

Voice Cracks and Strangled Birds: Unmasking The Trauma

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ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates the phenomenon of the voice crack through the concept of the Violated Voice, a term proposed to describe the interruption of the singing voice as both a physiological event and a metaphor for disrupted freedom, fractured identity, and violence enacted through and against the voice. While voice cracks are common experiences among singers and may result from physiological, psychological, or technical causes, they remain heavily stigmatized within vocal culture. The paper argues that the voice crack exposes the fragile relationship between the singer's body, artistic identity, and the demands of technical perfection. Beyond its medical and pedagogical explanations, the interrupted voice is interpreted as a symbolic act of violence: violence directed by the singer toward the voice through overuse, excessive discipline, stress, or unrealistic artistic expectations, as well as violence imposed externally through the restriction of expression and personal freedom. The Violated Voice thus emerges as a powerful framework for understanding the intersections of voice, violence, freedom, and human fragility. A personal case study of vocal collapse during a doctoral performance examination further illustrates how the temporary loss of the voice transforms the performer's perception of the body, time, and selfhood.

Keywords: strangled bird, violence, voice crack, voice break.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is devoted to the type of vocal antithesis – the Violated Voice. In this study, the term refers to the (un)intentional interruption of the voice: the sudden crack of the voice. The interruption of the voice, when a singer on stage can no longer continue performing, functions as a metaphor for interrupted freedom or a broken thread of thought. Figurative expressions describing a "broken voice," often associated with strangled birds, are used here to assess and question the fragility of the voice and, by extension, the fragility of an individual's personal freedom. The motivation for writing this paper

emerged from observations that prompted several questions: Why is the phenomenon of a voice crack such a powerful force that it can make a singer never want to step on the stage again? And why does the taboo against speaking about something that happens to most singers remain so persistent? Lastly – what the Violated voice has to do with voice cracks?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

American author Steven Pinker examines the idea that humanity experiences less violence today than at any previous point in history. However, he challenges the theory that every individual harbors

an innate drive toward aggression – a drive that constantly simmers within and periodically requires release. According to Pinker, aggression is not governed by a single motive but by many psychological systems that vary depending on environmental triggers, internal logic, neurobiological factors, and their social distributions [10]. Although Pinker's theory suggests that humanity has become increasingly empathetic over the centuries, various authors – including John Gray in an article published in *The Guardian* [7] – have argued that the popularity of thinkers such as Pinker risks producing a certain orthodoxy of thought. Gray questions whether violence has truly declined, particularly considering the extraordinary brutality and immense death toll of the twentieth century: "There is no reason to suppose that human beings are becoming more altruistic or more peaceful." Compared with previous centuries, people of today no longer need to hunt for food or hide from harsh climates; it is enough to visit a supermarket or increase the temperature in their homes. Survival has evolved into living, everyday problems are increasingly composed of elements created by society itself – taxes, social status, self-realization, social media, and similar concerns. If violence has not disappeared but daily life now exists in an entirely different dimension, where then, does violence reside? Within this study, the global understanding of violence as physical aggression toward another person takes on a different form. Rather than focusing on physical survival, the emphasis shifts toward **social survival**, and violence is examined within this context. The following discussion therefore investigates violence specifically as aggression enacted through the voice and against the voice, using my own created term – the Violated Voice.

Who commits violence against whom? It is useful to define the field of inquiry more precisely:

- A vocal break or hoarseness leads a person to commit violence against themselves or against their own voice with excess force and burn out.
- A person's physical, psychological violence towards themselves or their voice leads to vocal breaks or hoarseness.

- One person's violence against another manifests as the deprivation of freedom and the prohibition of expression.

Before examining the characteristics of the Violated Voice, however, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the term voice crack. David Harris and Laurel Irene, discussing problems of terminology in vocal pedagogy, argue that the linguistic symbolism used in vocal instruction reflects the intangibility of the voice [6]. Such terminology resembles the drawing of maps rather than a precise methodology for describing concrete objects. Characteristics of vocal technique are commonly explained through associative comparisons, idioms, clichés, and other figurative linguistic expressions. They constitute a patchwork of metaphors – a product of the vocal tradition passed from generation to generation together with the practical knowledge of singing itself.

One such expression is the voice crack. It should be emphasized that, in this study, a voice crack does not refer to the literal rupture or irreversible physical damage of the vocal folds. Rather, the discussion concerns temporary events that occur while singing, when the vocal folds briefly go into spasm, interrupting sound production and causing uncontrolled vocal outbursts or squeaks.

Why do voice cracks occur while singing? Several physiological causes can be identified:

- Pubertal voice mutation. Hormonal changes enlarge the laryngeal mechanism, causing the vocal folds to grow longer and thicker. During this period singers may experience increased discomfort or roughness while singing or speaking, a reduced or inconsistent vocal range, and general instability of the vocal mechanism. The vocal folds struggle to coordinate and vibrate evenly because of their sudden growth. In girls, voice mutation may also involve a lowering of pitch and an excessively breathy tone, although these changes are generally less noticeable than in boys. Carla Higgins [5] discusses female voice mutation in greater detail.
- Menopause. Research and interviews with women experiencing menopause frequently mention voice cracks as a common symptom. These arise from changes in both the vocal apparatus and

the body more generally. During menopause the vocal folds become more vulnerable and drier. Women's experiences are documented in *Singing Through Change: Women's Voices in Midlife, Menopause, and Beyond* [3].

- Dehydration. A lack of fluids reduces tissue elasticity, making the voice rougher and drier. Alcohol, smoking, passive smoking, and air pollution contribute to drying of the mucous membranes. Hormonal changes may also dry the vocal folds; altered levels of progesterone and androgens in women are known to have this effect [3].
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease. Stomach acid irritates the tissues of the larynx and the vocal folds, resulting in hoarseness and vocal instability.
- Stress. Stress affects breathing patterns by encouraging shallow upper-chest breathing, which compromises vocal technique. It also reduces vocal stability while negatively affecting concentration and psychological well-being.
- Respiratory illnesses, hoarseness, allergies, sleep deprivation, and other conditions that cause swelling of the vocal mechanism.
- Vocal fatigue or excessive vocal load resulting from prolonged singing or speaking, regardless of the singer's level of technical proficiency.
- Grief. Grief, as an exceptionally intense emotional experience, profoundly affects the emotional, psychological, and physical body, including the vocal apparatus.

Specific aspects of vocal technique may also contribute to voice cracks:

- Improper vocal technique, including excessive tension in the neck, incorrect articulation, excessive pressure on the throat or vocal folds to produce greater volume, or singing pitches that are too high or too low without understanding the necessary technique.
- Insufficient coordination between inhalation, airflow, and vocal fold engagement. Poorly coordinated breathing may cause the vocal folds to work either excessively or insufficiently.

- Transitions between vocal registers, during which the vocal folds fail to maintain coordination and the voice breaks.

- Changes in vocal technique. A singer who has studied a particular technical approach for many years under one teacher may experience voice cracks after making a sudden, fundamental change in technique. In such cases, the voice crack represents a kind of systemic shock—a movement unfamiliar to the vocal apparatus—which gradually resolves as the singer adapts through sustained practice and time.

Michel Poizat reflects on why something as seemingly insignificant as a voice crack can inflict such profound psychological trauma upon a singer [9]. He argues that the singer's existence on stage is governed by the voice – an object that exists only insofar as it remains unattainable, constantly circulating and therefore inevitably elusive. The fragile boundary separating the role performed by the singer from the singer's own corporeality must remain imperceptible. Otherwise, when an event such as a voice crack abruptly reinstates this boundary, the performer "once again reminds us of his existence not merely as a subject, but as a failed subject. <...> The audience returns him to the position of object – but now he is a fallen object, something to be discarded, something that may be greeted with rotten tomatoes or, more simply, with boos" (Poizat 1991: 198).

Similarly, Caroline Abbate, in *In Search of Opera* (2001), discusses the relationship between the human being and the machine, arguing that "the moment something goes wrong during performance exposes the machine within the human," while "every perfect mechanism wounds human individuality and consciousness" [1]. Searching the online platform YouTube using the keywords opera soloist voice crack yields an abundance of recordings—a concentrated archive of vocal mishaps and tragedies experienced by opera singers of different generations and artistic stature. Selecting one of the most widely viewed compilations, one first hears the elegant closing measures of the Duke's aria *La donna è mobile* from Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Above the orchestra, the mischievous Duke approaches the celebrated

conclusion of his aria in a rather unexpected fashion. During the climactic cadence on *E di pensier*, the concluding B – the note – fails spectacularly. Instead of the anticipated heroic tone, the audience hears only an involuntary, unmistakably non-singing sound produced by vocal folds that can no longer sustain the pitch. Before the recording cuts off, the audience's reaction immediately pronounces judgment upon the incident. Only afterwards does the viewer discover that the unfortunate tenor is none other than the legendary Swedish singer Nicolai Gedda (1925–2017). It is doubtful that this isolated episode cast any lasting shadow over Gedda's remarkable career. Nevertheless, the existence and enduring popularity of such recordings raises an intriguing question: why are they watched at all? One of the most highly rated comments beneath the video encapsulates precisely this response: "As a fledgling opera singer, this makes me feel better for two main reasons. 1) Even the greats screw up sometimes, and 2) I'm way too hard on myself. <...> Anyway, you have to be completely relaxed to hit the high notes, and it's easy to psych yourself out when you know it's coming up. <...> You start to tense and self-doubt, and if that gets a hold of your throat (your natural tendency is to squeeze your throat to hit the high notes, which is the opposite of what you need to do) you're screwed. <...> I'm sure they nailed it 1000 times in practice and then got nervous in front of the audience. They probably beat themselves up afterwards. As amusing as it is for the rest of us, I feel for them".

Such vocal incidents transform opera – what Bertolt Brecht famously described as an irrational genre – into something unexpectedly rational. An audience that moments earlier had been observing Gedda's Duke suddenly witnesses the Duke becoming Gedda. One might even regard this as the Duke's symbolic death: the theatrical illusion of his independent existence is abruptly destroyed. Yet the online comment cited above also reveals a curious ambivalence. On the one hand, witnessing the failures of great singers can provide reassurance and encouragement to aspiring performers. On the other hand, these moments remain irresistibly fascinating to observe from the outside. Caroline Abbate characterizes the phenomenon of the voice

crack as a schism – a rupture "when performance drowns the work itself. <...> [At that moment] I was radically attentive to what was happening on stage, paying equally little attention to Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, to the meanings of its music, or to its attempts to conceal that event" [2]. What, then, does it mean to experience a voice crack?

III. METHODOLOGY, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A voice crack is, fundamentally, the temporary disappearance of the voice itself. As Poizat writes, "The voice, by definition, is something that has been lost: perhaps lost in the distance, perhaps in the surrounding noise. Everyone loses it under the force of emotion, in moments of astonishment" (Poizat 1991: 205). Vocal technique is, in essence, the capacity to maintain control over one's instrument. This instrument comprises not only the vocal folds or the vocal apparatus but also the performer's entire physical, mental, and psychological being, together with the intangible relationships among these dimensions, within a particular moment and set of circumstances. As Abbate observes, "The live voice offers the singer's individuality and autonomy as a phenomenon that cannot be erased, even by the most powerful postmodern critiques that understand the voice as the presence of Western thought" [1]. Among the finest performers, this control is cultivated with such extraordinary precision that it becomes virtually invisible to the observer. Their virtuosity appears effortless, almost innate. As Abbate remarks, it resembles magic itself – an apparent transformation of the impossible into the possible. Performers of this calibre appear almost superhuman to their audiences, inspiring admiration that often borders on public worship or collective hysteria [2]. If complete mastery over the body and the voice constitutes the very essence of successful performance, what occurs when the voice – or indeed the body itself – ceases to obey its owner?

A concrete example of vocal loss of control occurred during my doctoral singing assessment on 20 January 2025, at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre in Vilnius. The first part of the examination consisted of performing a selection of ariette by the Italian composer Vincenzo Bellini. Although these works are relatively brief – lasting

between one and four minutes – and present few exceptional tessitura challenges, they possess one significant characteristic: they offer almost no opportunity to momentarily release the voice. Singing continues almost uninterrupted, demanding exceptional preparation of both breath and vocal apparatus. Put simply, when there is no opportunity to rest, deficiencies in vocal technique or professional experience quickly become exposed. The likelihood of "choking," experiencing a voice crack, running out of breath, or breathing exclusively into the upper chest increases considerably. During the second of the three ariette, as the musical tension intensified and the tessitura ascended, I experienced precisely such a collapse. The laryngeal mechanism ceased to support the voice adequately; the sound became strained, unstable, and audibly distressed. After swallowing and taking a breath before the third arietta, I became acutely aware of muscular fatigue and stress-induced spasms throughout my neck. Singing remained necessary, yet the voice no longer responded. Control over the instrument had effectively disappeared, and technical tasks that moments earlier had been entirely manageable suddenly became either extremely difficult or impossible to execute. During such a vocal incident, the performer's objective undergoes a fundamental transformation. The goal is no longer "to sing beautifully" or "to give an impressive performance." Instead, it becomes simply to finish the piece. Within the present study, this experience functions not merely as personal testimony but as a case through which broader processes of violence against the voice may be examined – violence emerging as the consequence of continual vocal discipline, professional expectation, and the relentless demand for technical control. As Catherine Malabou writes, "Something emerges through injury, through the wound – something to which ordinary creative plasticity grants neither access nor embodiment: the desertion of subjectivity, the distancing of the individual who becomes a stranger to herself, who no longer recognizes anything, no longer recognizes herself, no longer remembers her own self" [11]. Standing on stage during such an experience, perception itself changes. Vision darkens, while both form and time appear to unfold according to entirely different laws. As the voice begins to choke,

the duration of a single sung note stretches into what feels like an eternity, while the faces of those seated before the performer seem unnaturally close. Their collective gaze – even when silent – pierces the singer's body. One no longer inhabits ordinary reality but rather finds oneself inside a painting of German Expressionism, where perception has become distorted by psychological intensity.

Indeed, a vocal catastrophe such as a voice crack resembles a momentary form of amnesia. For those brief seconds, the singer forgets everything: what should happen next, how the body should respond, what technique should be employed. Only an overwhelming sense of danger remains, whispering that one's future as a singer has just come to an end.

Yet once this moment has passed – a moment capable of suspending time itself and compelling one to reconsider an entire life's work – the body resumes control. Rational consciousness returns. An internal technical programme begins to operate almost automatically, activating a repertoire of solutions intended to rescue the performance. How, then, should a singer consciously understand such an incident? Would it be sufficient merely to change one's perspective and accept it as a form of transformation? As Audronė Žukauskaitė observes, "In order to acquire a new form or a different identity, we must undergo change by destroying our previous forms and identities. <...> This imperative of destruction is evident even at the cellular level" [11]. The control discussed above extends beyond the body itself, encompassing the immaterial dimensions of human existence, including psychology. According to Brené Brown, anger is "the emotion we experience when something prevents us from achieving a desired outcome or when we believe that the course of events has been violated" [4]. Beneath anger's explosive surface lies a complex constellation of other emotions. Yet in decisive moments, anger also signals that change has become necessary. At the critical moment, I succeeded in transforming anger into determination rather than violence. The performance may have concluded in its least satisfactory artistic form, but it was nevertheless completed. At the same time, such an episode reveals, with remarkable clarity, the presence (or absence) of internal discipline and self-observation. Reflecting upon the incident

afterwards generated a powerful determination never again to allow such circumstances to recur. The experience itself became pedagogically productive. Consequently, I arrived at the conclusion that genuine artistic transformation necessarily requires a degree of self-destruction. One must, in a sense, explode the obsolete structures of consciousness and subconscious habit to create a new artistic form founded upon accumulated experience and strengthened vocal character.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the phenomenon of the voice crack extends far beyond a technical imperfection. As argued throughout this paper, it exposes the

vulnerability of the human voice as both a physiological instrument and a medium of personal freedom, revealing how violence can be enacted through and against the voice. The concept of the Violated Voice therefore reframes the voice crack as a moment in which artistic control, identity, and autonomy are temporarily disrupted. Yet this rupture is not solely destructive. By confronting failure, singers gain the possibility of transformation: the interruption of the voice can become a catalyst for greater self-awareness, resilience, and artistic growth. Rather than a sign of defeat, the violated voice ultimately demonstrates that fragility and vulnerability are inseparable from the process of becoming an artist.

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