

Gendered Voices and Social Harmony

rmjames

Blog post published March 9, 2015 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/kt9bq-50h37>

Abstract

Editor's Note: Our forum on gender and voice comes to a close today—and what a forum it has been! Last week AO Roberts talked about speech synthesis and why the robotic voices are so often female.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Cultural Studies, Gender, Gendered Voices Forum, Performance

Recommended citation

rmjames. (2015, March 9). Gendered Voices and Social Harmony. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/kt9bq-50h37>

Copyright

Copyright © rmjames 2015. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



Editor's Note: Our forum on gender and voice comes to a close today—and what a forum it has been! Last week [AO Roberts](#) talked about speech synthesis and why the robotic voices are so often female. That post followed [Art Blake's](#), where he talked about how his experience shifting his voice from feminine to masculine as a transgender man intersects with his work on John Cage. Before that, [Regina Bradley](#) put the soundtrack of *Scandal* in conversation with race and gender. The week before [I talked](#) about what it meant to have people call me, a woman of color, “loud.” The post that started it all? [Christine Ehrick's selections](#) from her forthcoming book, on the gendered soundscape.

This week [Robin James](#) returns to *SO!* to round out our forum with an analysis of how ideas of what women should sound like have roots in Greek philosophy. So, lean in, close your eyes, and let the voices take you back in time. —**Liana M. Silva, Managing Editor**

Dove and Twitter's [#SpeakBeautiful](#) tries to market its brand by getting Twitter users to rally behind the hashtag. The idea is to encourage women to talk about their bodies and other women's bodies only in positive terms—and to encourage interaction on Twitter. But why is tweeting, which is entirely text-based, called “speaking”? And what does it mean to *speaking* beautifully, since beauty is usually an issue of body *image*? In other words, why give this campaign that specific name?

https://youtu.be/_cncxoJPwBw

Their promotional video has a clue. As on Twitter, there is no voice, only text; however, there is an instrumental soundtrack throughout. It begins in a minor mode, traditionally associated with negative emotions. Then, around the 0:19 mark, once the blue Dove domino has started knocking down all the white dominoes with negative comments printed on them, the soundtrack shifts to major mode, which is traditionally associated with positive emotions. The video equates social media performance with musical harmony: negative comments are dissonant, positive ones are consonant.

“Speaking beautifully” means adopting the tone or attunement expected of the social media performance. But this still doesn't tell us why it makes sense for Dove to describe women's ability to follow social (media) norms as *speaking*, as making a particular kind of *sound*. [#SpeakBeautiful](#) is just the latest example of a convention that dates back thousands of years: patriarchy moderates women's literal and metaphoric voices to control their participation in and affect on society, ensuring that these voices don't disrupt a so-called harmoniously-ordered society. In what follows, I look to the origin of that convention in so we can better understand how it works today.

Anne Carson's essay "[The Gender of Sound](#)" focuses mainly on ancient Greek literature and philosophy. "In general," she argues, "the women of classical literature are a species given to disorderly and uncontrolled outflow of sound" (126). Unless carefully managed by husbands and the law, women's loose lips (in both senses of the term) will upset overall "harmonious" order of the city. That's why the ancient Greeks thought women's disharmonious sounds acted "as political disease" (127).



"Eglise de Commana2012
469" by Lamiot – Own
work. Licensed under CC
BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia
Commons

Emphasizing the relationship the Greeks drew between sonic harmony and social harmony, Carson's analysis hinges on the concept of *sophrosyne*; often translated as "moderation," the ancient Greeks understood *sophrosyne* as a type of harmony, and often explicitly connected it to musical harmony. Understanding the connection between *sophrosyne* and ancient Greek theories of musical harmony (which are very different than contemporary European ones) makes it easy to update Carson's analysis to account for contemporary appraisals of women's voices, such as the view that some feminist voices on social media are "toxic."

According to Carson, the ancient Greeks thought women's voices were immoderate when they exhibited excessive frequency: they could talk either at too high a pitch, or just talk too much. As Carson explains,

verbal continence is an essential feature of the masculine virtue of sophrosyne...[A]ncient discussions of the virtue of sophrosyne demonstrate clearly that, where it is applied to women,

this word has a different definition than for men. Female sophrosyne is coextensive with female obedience to male direction and rarely means more than chastity. When it does mean more, the allusion is often to sound. A husband exhorting his wife or concubine to sophrosyne is likely to mean ‘Be quiet!’ (126).

So, (certain kinds of) men were thought to be capable of embodying (masculine) *sophrosyne*, that is, of comporting their bodies in accord with the order of the city, so that when they did speak, their speech contributed to social harmony and orderliness. The practice of *sophrosyne* aligns one’s body with the logos of a properly-ordered society, and, indeed, a properly-ordered cosmos. As Judith Periano puts it, moderation “tunes the soul to the cosmic scale (rather than the physical body)” (33). Women (and slaves, and some other kinds of men) were thought to be incapable of embodying this logos, of transforming their bodies into microcosms of the well-ordered city and harmonious cosmos. Their speech would disrupt social and cosmic harmony with dissonant, disorganized material. Silence, then, is how women contributed to social and cosmic harmony: their verbal and sexual chastity preserved the optimal, most well-balanced political and metaphysical order.



“Sanzio 01 Plato Aristotle” by Raphael – Web Gallery of Art: Image Info about artwork. Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

Women couldn’t embody the logos because they had “the wrong kind of flesh and the wrong alignment of pores for the production of low vocal pitches, no matter how hard they exercised” (Carson 120). Women’s disproportional “alignment of pores” matters, and Ancient Greek music theory is key to understanding why. Though there was widespread disagreement as to the specific ratios that were the most consonant and harmonious, there was a general consensus among music theorists and philosophers that musical harmony was a matter of geometric proportion. For

example, Plato says in *Timaeus* 32c that the cosmos “was harmonized by proportion.” Proportion, for the ancient Greeks is both a ratio and a hierarchical ordering, a relational distribution that is also a series. Plato’s myth of the metals, for example, is both proportional (the “gold” get the most responsibility) and hierarchical (the gold are on the top). There is a right place for everything, and harmony is the effect of everything being in its right, appropriately proportionate place.

Harmonious *sounds* are side-effects of harmoniously proportioned material bodies—or rather, sonic harmony occurs when the relationship between an instrument’s internal structure and external emission (e.g., between body and speech) is itself proportionate. For example, on a pipe organ, a pipe’s size is directly and consistently proportional to the pitch it emits, such that the geometric relationships among pipes are directly and consistently proportional to the relationships among pitches. Woodwinds, on the other hand, exhibit no such direct, consistent relationship between material configuration and emitted pitch. On an oboe, the geometric relationship between the instrument as it plays a middle C and a high C does not mirror to the acoustic relationship between those pitches. As Plato puts it “in the case of flute-playing, the harmonies are found not by measurement but by the hit and miss of training, and quite generally music tries to find the measure by observing vibrating strings. So there is a lot of imprecision mixed up in it and very little reliability” (*Philebus* 56a). Here, he expresses the then-typical view that musical harmony ought to be a mathematically consistent effect of geometric relationships among the instrument’s parts (e.g., vibrating strings). The problem with the flute is that the relationships among its pitches is *merely* sonic, and cannot be inferred from the geometric relationships among its parts. Its sounds do not exhibit a consistent, proportional, moderate relationship to its material structure.

This is the same problem Carson identifies with women: the orderliness of their vocal emissions cannot be reliably inferred from the visible arrangement of their body and its constituent parts. Like the flute, a feminine body cannot emit a moderate sound because the proportions of women’s bodies are out of whack; they don’t exhibit the proper ratio between parts, or between inner constitution and outer expression.



*“Banquet Euaion Louvre G467
n2” by English: Euaion Painter –
Jastrow (2008). Licensed under*

Public Domain via Wikimedia
Commons

Women's voices are "bad to hear or make men uncomfortable" (Carson, 129) not just because the voices themselves are disharmoniously feminine, but because they upset the social and cosmic order, specifically, the balance between inside and outside (129), intelligible and visible. Just as the *aulos* (an ancient Greek double-reeded instrument, somewhat like a modern oboe) upsets the proper, ideal relationship between an instrument's physical structure (the part that commands, the mathematical logos of proportionality) and acoustic tuning (the part that obeys, pitches), women's emissions mess up the proper, logical relationship between "the part that commands and the part that obeys" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* Vol. 2, 87), that is, between inner and outer, soul and body, private and public. Carson says, "By projections and leakages of all kinds—somatic, vocal, emotional, sexual—females expose or expend what should be kept in" (129). *Sophrosyne* is what keeps things in their right place as they get outwardly expressed.

When men practice "masculine" *sophrosyne*, they shape their bodies, their resonating innards, so to speak, into a form that will lend itself to rational, proportional outer expression, i.e., speech. Women's feminine *sophrosyne*, public silence, keeps their irrational bodies from outwardly expressing disharmonious, disproportionate phenomena that would knock everything out of balance. Masculine *sophrosyne* is a technique for embodying the logos at the individual, social, and cosmic levels; feminine *sophrosyne* is a technique for keeping the cosmic/social logos from being disturbed.

Nowadays, though, we don't expect "good" women to be seen and not heard—we praise (some) women for making the right noises in the right contexts. For example, Rebecca Solnit [wrote that](#) 2014 was, for women, "a year of mounting refusal to be silent...It was loud, discordant, and maybe transformative, because important things were said...and heard as never before." Proclamations of women's envoicement—of women's full inclusion and participation in society—are central to post-feminist patriarchy, which functions best when there is a little bit of "feminist" noise mixed in with its signal. The audibility of some women's "feminist" voices serves as (misleading) evidence that patriarchy is over (or on the way there), and lets patriarchy and the intersectional work it does pass unnoticed. Whereas the ancient Greeks thought women's voices were absent from a harmonious society, contemporary (neo)liberal democracies think a harmonious society *includes* a certain amount of feminist noise.



“Christine de Pisan – cathedra” by From compendium of Christine de Pizan’s works, 1413. Produced in her scriptorium in Paris – http://bcm.bc.edu/issues/winter_2010/endnotes/an-educated-lady.html. Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

But not too much feminist noise: feminist noise must be moderate. Moderation still matters—it’s just measured differently than it was in ancient Greece. It isn’t a matter of geometric proportion, but of dynamic range. From a post-feminist perspective, feminist voices that call attention to ongoing patriarchy and misogyny feel too loud. Sara Ahmed explains, “words like “racism” and “sexism” are heard as abrasive because they name what has receded from view.” Voices that speak of ongoing racism and sexism are charged with the same flaws attributed to artificially loudened, overcompressed music: inflexibility, lack of variability, and ineffectiveness. Just as overcompressed music is thought to, as Suhas Sreedhar describes “sacrifice...the natural ebb and flow of music,” feminist activists are thought to sacrifice the natural ebb and flow of social harmony.

In a post-feminist, post-race society, people who continually insist on the existence of sexism and racism appear to be similarly stuck on an irrelevant issue and lacking in expressive range. Similarly, in music lacking dynamic range, “the sound becomes analogous to someone constantly shouting everything he or she says. Not only is all impact lost, but the constant level of the sound is fatiguing to the ear (Sreedhar).” Because it stays more or less fixed at the same amplitude of sound, loud music is thought to be both ineffective and unhealthy for those subjected to it. Similarly, liberal critics of women of color activists often characterize them as hostile, uncivil, or overly aggressive in tone, which supposedly diminishes the impact of their work and both upsets the healthy process of social change and fatigues the public. They are, in Michelle Goldberg’s terms, “toxic.”

This “ebb and flow” is not a geometric proportion, but a frequency or statistical distribution that can be represented as a sine wave. As I have argued [here](#), contemporary concepts of social harmony aren’t based in ancient Greek music theory, but on acoustics. For example, [Alex Pentland’s theory of “social physics”](#) or, “the reliable, mathematical connections between information and idea flow...and people’s behavior” (2), treats individual and group behavior as predictable patterns that emerge, as signal, from noisy data streams, just as harmonics and partials emerge from interacting sound frequencies.



In this context, “loud” feminist voices *feel* like they’re upsetting the ebb and flow, the dynamic range and variability, of information and idea flow. But the thing is, they aren’t upsetting the flow, but intensifying it: their perceived loudness incites others to respond with trolling, harassing, and other kinds of policing speech, often in massive scale. When philosopher [Cheryl Abbate](#) [told her students](#) that it was unacceptable to express homophobic views in class, John McAdams, a tenured faculty member in the department where Abbate is a doctoral student, wrote a blog post [accusing her](#) of inhibiting the free expression of a diverse range of opinions. Her “loud” feminism masked the “healthy diversity” of opinions. McAdams’s post led Abbate to be targeted by a tsunami of harassment, from individuals emailing her, to social media attacks, to attacks from mainstream media and political organizations. When feminist voices make noise, patriarchy amps up its own frequencies to bring the mix back in proper balance so that patriarchy is what emerges from feminist noise. In this context, voices are harmonious when, together, their ebb and flow predictably transmits patriarchal signal into the future. *Sophrosyne* is a feature of voices that interact so that patriarchal power relations emerge from them: they might actually have an extremely high volume, but they *feel* moderate because they restore the “normal” ebb and flow of society.

When Dove and Twitter urge women to “speak beautifully,” they’re really demanding that women practice *sophrosyne*: that they make just enough ‘feminist’ noise without being too loud—i.e., loud enough to distort the brand image of Unilever and Twitter. So, even though ancient Greek concepts of musical harmony and patriarchy are vastly different than contemporary (neo)liberal democratic ones, each era uses its own version of *sophrosyne* to shape women’s voices into something consonant with a social order that privileges men and masculinity.

—

Featured image: “[blurred curves](#)” by Flickr user Ed Lynch-Bell, CC BY-NC 2.0

Robin James is Associate Professor of Philosophy at UNC Charlotte. She is author of two books: *Resilience & Melancholy: pop music, feminism, and neoliberalism*, published by Zer0 books last year, and *The Conjectural Body: gender, race and the philosophy of music* was published by Lexington Books in 2010. Her work on feminism, race, contemporary continental philosophy, pop music, and sound studies has appeared in *The New Inquiry*, *Hypatia*, *differences*, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, and the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. She is also a digital sound artist and musician. She blogs at its-her-factory.com and is a regular contributor to *Cyborgology*.



REWIND!...If you liked this post, check out:

Top 40 Democracy: Taylor Swift's Election Day Victory—Eric Weisbard

Vocal Gender and the Gendered Soundscape: At the Intersection of Gender Studies and Sound Studies—Christine Ehrick

On Sound and Pleasure: Meditations on the Human Voice—Yvon Bonefant