



## **Approaches to the Singing Voice: Linguistically, Musically, Gesturally, and Mimetically**

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### **I. Interest in the Topic**

Describing a voice—its color and texture—is a difficult task. For this reason, over the last decades journalists, authors, editors and music critics have created a plethora of strong, sometimes extravagant, metaphors to characterize singing voices.

Apart from professional writers, teachers, students and singers are also faced with the challenge of speaking adequately about voices. The widespread view that it is impossible to speak objectively about voices, or rather that there are only a few codified terms available for it, and the fact that those mentioned are constantly communicating about the singing voice, prompted us to investigate how this is done in different communicative frameworks and especially in professional singing lessons—with words, with metaphors, with gestures and facial expressions, with pretending and imitating.<sup>1</sup>

### **II. The Contradiction**

“Sun above high fog,” “sinking into a velvet armchair,” “someone who has a hangover after a night of drinking and desperately needs a drink of water”: At the beginning of the project we found a quite distinct and extravagant metaphoric in journalistic texts to describe singing voices. This resulted in the desire to develop a systematized presentation of ways to speak about the human singing voice.

Then there was an opposite experience: People, asked in everyday situations, about ways to describe singing voices, answered that it is not possible to talk about the sound of voices, that there are no words for it and no terminology with fixed rules. This shows that people feel instinctively unable to discuss voices.

This contradiction between “there are no words for it,” there are “no rules” and the wide stylistic variation in how people actually speak about the voice, prompted us to investigate how this happens in different situations in which one communicate and has to communicate about singing voices.

### **III. Data Collection and Transcription of the Video Recordings**

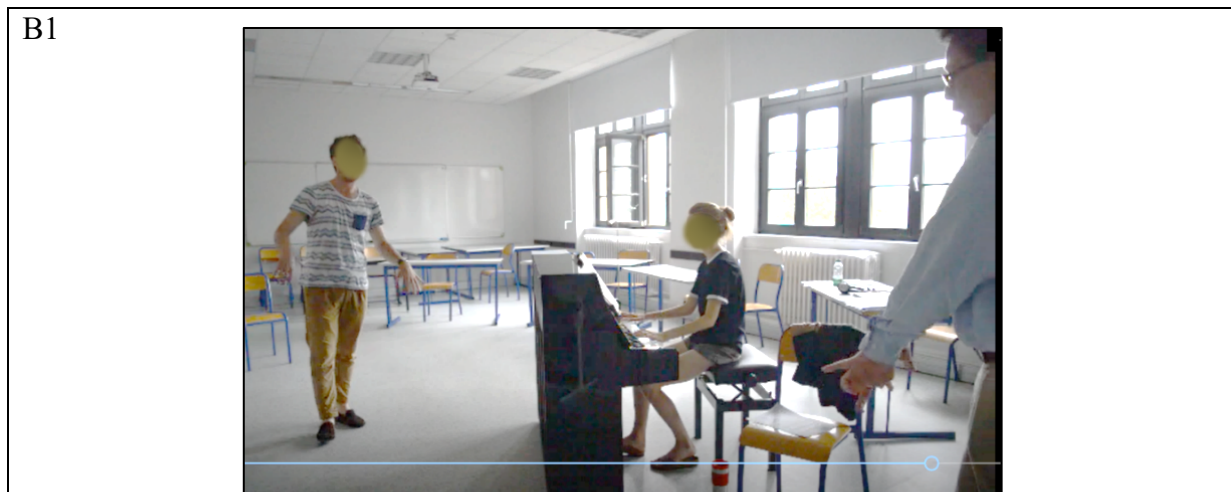
During a two-week master class we realized video recordings to investigate how voice descriptions are concretely generated and used in practice, and generally, which forms of pointing (lin-

guistic, musical and gestural) are introduced in professional singing lessons when people communicate about the sound of voices, technical aspects and artistic elements.

For the representation of the verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal actions the GAT2 MINIMAL TRANSCRIPTION was used to continue working with the video recordings.<sup>2</sup> This transcription is easy to read, it can be expanded little by little if needed and it maps chronological sequences. In a second step, significant video stills were selected from the data material and then information about the gestures, references to the word list and explanations about the content of the communication were added.

#### IV. Forms of Pointing in Singing Lessons

The following example shows all the forms of pointing that we have outlined as relevant for the description of communicating about singing voices: Linguistic pointing, musical pointing, and gestural pointing. It is clearly recognizable that pointing is at any time simultaneous multimodal. So there are always at least two forms of pointing used at the same time. (See example 1.”



B2



B1

T sings an excerpt from the choral literature

SV sings this excerpt

01

T [no

L imitates seal calls

02

T do you know[that one '

T [imitates the slapping together of a seal's fins by slapping the backs of his hands together, then imitates the typical call

SV [imitates seal calls and imitates the slapping together of the fins by slapping the backs of its hands together

03

T [THAT is the pitch

SV [imitates seal calls again

T sings an excerpt from the choral literature

SV sings this excerpt

B2

04

T [no no

T imitates a seal call with vocal fold closure and open embouchure tube

05

L ä is [THIS

L [moves the hanging right hand upwards, turns the palm upwards and makes a sound with insufficient vocal fold closure and unfavourable resonance displacement

B3



B4



**B3**

06

T we want

T [imitates the fins of a seal with his arms. With his palms facing outwards, he brings his arms together in front of his body so that the backs of his hands touch. With his voice he imitates the call of a seal; SU imitates him. SU imitates him.

T phonates

SV phonates

07

T [exactly  
(00:17:18-00:17:42)

T imitates the fins of a seal with his arms. With his palms facing outwards, he brings his arms together in front of his body so that the backs of his hands touch. With his voice he imitates the calls of a seal

T sings the excerpt

SV [sings the excerpt again]

08	T	[exactly – yes exactly like this]
	SV	[sings the excerpt again ]
	T	[imitates the seal]
<b>B4</b>		
09	T	[ok stop   that was fooling around with a tremendous effect --
10		did you notice that ‘
<u>Explanation:</u>		
This physical and vocal non-verbal gesturing describes the massive glottal closure of the vocalis function/chest voice function needed to sing a powerful tone. Here, the gesture serves as a muscle synergetic default and the animal voice imitation for the deletion of vocal technical patterns.		

### Example 1. “The seal.”

#### V. What do we gain by saying “point to”?

First, going out of the practice of “pointing to” offers the possibility of a unified description of different modalities of communicating. Moreover, we understand (as Augustine already did in his *Confessiones* ca. 400 AD) communicating as necessarily multimodal signposting.<sup>3</sup>

For singing lessons, this means:

- a) “Ostensive teaching”: The teacher points to something (like a signpost) while saying its name, singing or phonating. He/she directs the student's attention to something, and the student learns how it is called, how to sing or phonate it.
- b) Learning in use: The student repeats the words, the sounds, the sung and the gestures recited by the teacher.

#### VI. Word List

In addition to the compilation, systematization and categorization of the different forms of pointing in singing lessons, with examples and explanations, which is to be understood as an open pool of possibilities, a word list for describing voices was also compiled, as already mentioned above.

The basis are professional and colloquial, public and private, oral and written texts. With this corpus, 393 words used to describe singing voices could be substantiated. The words were defined from a linguistic and a vocal pedagogical perspective and their use was documented with evidence of usage contexts. The following is an excerpt from the word list for the entry “bib-bern.” (See example 2.)

Word	Linguistic definition	Vocal pedagogical definition	Evidence cited from KORAP and DWDS <sup>4</sup>
bibbernd  Lemma: bibbern	<i>salopp</i> zittern <u>Beispiele:</u> vor Angst, Erregung bibbern der ganze Körper bibbert eine bibbernde Stimme	zu schnelle Vibrato-form, oft mit periodischen Klangabbrüchen	Es singt und quietscht, schnarrt und jubiliert, es knarrt, grummelt, wispert, bibbert, brummt und säuselt, sowohl forte als auch pianopianissimo. <i>Die Zeit</i> , 15.07.1988, Nr. 29 (23.06.2019)

### Example 2. Excerpt from the word list.

#### VII. Conclusion

The study shows that, contrary to the widespread belief that it is impossible to talk about voices, it is indeed possible to communicate about them. By observing professional singing lessons, different forms of pointing were found, namely linguistic pointing, musical pointing and gestural pointing. It can be stated that the respective form of pointing is chosen depending on the context, following common knowledge and regarding the objectives of the singing lessons. The singers learn new words and how to use them. New words enable new and more precise analysis, diagnosis and self-reflection.

Furthermore, we have managed to systematize the thus-far uncodified pointing techniques and to illustrate the necessity of multimodal pointing in professional singing lessons. The results of the study are of great relevance to teachers, singers and professional writers as well as representatives of all disciplines that require descriptions for singing voices.

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the research for the dissertation project “Bilderzauber—Funktionen terminologischer und nichtterminologischer Beschreibung der Singstimme” by Stefanie Lorsch at the University of Mannheim.

<sup>2</sup> Selting, Margret et al., “Gesprächsanalytisches Transkriptionssystem 2 (GAT 2),” *Gesprächsforschung Online-Zeitschrift zur verbalen Interaktion* 10 (2009): 353–402.

<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> <https://korap.ids-mannheim.de/> and <https://www.dwds.de/> (accessed August 25, 2022).