voice and speech is reserved, in *The Speech of Monkeys*, almost exclusively for humans. Garner recorded one instance of a Cebus called 'Darwin' who learned to imitate his Capuchin neighbour's sounds, but otherwise the monkeys' utterances just 'are'. They seem to be acquired in a process like the one with which human children learn to speak initially, but then they stop developing. As Garner remarks, 'Monkeys do not generally carry on a connected conversation … [T]o suppose that their conversations are elaborate or of a highly social character, is to go beyond the bounds of reason.'[63] The hierarchical relation between simian and human speech is maintained throughout, but, contrary to studies on human speech, *The Speech of Monkeys* does not elevate more 'natural' forms of speech over others. Nevertheless, like essays on human speech, it shows that both the ease and the potential cultivation of the conversational voice were distributed unequally, according to not only class, gender and ethnicity but also species.[64]

Conclusion: The Grain of the Conversational Voice

Between the recordings of simian speech and analyses of pitch, we learn something about the (expected) sounds of nineteenth-century conversation. First, variation was key: the conversational voice was all about fluidity in pitch, in syllables, in volume. Unlike public speech, for which a recognizable pattern of stress and melodic leaps seems to have been prescribed, conversational speech was a matter of subtle management and manipulation – and the opposite of monotony. This is why it was so easily associated with both corporeal and social ease: established through daily practice and marked by a lack of systematic 'exercise', it seemed to emerge from human throats naturally. Some human throats seemed more suited for conversation than others, however, and the seemingly 'natural' gift of a conversational voice was thought to be supported particularly in bodies believed to be more cultivated and civilized. Women's flexible larynges, helped by their tendency to chatter, were believed to be especially good at producing conversational voices.

Second, conversational sounds were connected to conversing bodies despite the apparent distance between anatomy and sound waves. This is hardly unique to the conversational voice, nor to the Victorian context. As Roland Barthes has pointed out in what is now probably the most well-known (or at least most often cited) text on cultural vocal analysis, language manages 'very badly' when it has to interpret music, and it seems to run into similar difficulties when interpreting other sounds. Barthes locates this semiotic failure of language regarding sounding realities in the intersubjectivity of aesthetic sound: 'There is an imaginary in music whose function is to reassure, to constitute the subject hearing it … and this imaginary immediately comes to language via the adjective.'[65] Although Barthes explicitly targets music, and more precisely the lied, many of the uncomfortable qualities of the ways in which music criticism operates also apply to the documents we are limited to when studying historical practices of conversation. It, too, is a 'very precise space of *the encounter between a language and a voice*', comprising both corporeal practice and the cultural work of signification.[66] And much like vocal music, in its dependence on intersubjectivity, its close connection to subjective constitution at the crossroads between language and sound, conversation as an acoustic practice 'comes to language via the adjective'.[67] In fact, much of the analysis in this article relies on the historically contingent use of the adjective to contextualize the conversational voice. It attempts to gain insights into the 'audile techniques' of the past by probing the adjectival neologisms and experiments that linger on the pages of

educational manuals and scientific essays. Are we then, as Barthes asks, 'condemned to the adjective? Are we reduced to the dilemma of either the predictable or the ineffable?'[68] For Barthes, the answer was in the *grain* of the voice, 'the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs'.[69] The *grain* is, in a sense, where the tension between the living, breathing body and the cultural expectations and norms of vocal beauty is held, coming out in vocal sounds that betray the presence of that body and the resilience of ontological realities in culturally formed spaces. According to Barthes, the classically trained voice lacked grain because it had been cultivated to hide the work of the body. But as forays into the history of bel canto have shown – and as becomes obvious when analysing the seemingly 'natural' voice in conversation – the cultivation of the modern voice did not happen at a sharp edge between culture and nature. Rather, cultural work was repeatedly carried out to shape what would be heard as a natural sound, and the sounding body was absolutely central to practices of cultivation. Rather than distinguishing between voices that have, or do not have, a *grain*, cultural histories of conversation allow us to consistently draw connections between cultural expectations and imperatives of style and cultivation, on the one hand, and daily bodily practices 'producing' voice, on the other. The nineteenth-century insistence on the vocal organs as a site of cultivated nature and on the physicality of both sounds and voices opens up possibilities to think of conversation as an embodied, acoustic practice – and gives us more than just adjectives to do so.

Notes

1. This text started its life as a contribution to the Belcher colloquium on 'Victorian Talk' organized by Martin Hewitt and Patrick Leary at St. Hugh's College, Oxford, in 2022. I would like to thank all participants for their useful comments and pleasant conversation about the text. The research on which the text is based was funded by the European Research Council (ERC StG 2017 – CALLIOPE: Vocal Articulations of Parliamentary Identity and Empire).
2. André Castex, *Hygiène de la voix parlée et chantée* (Paris: Masson, 1894), p. 169. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
3. More specifically, I focus on knowledge circulating in English, French and German throughout the nineteenth century. The corpus of texts used is based on the collections of the Wellcome Library, London, the Royal Conservatory of Music, London, the Royal Academy of Music, London, the library of the Conservatoire National de Paris and the Bibliothèque National de Paris, the Samuel Heinicke Bibliothek, Leipzig and the library of the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Felix Mendelssohn, Leipzig. Together, they do not provide an exhaustive overview of what was published at the time, but they give a good indication of the kind of information that would have been available to an interested reader in each of these centres of sociability and knowledge. Moreover, Paris, London and Leipzig were all home to

leading institutions for Deaf education, speech therapy and musical education at the time.

4. For example, Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Naomi André, *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early-Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006); Gina Bloom, *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Jennifer Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: NYU Press, 2016); Nina Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Anke Charton, '"Was dem Manne die Bruststimme, das ist dem Weibe das Falsett": Einige Anmerkungen zur Konstruktion des Stimmgeschlechts', *FZG*, 18:1 (2012), pp. 39–52; and Rebecca Grotjahn, 'Die Konstruktion des Stimmgeschlechts als historischer Prozess', in Sabine Meine and Katharine Hottman (eds), *Puppen, Huren, Roboter: Körper der Moderne in der Musik zwischen 1900 und 1930* (Schliengen, Germany: Edition Argus, 2005), pp. 35–57.
5. The field of sound studies, originally mostly growing out of ethnomusicology and media studies, has included historical approaches to soundscapes, practices of listening and experiences of sound in the past two decades. For this article, I am particularly borrowing from authors working at the intersection of science and technology studies, histories of science and technology, and sound studies, who have demonstrated the centrality both of sound-based methods in the rise of modern science (next to visual modes of observation) and of sound as an object of research, for example in the development of acoustics, or the image of laryngology within studies of the inner and metaphorical voice. See, for example, Alexandra Hui and Julia Kursell (eds), 'Music, Sound and the Laboratory, 1750–1890', special issue, *Osiris*, 28 (2013); Karin Bijsterveld, *Sonic Skills: Listening for Knowledge in Science, Medicine and Engineering (1920s–Present)* (London: Palgrave, 2019); and Viktoria Tkaczyk, 'Whose Larynx is It? Fields of Scholarly Competence around 1900', *History of Humanities*, 3:1 (2018), pp. 57–73.
6. Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
7. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
8. Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
9. Peter Burke, *The Art of Conversation* (Cambridge: Polity, 1983). Historical work on conversation as an art is closely related to the rich historiography on politeness. As Lawrence Klein has put it, 'Politeness was an 18th century idiom'. Lawrence Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', *The Historical Journal*, 45:4 (2002), pp. 869–98 (870).
10. Stephen Miller, *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); and Theodore Zeldin, *How Talk Can Change our Lives* (Santa Monica, CA: Hidden Spring, 2000).
11. See, for example, Henk Te Velde, *Sprekende politiek: Redenaars en hun publiek in de parlementaire gouden eeuw* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2015).
12. John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
13. Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*, p. 3.
14. Idem.

15. Marc Colombat, *A Treatise upon the Diseases and Hygiene of the Organ of the Voice* (Boston: Redding, 1857), pp. 18–19. Colombat continues:

> The immortal physiognomist of Switzerland, Lavater, said, that the voice and the countenance were very often associated. In a work of father Kircher, we read, that a strong and hoarse voice is that of a man avaricious, pusillanimous, insolent in prosperity, cowardly in misfortune; such was Caligula, according to Tacitus. The voice which is grave at first, and terminates in faucette is that of a sad and irritable scold; the sharp, feeble and broken voice is that of an effeminate; that which is sharp and strong indicates a man devoted to pleasure; finally, the same author adds, that the grave, sonorous, heavy and precipitated voice denotes an individual enterprising, bold, and adapted to the execution of great things.

16. Emil Behnke, *The Speaking Voice* (London: Curwen & Sons, 1897), p. 5.
17. Richard Faulkner, *The Tonsils and the Voice in Science, Surgery, Speech and Song* (Pittsburgh, PA: Presbyterian Bookstore, 1913), pp. 219–20.
18. As William Clark has demonstrated, practices of speech including gossip and conversation have also played an important role in the development of the university. William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Part 2 of the book is entitled 'Narrative, Conversation, Reputation: On the Ineluctability of the Voice and the Oral'.
19. Frederick Helmore, *Speakers, Stammerers and Singers* (London: Joseph Masters, 1874), p. 49.
20. Walter Yearsley, *A Practical Self-Cure of Stammering and Stuttering* (Accrington, UK: Mrs. Yearsley, 1909), p. 106.
21. Ibid. p. 74.
22. In doing so, they relied on a long history of distinguishing humanity from animality through speech; see, for example, John Heath, *The Talking Greeks: Speech, Animals and the Other in Homer, Aeschylus and Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
23. That is not to say that physiological and biological approaches to song and voice can be completely set apart from philosophical ideas about music in the nineteenth century. As, for example, Edward Gillin has shown recently, fields focused on knowledge about sound were not very clearly defined at this time. Edward Gillin, *Sound Authorities: Scientific and Musical Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).
24. J. Farrar, *The Human Voice and Connected Parts: A Practical Book for Orators, Clergymen, Vocalists and Others* (London: Marshall Japp, 1881), p. 23.
25. Ibid. p. 23.
26. See, for example, Eve Marie Engels and Thomas F. Glick, *The Reception of Charles Darwin in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2008).
27. Bill Luckin, 'Revisiting the Idea of Degeneration in Urban Britain, 1830–1900', *Urban History*, 33:2 (2006), pp. 234–52.
28. Amy Wong, *Refiguring Speech: Late Victorian Fictions of Empire and the Poetics of Talk* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023).
29. Farrar, *The Human Voice*, p. 23.
30. William Gardiner, *The Music of Nature or an Attempt to Prove that What is Passionate and Pleasing in the Art of Singing, Speaking, and Performing upon Musical Instruments is Derived from the Sounds of the Animated World. With Curious and Interesting Illustrations* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman, 1832), p. 25. 'It is said that the

French speak in the nose, the Germans in the throat, and the English through the teeth.'

31. See, for example, also Castex, *Hygiène*, p. 109.
32. Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, p. 4.
33. Helmore, *Speakers, Stammerers and Singers*, p. 4.
34. Theodore Schmauk, *The Voice in Speech and Song: A View of the Human Voice for Speakers and Singers and All who Love the Arts of Speech and Song* (New York: John B. Alden, 1890), pp. 43–4.
35. Schmauk, *The Voice in Speech and Song*, p. 44.
36. Ibid. pp. 57–8.
37. Helmore, *Speakers, Stammerers and Singers*, p. 4.
38. Henry Hulbert, *Voice Training in Speech and Song: An Account of the Structure and Use of the Vocal Organs and the Means of Securing Distinct Articulation* (London: W. B. Clive, 1910), p. 71.
39. Sound studies scholars like Alexandra Hui and Julia Kursell have shown to what extent various technical skills related to a middle-class upbringing, such as musical notation, were central to scientific endeavours of the period. See, for example, Alexandra Hui, *The Psychophysical Ear: Musical Experiments, Experimental Sounds, 1840–1910* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); and Julia Kursell (ed.), *Sounds of Science – Schall im Labor (1800–1930)* (Berlin: Max Planck Institute, 2008). On the visualization of sound, see also Robert Brain, *The Pulse of Modernism: Physiological Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2015).
40. Greg Goodale, *Sonic Persuasion: Reading Sound in the Recorded Age* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Karin Martensen, *'The Phonograph is Not an Opera House': Quellen und Analysen zu Ästhetik und Geschichte der frühen Tonaufnahme am Beispiel von Edison und Victor* (Munich: Allitera Verlag, 2019), p. 4.
41. Bijsterveld, *Sonic Skills*, p. 5.
42. Tom Rice, 'Beautiful Murmurs: Stethoscopic Listening and Acoustic Objectification', *The Senses and Society*, 3:3 (2015), pp. 293–306.
43. Lynn M. Voskuil, 'Acting Naturally: Brontë, Lewes, and the Problem of Gender Performance', *ELH*, 62:2 (1995), pp. 409–42.
44. Castex, *Hygiène*, p. 138.
45. Lewis Monroe, *Manual of Physical and Vocal Training for the Use of Schools and for Private Instruction* (Philadelphia: Cowperthwait, 1869), p. 69.
46. See, for example, Soile Ylivuori, *Women and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England: Bodies, Identities, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
47. Hulbert, *Voice Training*, p. 39.
48. Ibid. p. 75.
49. See Josephine Hoegaerts, 'Women's Voices in Educational Manuals: The Gendered Sounds of Speech Therapy, Song and Education in Europe, c.1830–1900', *Women's History Review*, 29:3, (2019), pp. 444–64.
50. Joy Damousie, *Colonial Voices: A Cultural History of English in Australia, 1840–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Helen Sunderland, 'Politics in Schoolgirl Debating Cultures in England, 1886–1914', *The Historical Journal*, 63:4 (2019), pp. 935–57.
51. Ralph Dunstan, *Exercises in Voice-Production and Enunciation for Speakers and Readers* (London: Westminster School Book Depot, 1896), p. i.
52. Marc Colombat de l'Isère, *L'orthophonie ou physiologie et thérapeutique du bégaiement et de tous les vices de la prononciation* (Paris: Mansut fils, 1833), p. 118.

53. Thomas Bartlett, *Stammering, practically considered: with the treatment in detail* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper, 1839), pp. 10–11.
54. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was often credited with the observation that women, having significantly more practice through their tendency to chatter, had more flexible voices. James Hunt, for example, referred to his as 'the gallant Frenchman's explanation'. James Hunt, *A Treatise on the Cure of Stammering, with a General Account of the Various Systems for the Cure of Impediments in Speech and a Notice of the Life of the Late Thomas Hunt* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1857), p. 33.
55. A physician, *A Treatise on the Nature and Causes of Stammering with an Exposition of the Best Methods of Cure, Medical, Surgical, and Educational* (London: Samuel Highley, 1843), p. 14. 'Girls have the organs of speech more supple and flexible than boys, they speak sooner and easier, and women speak more agreeably than men. They are accused of speaking more; such ought to be the case, and I would willingly convert this reproach into praise.'
56. The 'angels in the house' were inscribed with 'angelic' voices in a distinctly hierarchical manner, dependent on other markers like class and ethnicity. See, for example, Lucy Green, *Music, Gender and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
57. Gardiner, *Music of Nature*, p. 476.
58. Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 35.
59. Most notably, perhaps, experts would rail against interpretations of vocal production as a mechanical event that could be located in the 'voice box' and present a holistic image of the whole body and all its organs producing voice. See Josephine Hoegaerts, 'De eunuch en de stotteraar: Ongepaste, ongezonde en onnatuurlijke mannenstemmen rond de eeuwwisseling', *Rythmus: Jaarboek voor Fin-de-Siècle Studies* (2014), pp. 95–112.
60. See Bijsterveld, *Sonic Skills*, p. 9. For a broader critique of the narrative of 'objective' observation in modern science, and a counternarrative of enduring embodied engagement with the natural world, see also, for example, Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@ Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
61. See, for example, Tom Rice, 'Listening', in David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (eds), *Keywords in Sound* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 99–111.
62. Richard Garner, *The Speech of Monkeys* (London: William Heinemann, 1892), pp. 5.
63. Ibid., pp. 45–6.
64. See also Joanna Bourke, *What it Means to be Human: Reflections from 1791 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2011).
65. Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 179–89 (184).
66. Ibid. p. 188.
67. Ibid. p. 180.
68. Ibid. p. 180.
69. Ibid. p. 188.