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Cecilia Björkén-Nyberg

Vocal Woolf

The audiobook as a technology of health

Cecilia Björkén-Nyberg
Senior Lecturer in English
School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences
Halmstad University

www.soundeffects.dk



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Abstract

*This article explores the therapeutic potential of the performing audiobook voice. It takes as its point of departure the view that the audiobook negotiates the semantics of a text and its vocal manifestation. A key idea is that the performing voice is an affordance for creating a salutogenic sense of coherence in the listener. The argument is theoretically situated within the context of the psychology and sociology of music, with affect regulation and 'health musicking' as significant elements. The British actress Juliet Stevenson's reading of Virginia Woolf's second novel *Night and Day* (1919) will be approached as a case of 'health musicking' and an event-based appreciation of sonic culture. This discussion will focus on the listeners' appropriation of the sound object for their own empowering purposes.*

Introduction

This article explores the therapeutic potential of the performing audiobook voice. It takes as its point of departure the view that the audiobook negotiates the semantics of a text and its vocal manifestation through the performing narrator. The argument is grounded in the notion that the performing voice is an affordance that the listener may appropriate for the purpose of mood regulation and a sense of emotional cohesion, which is a key idea in a salutogenic approach to health. The line of reasoning builds on research that has been carried out within music psychology, and throughout the article audiobook vocality is inscribed in a musical discourse. It is further argued that a performing narrator's vocal virtuosity is likely to establish a parasocial interaction between a listener and a mediated fictional person.

The health-promoting potential is latent in the initial discussion of the voice as affordance, but becomes increasingly foregrounded as the argument develops into a consideration of the British actress Juliet Stevenson's reading of Virginia Woolf's novels. The interest in exploring this topic was first generated by my own response to Stevenson's digitally recorded reading of Woolf, which was then matched against the material of other listener responses published on the Audible website. Based on this material, the manner in which the narrator's vocal features clarify aspects of focalisation and intentionality, thereby facilitating a co-pathic attitude, will be illustrated. This discussion will then feed into one relating in particular to Woolf's second novel, *Night and Day* (1919), as an example of 'health musicking', with two people recovering from professional burnout. In this context 'health musicking' is to be understood in the broad sense suggested by Lars Ole Bonde (2011) and, as such, constitutes 'the common core of any use of music experiences to regulate emotional or relational states or to promote wellbeing, be it therapeutic or not, professionally assisted or self-made' (Trondalen & Bonde, 2012, p. 40). In the concluding part it will be argued that the audiobook can function as a health technology, and that listen-

ing to digitally recorded vocal sound offers new affordances that represent a clear orientation towards an event-based appreciation of sonic culture. Consequently, the focus is less on the autonomous work than on those appropriating it for their own empowering purposes.

The voice as affordance

The audiobook is a phenomenon that defies categorisation. This feature is one that is brought to the fore in the choice of verb to use when engaging with the medium – do we read it, listen to it or both? A focus on the activity of reading tends to take as its point of departure the remediation of the print book, whereas a focus on listening mode summons associations with music, thus situating the audiobook in a sonically mediated context. In their recently published book, *Digital Audiobooks: New Media, Users, and Experiences* (2016), Iben Have and Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen draw attention to the inherent ambiguity of the digital audiobook, arguing that it is this sense of indecision that lends the medium its unique character. When the reader goes from print to sound, there is generally a certain loss in the ability to make ‘a coherent cognitive mapping of events’ (p. 35); however, this loss is compensated for by the performing voice, which adds intensity to the text and produces a sense of emotional cohesion. Thus, as Have and Stougaard Pedersen observe, to the audiobook’s many interrelated affordances, such as hardware, mobility, flexibility and multimodality, the voice itself should be added.

In my opinion, focussing on the voice as affordance is a means of acknowledging ambiguity as an innate characteristic of the audiobook medium, not least in regard to the intriguing tension between the semantics of a text and its vocal manifestation. This tension is one that informs Mladen Dolar’s (2006) notion that the voice may function as the alterity of logos and Adriana Cavarero’s (2005) belief that vocal manifestations existing outside the signifying patterns of speech represent much more than meaningless excess. Cavarero’s approach is inspired by the distinction made by Paul Zumthor (2000) between ‘orality as “the functioning of the voice as the bearer of language” and vocality as “the whole of the activities and values that belong to the voice as such, independently of language”’ (p. vii in: Cavarero, 2005, p. 12). Cavarero further stresses the unique respiratory and articulatory qualities of a certain voice in a manner that is reminiscent of Roland Barthes’ theory of the grain of the voice (1977). What is particularly interesting about Cavarero’s stance is that the listener is implicitly involved in the pleasurable act of vocal production: ‘It takes at least a duet, a calling and a responding – or, better, a reciprocal intention to listen, one that is already active in the vocal emission and that reveals and communicates everyone to the other’ (p. 5).

Cavarero's approach is founded on the performing act being physically situated and embodied. This stress on embodiment has attracted scholarly criticism. Neumark (2010a) argues that the digital challenges the very notion of authenticity as a nexus for intimacy and intensity, and that digitally produced vocal performativity has a disturbing rather than representational agency. In fact, she claims, the digital voice can create an 'authenticity effect' (p. 114) by communicating embodiment in the actual moment of enunciation and not by 'expressing some pregiven essential body'. Pettman (2011) is more explicit in his critique and declares that Cavarero 'fetishizes the singular human element to an almost infinite degree' (p. 154) and sees this as a regrettable limitation, since 'mobile telephones and MP3 players can potentially create connections and encounters – "events," even – on the plane of intersubjectivity'. Thus, Cavarero's theory of vocal performativity is not incompatible with the theorising of the performing audiobook voice in terms of intimacy and interaction.

Although the narrating act takes place at a remove from the listening activity, it extends both spatially and temporally through the audiobook medium (Schulz, 2004) and establishes a sense of presence and intimate company with the listener. As Have and Stougaard Pedersen note, this company may be understood as a form of 'parasocial' interaction, a phenomenon that was first theorised by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956, to designate the illusionary relationship that an audience may form with a mediated person who is either real or fictional. In fact, as Horton and Wohl remark, this 'persona' often makes assumptions about how the audience is going to respond and acts accordingly. Similarly, the performing audiobook narrator speaking directly to the listener can easily produce an intimate effect and, moreover, by being in a position to calculate the effect of vocal choices, may be said to take on the function of a persona. In audiobook narration vocal affordances such as tempo, phrasing and intonation greatly affect the unfolding of semantic meaning, and, drawing a parallel to musical interpretation, Have and Stougaard Pedersen point out that in sounding 'the implicit or immanent intentionality of the text' (2016, p. 83) the performing voice approaches it 'like a piece of music from a score'. This line of reasoning is reminiscent of Peter Szendy's (2008) theory of 'hearing double'. Szendy sees the arranger of music and the translator of literature as performing the same function, since, for both, meaning is in a constant state of motion and, as such, is being endlessly deferred. Consequently, the arranger and translator can only aim for, but never achieve, what must be '[left] to be desired' (p. 53). Transferring Szendy's argument to the audiobook context, the performing narrator interprets the semantic text in a unique vocal enunciation, but one which makes the desire for new meanings resonate inside the listener. Moreover, and since the shift from a visual to an aural mode of perception tends to work as an emotional intensifier, the parasocial company caters to a whole register of affective needs.

As such, it has affinities with affect regulation in musical self-care. According to music psychologist John Sloboda (2005), music has an ability to intensify and release emotions. Affect regulation may be further subcategorised into a regulation of emotions, on the one hand, and of mood, on the other (Gross, 1999). According to Strand Skånland (2012):

Emotions can be defined as relatively short and intense reactions to goal oriented changes in the environment (Juslin, 2009; Juslin & Laukka, 2004). Moods usually last longer than emotions, and are less intense. In addition, moods are not oriented towards a fixed object or incident, whereas emotions mobilise the body in a reaction linked to a specific phenomenon. While moods inform us about our inner states, our emotions inform us about the environment and external incidents. (Juslin & Laukka, 2004; Larsen, 2000). (p. 155)

The hypothesis that music may actually work on our emotions more or less instantaneously is supported by a neuroscientific study carried out by Peretz, Gagnon and Bouchard (1998), who have proved that ‘ordinary adult listeners need less than a quarter of a second of music (e.g. one chord or a few notes) to reliably distinguish the tone of the whole musical excerpt as happy or sad’ (as cited in Peretz, 2001, p. 114). Hence, the listeners may tune in almost at once, which may more rarely be the case in audiobook listening, since the semantic message is not always consonant with the ‘vocal mood’. This implies that the main regulatory function of the audiobook concerns mood, not least since it invites the listener to engage in sustained spells of listening and of introspection.

Thus, as shown above, some of the theories relating to music and emotions have been corroborated by neuroscientific research. Moreover, according to Koelsch and Stegemann (2012), listening to music may activate a Theory of Mind (ToM) so that ‘individuals automatically engage processes of mental state attribution [...] in an attempt to figure out the intention, desires and beliefs of the individuals who actually created the music’ (p. 440). In fact, the results of measuring and mapping brain activity in a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study (Steinbeis & Koelsch, 2009) show that an entire ToM network is triggered in listening to music. Similarly, within literary studies scholars have advocated the use of ToM as an instrument for analysing readers’ engagement with characters in novels. A case in point is Zunshine (2006) who applies a ToM approach to a selection of writers and works, among others Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, in order to illustrate how the reader attributes mental states to literary characters for an understanding not only of these fictive people, but also of themselves. As will be argued below, the audiobook is a useful instrument in a ToM context in the sense that by clarifying intentionality vocal nuances negotiate an engagement with fictional characters and thereby facilitate a parasocial interaction.

Due to this profound emotional engagement with a fictive person, the listener is likely to take on a co-pathic attitude. Like ToM, co-pathy is a term that is highly applicable to emotional states created by fiction, particularly since it ‘refer[s] to the phenomenon that one’s own emotional state is affected [...] when one perceives (e.g. observes or hears), or imagines, someone else’s affect’ (Koelsch & Stegemann, 2012, p. 440). The difference between empathy and co-pathy is that while the former relates to ‘what one *would* feel if one were in someone else’s position’, the latter presupposes ‘that one’s own emotional state is actually affected’ (Koelsch, 2013, p. 230). Like ToM, co-pathy is a phenomenon that has been studied within the field of music psychology. According to Koelsch and Stegemann (2012), it can ‘increase the wellbeing of individuals during music making or during listening to music’ (p. 440). Admittedly, a reader of a print book may also experience co-pathy. However, the present article is based on the idea that, by virtue of the vocal dimension being added in audiobook narration, the listener may actually perceive the affect to a greater extent than the silent reader does.

Semantic meaning, intentionality and affective tone

I will now move on to illustrate the way in which the relation between semantic meaning, on the one hand, and vocally produced meaning, on the other, is negotiated through the performing voice. More specifically, I will be touching upon what I consider to be a particularly interesting connection between the texts of an author, in this case Virginia Woolf, and the recorded reading of some of these texts by a performing voice, in this case the actress Juliet Stevenson. For a discussion of this relationship I will begin by referring to material published on the website of the Amazon-affiliated company Audible, which is the world’s largest audiobook vendor. The listeners having first used the Audible downloading services, then, subsequent to listening, posted comments concerning their perception of the vocal features of Stevenson’s narration of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927).¹ For these novels there are 35 and 20 individual comments, respectively. In addition, on the Audible website listeners may rate their overall impression of the listening experience, the story as such (semantic meaning) and the performance (vocal dimension) on a five-star scale (given within parentheses below). As for *Mrs Dalloway*, there are 133 ratings for the overall experience (4.1), 100 for the story (4.1), 98 for the performance (4.5). The corresponding ratings for *To the Lighthouse* are 73 (4.1), 5 (3.9) and 48 (4.4), respectively. Most of the listeners seem to have been familiar with Woolf’s style through print prior to engaging with Stevenson’s narration. However, quite a few testify to this being a rather frustrating experience. A case in point is a former student of English literature who admits that ‘*To the Lighthouse* was compulsory reading but I never got past like page 10’ (‘Amazing detail of characters and moods’).

What seems to be the greatest obstacle to thoroughly enjoying Woolf's prose is the aspect of focalisation and, consequently, of having a clear sense of intentionality.

According to the listening responses on the Audible website, the audiobook to some extent remedies this deficiency. One comment draws attention to the stream of consciousness technique used in *To the Lighthouse* as convoluted, and the listener is therefore pleased to find that 'Juliet Stevenson's reading renders the task much easier and even more enjoyable [since] she changes her voice in a way which makes it easy for the reader to know who is talking' ('An interesting book'). On a similar note, it is observed about *Mrs Dalloway* that 'the frequent changes in point of view can be difficult to follow in the print text, but the Audible version lets you get inside the heads of the various characters pretty seamlessly' ('Audible version gets inside the head'). Thus, rather than corroborate Zunshine's (2006) theory that 'a written culture is, on the whole, more able than is an oral culture to support the elaborately nested intentionality' (p. 38), the listener statements seem to support the idea presented above that audiobook vocality promotes a ToM approach by clarifying the aspect of focalisation. It needs to be taken into consideration, though, that Zunshine is primarily concerned with the actual memorisation of material to be orally transmitted by the speaker outside a digital context, and that most of the Audible listeners were familiar with the print text prior to listening. Still, the main impression is that the vocal nuances in Stevenson's narration are considered significant in their own right.

My own personal predilection for Stevenson's narration of Virginia Woolf's texts is grounded in this vocal sophistication that makes me think of it in musical terms. Her diction is both reflected and confident, and its effect on the listener is accentuated by the pace which is quite slow, but appears to quicken almost instinctively if a sense of urgency needs to be expressed. Diction and pace thus fuse into what is best characterised by the musical term *tempo rubato*, that is a certain interpreter's talent for intuitively knowing how to modulate the tempo. It is as if Stevenson, like Woolf when she wrote, thinks of the prose in terms of music. The pulsating drive of the narration is informed by a musical phrasing through which, for instance, a slight emphasis on voiced syllables at the end of words creates a cohesive effect. In my opinion, the voice of the text itself – both the structural intentionality of focalisation and the unique aesthetic tone (Have & Stougaard Pedersen, 2016, p. 82) – is expressed in Stevenson's musical phrasing and *tempo rubato*.

My listening response seems to be corroborated by the comments made on the Audible website. There is a general tendency to define Stevenson's rhythm, pace and diction in musical terms, often implicitly, but on a few occasions also explicitly. One listener writes that her vocal modulations in narrating *To the Lighthouse* create 'a perfect accompaniment to the text' ('A stark tower on a bare rock'), and another that Stevenson reads in a 'cello-mellow voice' ('Like a leaf in water'). The former

indicates that although the vocal features of the performing voice create a musical effect, they are still dependent on the semantics of the print text. The latter implies that the vocal nuances are liberated to a greater extent from the print version and are best defined through a comparison with the unique tone of a musical instrument.

Such a musical tone is intimately associated with the affective tone of the text itself, which is communicated through language, but at the same time reaches beyond it. A conclusion that can be drawn from the comments made on the Audible website is that Stevenson's vocal interpretation of Woolf's texts is felt to harmonise with and intensify this affective tone – or mood. One listener, who has read the print text of *Mrs Dalloway* twice before, but 'failed to connect it all together and feel its moments', found that the audio version 'transmitted the true spirit of the book' ('Pure enchanting magic'), thus investing it with a sense of cohesion. Another listener writes: 'Juliet Stevenson's reading has an uncanny "Woolf" voice [...] unlike some "readers" she understands, dare I say, seems to love Virginia Woolf's words and her intonation, timing, is absolute perfection' ('Empathetic, intelligent reading'). Here, in my opinion, the sense of transparency is less the result of the narrator being faithful to the author's intention – if it can at all be established – than of striking an emotional note that resonates inside the listener. Further, the word 'perfection', used frequently on the Audible website, does not signify 'hermeneutic closure' (Have & Stougaard Pedersen, 2016, p. 34), but an opening up of new and previously unknown vistas. Thus, while Stevenson's vocal qualities facilitate an understanding of semantic meaning, my impression is that the eulogistic character of the comments relate primarily to vocality as an affect intensifier. This is indicated by the frequent use of words such as 'mood', 'atmosphere', 'immersion' and 'pleasure'. Interestingly, this mood-intensifying immersion appears to be further reinforced by the fact that the reader is not in total control of the narrating pace, which is usually considered one of the disadvantages of the audiobook medium (Have & Stougaard Pedersen, 2016, p. 67).

***Night and Day* as audio therapy**

As previously mentioned, what led me to look into the reception of Juliet Stevenson's audiobook narration of some of Virginia Woolf's books was the pleasure I take in the way in which she negotiates 'the encounter between a language and a voice' (Barthes, 1977, p. 181). For me, her musical enunciation of the text works as a mood regulator and an anti-stressor. My favourite 'vocal Woolf' – her second novel *Night and Day*, which is less experimental than her later ones – has not been dealt with above in my discussion of the Audible responses. The reason is that, compared to the number of listeners who produced ratings for the vocal performance of *To the Light-*

house and *Mrs Dalloway*, 48 and 98, respectively, only 14 did so for *Night and Day* (3.9 for overall impression, 3.6 for the story and 4.5 for the performance). This discrepancy in the number of ratings did not really surprise me, since *Night and Day* would generally be considered less representative of Woolf's style and is also considerably longer (18 hours and 57 minutes) than *To the Lighthouse* (7 hours and 43 minutes) and *Mrs Dalloway* (7 hours and 10 minutes). Judging from the few (only three) listener responses for *Night and Day* posted on the Audible website, the effect of Stevenson's reading of this novel is similar to the one created by her narration of the other novels discussed above. According to one comment, she 'stri[k]e[s] the perfect tone' ('Slow to start but worth the wait'), but since this listener 'found the story difficult to engage with at first', there is reason to believe that the sense of perfection is not solely the effect of the semantics of the text, but also of the vocal performance of it.

The fact that this novel thematically foregrounds the 'tension between [...] silence and language' (Lindskog, 2014, p. 222) makes it a particularly interesting case study for the remediation into sound. The passages in which Stevenson voices Katharine Hilbery's night-time state of mind – one that is paradoxically associated with silence – made a powerful impression on me. Katharine Hilbery's reluctance to express herself in ready-made phrases has been interpreted by scholars as her wish to turn away from the patriarchal world (Leonardi, 1986; Cooley, 1992). Lindskog argues, though, that silence in the novel should be seen rather as 'an existential condition, as the natural state of a conscious mind whose operations are largely wordless and whose content refuses categorization' (2014, p. 226). In my opinion, it is the sense of this 'existential condition' that is communicated in Stevenson's reading – a vocal quality of lingering emphasised by a certain tone of hesitation at the end of sentences. By contrast, towards the end of the novel, when Katharine Hilbery feels a desperate need to come into contact with Ralph Denham, but fails to do so, the narrating voice – in its pitch, speed and intensity – leaves no doubt that her fear is also associated with her existential condition. In my opinion, the broad vocal register activated in Stevenson's reading of Woolf's text invites the listener to form a parasocial relationship with Katharine Hilbery, and to approach her mental and emotional state through co-pathy.

I find this approach particularly interesting, since neuroimaging studies have shown that music may not only evoke co-pathy in listeners, but can actually regulate amygdala dysfunction and have a therapeutic influence on affective disorders like depression and pathologic anxiety (Koelsch, Siebel, & Fritz, 2010). In addition, it has been found that the amygdala is not just a fear centre associated with negative emotions – it is also related to the experience of pleasant emotions in patients with depression. Against this background I was interested in exploring Stevenson's musical narration as a form of audio therapy, and I wanted to do this in conversation with other listeners, but without the intention to draw any far-reaching

conclusions about audiobook listening and health promotion in general. Rather, I thought of the discussions as a touchstone for my own listening experience. For this purpose, I framed the listening to *Night and Day* as a voluntary therapeutic activity organised by a municipal organisation in the south of Sweden. Four two-hour sessions occurring at two-week intervals were scheduled. On these occasions the discussions would take as their point of departure individual listening experiences made prior to the session as well as a shared listening to selected passages during the actual meeting. Thus, the activity was intended to function as a tool for exploring the vocal features of the performing narrator, the listeners' practices of appropriating this voice and their sense of agency in doing so.

The two people who wished to participate in the discussions had a common interest in music. Martin, 53 years old, is an amateur musician with long experience of playing the guitar in a band and composing songs. Due to professional burnout, he has been on two-year partial sick leave from his job. He suffers from tinnitus and wears a sound-masking hearing aid, and he is used to verbalising his great susceptibility to different soundscapes. For Martin, music is a way of coping, which in this context refers to strategies for managing a stressful situation. Robert, 30 years old, has suffered from performance anxiety for the past 15 years, and he has recently been diagnosed with both depression and an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Several years ago Robert discovered that listening to music on his MP3 player was an effective way of keeping obsessive-compulsive thoughts at bay, and then finding that audiobooks had the same beneficial effect for coping was a revelation for him.

In two important respects Martin and Robert differed from the listeners who had left comments on the Audible website. First, while most of the listeners commenting on the website appeared to have English as their native language, Robert and Martin's mother tongue is Swedish. Second, as has been mentioned above, the Audible listeners appeared to be familiar with Woolf's prose style from print sources. By contrast, Martin and Robert, although they had both heard about Virginia Woolf and her style, had not read anything by her and came fresh to the listening experience. My own position, due to a familiarity with Woolf's texts both in print and in sound and a proficiency in the English language, therefore differed from theirs. I was, for example, well aware that semantic speech was likely to be less transparent for Martin and Robert than for myself or for the listeners on the Audible website, although the less experimental style of *Night and Day* as compared to *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway* was likely to reduce difficulties related to focalisation and intentionality.

It was evident almost from the start that Martin and Robert differed greatly in the way in which they managed the relationship between semantic speech and vocality. Robert pointed out that listening to audiobooks narrated in a language in which he was not proficient did not generally present an obstacle to his enjoyment

of the affective dimension of the narrating voice. On the contrary, he said that he actively chose books narrated in French for that reason. As for *Night and Day*, he reported that he understood most, if not all, of the novel's vocabulary, and that the vocal features added an important dimension to his listening pleasure. Hence, he listened for extended periods varying from 30 minutes to two hours at a time. A few chapters from the end he started to portion out his listening as a means of regulating his mood and preparing for the point at which the parasocial company would cease. This would mean the beginning of a period of 'grief', but he knew from experience that once he had come through it, he would benefit from having the vocal impression stored in his emotions. Martin, on the other hand, was not really in a position to comment on the vocal features at first, as he was fully preoccupied with the semantic meaning. The experience was a frustrating one and described by him in terms of being exposed to 'white noise'. This was particularly noticeable in his response to Chapter I and Chapter III, both of which are devoted to a detailing of Katharine Hilbery's 'daytime' self of social responsibilities and family history. Martin said that he wanted to feel 'in control' and made comparisons with formalist approaches to music (Adorno, 1988).

Martin compared his experiences of audiobook listening to that of attending an opera performance without the libretto. Consequently, he listened with great concentration to the representational character of the narrating voice of *Night and Day* and thereby lost touch with the affective experience. Due to the great information load he had to process, he could not listen for more than 8 to 10 minutes at a time, and, as a result, he was recommended to select a meditative passage without too much information to process. This proved to be a helpful approach, not least because at night Martin always has the same music playing in a pillow speaker as a means of coping with his tinnitus. At our third meeting he told us that he had been listening repeatedly to the passage of his choice – one depicting a peaceful outdoor setting – as a form of mindfulness and showed signs of being able to make semantic speech and affect fuse.

In our discussions it soon became evident that the vocal features of Katharine's night-time state of mind were not appreciated to the same extent by my conversational partners. What I interpreted as wavering indecision full of potential struck them as a rather cold and distanced tone with which it was difficult to engage. Instead, they found the dialogues between Katharine Hilbery and Mary Datchet especially rewarding to explore through a ToM approach. In addition, the fine vocal nuances between the flatness of the former and the briskness of the latter became a means of establishing with the listeners the kind of duet for vocal alterity described by Cavarero. By contrast, however, the dialogues between Katharine and William Rodney ended all ToM attempts due to vocal affectation in the rendering of Rodney's speech. Robert, in particular, was much disturbed by this initially. In general,

both he and Martin tended to favour Stevenson's vocalisation of Mary Datchet's mental state as one that evoked a sense of co-pathy.

We listened together to Chapter VI, in the opening paragraphs of which Mary prepares for an ordinary day at the office, where she works for women's suffrage. In Robert's opinion, the vocal manifestation of Datchet's mental and emotional state served to diminish the gap between her and Katharine Hilbery. In other words, what was experienced as an obstacle to establishing co-pathy in connection with the vocalisation of Katharine's consciousness was felt to have a compensatory effect in relation to Mary Datchet. Robert considered this chapter to be of key importance for somehow establishing Mary Datchet as the novel's central consciousness. The individual interpretation of the performing voice greatly contributed to seeing both the night and day themes as being embodied also in Mary Datchet and thus opened up the possibility for revising her life story. Significantly, engaging in this revisionary process – through aesthetic participation – was an empowering one, especially since it provided an opportunity for establishing a connection with the listeners' own life stories, and for negotiating a reconciliation of what they perceived as the 'night' and 'day' within themselves.

'Health musicking' and appropriation of the sound object

Empowerment is a vital element in a salutogenic approach to health, which is founded on the notion of 'a positive state rather than simply the absence of disease' (Strand Skånland, 2012, p. 53). According to Antonovsky (1979, 1987), one of the main proponents of the salutogenic model is 'a sense of coherence', which helps people cope with stressors and is therefore conducive to remaining in good health. The argument in the present article – based on the premise that the narrating audiobook voice gives the listener a sense of unifying coherence – can thus be fitted into a salutogenic context. Inscribing audiobook vocality in a musical discourse of mood regulation, as I have done, is a way of further emphasising the salutogenic implications. My discussion has focussed primarily on the affordance of the performing voice itself and only to a limited extent on the possibilities offered by the various devices for appropriating the digital voice. Neither has the aspect of mobility been addressed, despite the fact that it is considered an important feature both in the consumption of music (Bull, 2000, 2007; Strand Skånland, 2012) and of audiobook listening (Have & Stougaard Pedersen, 2016). The reason for the reticence on the topic of mobility is that it hardly figured at all in my discussions with Martin and Robert; they used *Night and Day* as a form of audio therapy that is usually associated with physical stillness (Have & Stougaard Pedersen, 2016). As the discussion draws to a close, the focus will be on a more active engagement with the vocal affordances

of *Night and Day*. For this purpose, I will continue to draw on music research and add to the psychological dimension a sociological one.

A case in point is ‘musicking’. Coined by Christopher Small in 1998, it is a term that includes a wide range of activities related to music: *‘To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composition), or by dancing’* (p. 9; emphasis in original). Through a ‘musicking’ approach, music making turns into ‘an investigative tool’. As music sociologist Tia DeNora (2000, 2001) has shown, ‘musicking’ has contributed to downplaying the significance of the musical ‘work’ in favour of a participatory approach to music. Her research is thus inscribed in the long work versus event tradition in music,² but adds the component of health promotion which, she argues (1999, 2000), lays the foundation for seeing music as a ‘technology of the self’. This term was originally defined by Michel Foucault (1988) as one of four types of technologies:

(4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (p. 18)

Situating Foucault’s concept of the technology of the self in a musical context, DeNora accentuates the great value of music as a regulator of emotions and for coping – the technology of the self becomes a technology of health. It needs to be clarified, though, that ‘technology’ as employed by Foucault is to be understood as ‘practices’ or ‘operations’ in a wide sense, and not in the more restricted one of hardware and software, which are rather to be considered a form of technology that reinforces the agency already built into Foucault’s concept of ‘technology’. As Strand Skånland (2012) states on the topic of MP3 listening, ‘it can be said to be a technology of a technology of the self’ (p. 50), whose affordances listeners may appropriate in a number of different ways, thus adding to the sense of individual agency.

‘Musicking’ has become a key concept in music therapy. Arguably, by virtue of being a sonically mediated experience of a fictional work, a listener’s engagement with audiobook vocality may also be theorised as a ‘musicking’ event. My intention in using it as ‘an investigative tool’ in my conversations with Robert and Martin was to be able to focus on their agency as expressed in conversations about practices for appropriating the digital voice. A detail that further supports the framing of audiobook reception in this way is that while the emphasis in musicking is generally on social interaction, the listener’s engagement with the music itself – in MP3 format – is regarded as an equally empowering one (Strand Skånland, 2012). In fact, it should be made clear that although we met on a regular basis to listen together

to passages from *Night and Day* in order to discuss the vocal effect of these excerpts, the individual listening that each of us engaged in prior to coming to the meetings was of even greater importance for the quality of our ‘musicking’ conversations. In Lars Ole Bonde’s ‘health musicking model’ (2011) ‘[a] meaningful musical relationship is based on the client’s experience of being empowered (at a non-verbal and/or verbal level) as the ‘musicking’ affords and appropriates a variety of interpretations’ (Trondalen & Bonde, 2012, p. 54). It thus engenders ‘the creation of new life stories over and over again’ (p. 54). The sense of empowerment is reinforced in the ‘*doing – the aesthetic participation*’ when the ‘inner senses of the self may be explored’ (p. 55; emphasis in original).

As has been pointed out above, the shift from Katharine Hilbery to Mary Datchet as the central consciousness in *Night and Day* is an example of a process of aesthetically participating with the performing voice, which also has implications for the listeners’ perception of their own life stories. This process may be described in musical terms as the arrangement of a particular piece of music for an instrument other than that for which it was originally composed and, as such, brings out new qualities that were previously hidden. Have and Stougaard Pedersen (2016) comment on the affinities with music in this respect: ‘We must conceptualize the act of telling a story through a voice as an interpretative act that links the audiobook to musical work referred to by Bryant (2002) as “fluid texts”, which can interconnect different editions’ (p. 80). In my opinion, by thus foregrounding the tension between an existing work and a new interpretation the ‘musicking’ model is particularly apt for fictional audiobooks that already exist in print.

As stated previously, Martin and Robert both listened while being physically at rest and appeared to have an intuitive understanding of the concept of multistability. In other words, they could sense that their perception of the voice was dependent on their choice of audio device, its unique affordances and their position in relation to it. Listening on their own during the day, they chose earbuds for an intimate and intensified experience and a strong sense of presence. When we met in a fairly large room to listen to the novel together from a Bluetooth loudspeaker connected to my smartphone, they expressed regret that they did not perceive the performing voice as embodied. However, listening late at night or before falling asleep, they preferred to do so by placing the audio device, smartphone or computer somewhere in the room at home. Despite being physically distanced from the actual source of sound and thus not experiencing it as coming *through* their bodies, they wished to feel its presence *on* their bodies. This night-time form of listening had the haptic effect of a vocal touch (Have & Stougaard Pedersen, 2016) and, as such, was deeply comforting. In Martin’s case this was particularly evident, since he tended to approach his night-time audiobook listening as a distracted act comparable to that of his pillow speaker playing the same music over and over again. This may explain why the

vocal rendering of Katharine's night-time self with its acute existential probing had a counterproductive and unsettling effect on his therapeutic night-time listening.

In the process of listening to the entire book Martin and Robert started to experiment more and more with the sound object in order to engage aesthetically with it and thus produce new alternative meanings. This wish to appropriate the digital voice through software technology for the purpose of mood regulation grew out of their intuitive awareness of cohesion, co-pathy and parasocial company as aspects that greatly contribute to a sense of well-being and empowerment. At our last meeting Robert explained that he wished to reinforce the element of introspection, especially in passages devoted to Katharine Hilbery's reflections. For this purpose, he slowed down the narrating speed, but gave up on the experiment, as the timbre of the voice came out as metallic. Both Martin and Robert reported that they were highly sensitive to the timbre of the narrating voice and preferred a 'concert hall effect' for a heightened sense of presence. They discussed a variety of ways of appropriating the digital sound object and of customising the acousmatic voice through the use of sound editing software, such as cutting the treble for a relaxing effect. Robert stated that he had a selection of 15 individual options for editing a given sound object. I argue that his familiarity with these affordances made him alert to the significance of the vocal qualities in adding to the characters' complexity. Moreover, it enabled him to express his emotional response to the vocal features in a highly sophisticated way. A case in point is his account of how Katharine Hilbery's 'female timbre' balanced her inner (and silent) 'male' self, while the opposite relation between gendered features was noticeable in Mary Datchet, but how in dialogue the vocal characteristics of each kept changing and occasionally fused.

Whether the informants actually modified the recorded voice or only verbalised the desired effect that a specific adjustment would have produced is of no great importance. The crucial point is that the options provided by the software technology were built into their original perception of Stevenson's reading. The implication of such an appropriation is that it allows the listener to approach the sound object from a phenomenological perspective. Just as Edmund Husserl (1982) argues that seeing a table from a certain point of view creates different 'adumbrations' of it, the same sound object may be explored in a series of adumbrations. The changes in timbre and pace with which Martin and Robert were experimenting constitute such spatiotemporal modifications. This, in turn, allows a consideration of the sound object through the *epoché*, an act of suspension in which we experience the sound as a totally new thing that is beyond judgement. The French developer of *musique concrète* Pierre Schaeffer (1966) was indebted to Husserl for elaborating his theory of the sound object and the acousmatic reduction, as expounded by Kane (2014): 'Pierre Schaeffer's originality was to see a profound affinity between the phenomenological *epoché* and the role played by the Pythagorean veil' (p. 25).³ It

was from behind this veil that the master's voice reached his *akousmatikoi* disciples. More specifically, Schaeffer argued that sound technology and the acousmatic voice have taken on the function of the veil and have become 'a tool for bracketing the spatiotemporal factuality of the sonic source'. As I see it, this argument may be transposed to the processes triggered in the listening to Stevenson's reading of *Night and Day* as reported in the group discussions. Hence, trying out different sonic perspectives in listening and then letting oneself be immersed in the experience of quietly considering the effect is a 'health musicking' strategy that confers agency and empowerment upon the listener.

Conclusion

As the reader of this article may have noticed, the activity of engaging with the audiobook has invariably been referred to as a listening one. This may not have come as a surprise, since the argument is founded on the assumption that research related to the affect-regulating capacity of music may also be applied to audiobook vocality. However, returning to the question I posed initially as to the choice of verb to use in engaging with the performing voice, I am at this stage in a better position to comment on the way in which reading and listening are intertwined. For it is not simply a matter of reading semantic meaning and listening to the vocal features. Rather, by yielding to the control of the mediating agency of the performing voice we can read the consciousness, desires and frustrations of fictional people, such as a Katharine Hilbery or a Mary Datchet, from a co-pathic point of view and, consequently, read our own lives. The listener responses on the Audible website testify to the enchanting magic of establishing such a parasocial interaction with Virginia Woolf's characters, but the intimacy created is as much, if not more, with Juliet Stevenson's voice interpreting the text. This became evident in the 'musicking' discussions with Robert and Martin who approached *Night and Day* on a more or less clean slate, and in the process of listening felt the need to take control and appropriate the sound object itself. Such an initiative is empowering and opens up a text for a continuous process of composing stories over and over again. In fact, by its musical associations the verb 'compose' is an apt one for the joint activities of listening and reading. In conclusion, the question is whether it is even possible to dissociate the therapeutic dimension from audiobook listening generally. Approaching the phenomenon from this theoretical perspective is after all only a means of rendering explicit what is always implicit in any reading or listening act.

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Notes

- 1 Juliet Stevenson has also recorded the unabridged texts of the novels *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Jacob's Room* (1922) as well as the essay 'A Room of One's Own' (1929), which is based on a series of lectures. For the two novels there are no reviews given on the Audible website, which is why they are not dealt with in the present article. While there are 20 reviews for 'A Room of One's Own' and the text seems to have been approached more or less as a piece of fiction by the listeners, it has nevertheless been left out of the analysis on the grounds that it is, strictly speaking, not fictional.
- 2 For a discussion of the work versus event conflict from a historical perspective, see, for instance, Dahlhaus (1989) and Goehr (1992).
- 3 The passages quoted from the French original were translated by Kane.