

Facing the Soprano: Uncovering a Feminist Performative “I” Through Autoethnography

Runa Hestad Jenssen

Nord University

Abstract: This article unpacks three auto-narratives drawn from my embodied experiences journeying from soprano to researcher. A feminist theoretical performative “I” is created through the use of performative autoethnography, a position of situated knowledge and Judith Butler’s thinking of gender as performative. I explore the query: How is a singer’s feminist performative I created through autoethnography? By unpacking my lived experiences I establish a connection between the I and the context I live in, referred to as “the Other”. This connection then illuminates how my voice has been constructed and disciplined to that of a normative feminine soprano by attaining and repeating actions from the social-culture context of singing. I also leverage off Butler’s thinking and how it may foreclose the attention to the materiality of the body, and lean into a performative embodied, new perspective. Embracing both the soprano and researcher role I create a position that brings me into a “liminal space”. I do this to better understand the intersection of music education and gender, the becoming of a researcher, researching with the “inside out”, and to embrace the material body’s actual contribution in (to) the web of meanings in the sociocultural context of singing. By carving out a connection between *being* a soprano and moving into my researcher voice, I offer this article as an expanded way of knowing – a *knowing* through *being*. In turn, such insights offer epistemological and ontological ways of thinking for those experiencing similar encounters.

Keywords: embodiment, feminism, Judith Butler, performativity, performative autoethnography, voice

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Prelude

I grew up with a feminist mother. She showed me pictures from the streets of Oslo in the 1970s where she went to demonstrations. She sowed feminist seeds in my upbringing – brown clothes, a bedroom painted green, and an admonition to go into every situation with my back raised. “The most important thing is not what you have, but what you are about to become, Runa”. But at that time, I truly loved pink! When my mum was studying and was mostly at university, my dad painted my room, at least the closet doors, light pink, and we ordered floral curtains at Sparkjøp. I educated myself into a profession that is considered feminine. I became a singer and spent six years training to learn how to produce beautiful sounds and move gracefully on the opera stage, in beautiful dresses, and often in the role of the naive and beautiful maid or princess. I loved it!

Now, I am married. I have four children. In a way I have supposedly fulfilled the criteria for society’s normative conception of being a woman. As I was tuning the theoretical lens in my academic work which studies working with the adolescent female changing voice, my mother’s seed began to germinate. Carving out a critical approach, I felt a need and desire to focus on women’s thinking and imprints. My study is no longer “just” a vocal didactic project, but rather it has morphed into a multi-layered contribution: for women in academia and in the arts. Oh, and by the way, I have three female supervisors and a large picture of Simone de Beauvoir hanging outside my office door.

Introduction

This article shares methodological and theoretical wonderings that sit at the intersections of feminism, embodiment, performativity and autoethnography. Through feminist performative autoethnography as a method of investigation, I specifically lean on the work of Judith Butler (1990) to unpack how my becoming, from soprano to researcher, enables a feminist perspective. Through this journey of becoming I have found a new voice, my feminist performative “I” (Pollock, 2007; Spry, 2011). The notion of a performative I has been articulated by different scholars with slightly different interpretations and connections,

however for the purpose of this article I specifically lean on Spry's use of performative I, which draws this into the context of autoethnography. Actually, it has been more of an uncovering, not too dissimilar to the peeling of an orange, removing the thick skin of the orange to get to the flesh. I often use this orange metaphor when describing my vocal-technical philosophy to my university students – explaining to them how external tensions in the body makes it difficult for a singer to find physical anchorage. Without connection to the core of the body the voice floats alone without the passion, sorrow, hate, or joy to be conveyed in the story of an aria. I believe the way to find the core is to search for emotions and evoke experiences – cry, whine, laugh! Find the primal voice in you. However, this requires courage. At first glance, some singers seem to have “thick skin”. The thick-skinned stand out to be the toughest and dare to throw themselves into the unknown, while the “delicate” ones seem to hold back. Those with a more vulnerable skin, framed with tensions, must spend time finding the core of the singing body. Either way, the singer must find their own ways to “peel the orange”, because when finding the core, the singer discovers, feels and understands their own voice, and the voice and personality merge. In order to find the core, it is necessary to expose one's vulnerability. Now it was my turn to be brave.

The question that this article explores is: How is a singer's feminist performative I created through autoethnography? This question has emerged from my own lived experiences. I share auto-narratives to establish a connection between the I, and the socio-political/cultural context I live in, referred to as “the Other”. In this article I describe how I started to investigate the I through autoethnography. Doing this I realized that the performative I, was less a dialogue with the self, and more a dialogue with how the self is always and already in sociopolitical formation with and by others and culture. By bridging the performative I and the field of feminist theory, I anchor myself in Judith Butler's feminist theoretical perspective. This has enabled me to investigate my embodied experiences, shared through three auto-narratives, and offer points of departure around the notions of what it means to be a soprano *and* researcher. I embrace subjectivity with a *labor of reflexivity* (Madison, 2011), and

analyze my encounters of becoming a soprano and a feminist researcher through Butler's thinking of gender as performative and from the position of situated knowledge. I also engage with Butler's thinking and how it might foreclose the attention to the materiality of the body. Leaning on a new material feminist perspective I analyse my lived experience to better understand the intersection of music education and gender, the becoming of a researcher, and how a performative embodied and feminist approach can critically investigate and dismantle oppressive norms in the sociocultural context of singing. Towards the end of this article, I embrace both the soprano and researcher role, positioning these roles in what would be viewed as a "liminal space" (Boyce-Tillman, 2009; Butler Brown, 2007), in turn offering an expanded way of knowing, a *knowing* through *being* (Bresler, 2019).

The Skin of the Soprano

I frame this article around the socio-cultural construction of "the skin of the soprano". The soprano-skin is a border that *feels*, and I envisage this boarder to be porous, responsive to my lived experiences and encounters. Laying bare my soprano skin is a way of *feeling the field* (Martin, 2019), a constant movement between the *inside* through my embodied experiences and from the *outside* from the perspective of a feminist researcher. Being an insider and an outsider of the soprano skin in the socio-cultural context of singing, I create a space in-between where I dialogue with myself and the context of my lived experience. A space of transmission, where the boundaries become blurry and the voices intertwine with each other. I am not just an outsider *or* an insider, as a feminist auto-ethnographer I am both, searching for space between, a liminal space.

As a feminist, I see that I have been socialized into a gendered role in the field of singing. I have known resistance, but it is now with a methodology and theory to hold onto, that I am able to unpack this, redeemed by the autoethnographic and theorized by the feminist. Singing is an action where you *are* the "instrument" a performance where experiences become embodied. The nature of performance is an embodied practice (Pelias, 2018) and as a singer my soprano skin has been inscribed with practices

and experiences. Like Martin (2019), I have found this to continue as I have become a researcher. Bringing experiences forth through embodied memories (Pink, 2015) is my way of using the term embodiment when investigating my auto-narratives. I see that my embodied experiences are not isolated to the context of singing, as Martin writes, such experiences “*travel with us*” (2019, p. 10). Facing my soprano, unpacking my soprano voice, in the narrative below I investigate what has travelled with me through embodied crossroads, exposing my vulnerable self.

A Silver Soprano Voice

I was one of those children who sang before talking. Memories are carried in my body of moments where my grandmother and I sang together. I would sit on her lap, experiencing ‘musical skin contact’. Grandma had a very dark voice, and was proud of it, but as I grew older, I noticed how excited she was for my bright, light, bell-like and pure high notes. I got to be the princess in the fairy-tale in theater performances. Apparently, this role suited me – I had long blonde hair and a silver soprano voice.

My father was an opera singer, I loved listening to him, practicing the role of Sarastro in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. But best of all, I admired the high notes of *The Queen of the Night*. For hours I could listen to the soaring ice-clear tones.

When I was in my teens, the slight height in my voice vanished. I developed ‘altitude fright’. The height, which had been my trademark, disappeared. I would love to go up there again, but there just wasn’t a sound. My vocal teacher in high school asked me to sing with the alto group. I felt that this was degrading because I could not sing the first soprano anymore. I was crushed. I cried to my dad when I got home. He was, as always, clever, saying: “You don’t need that much power on the notes, Runa. Let them flow freely with more air and with more body. Say a thousand thanks for what’s coming out of your singing body”. My father never had vocal lessons with me, but I remember those words so well.

Anyway, I became a singer. A soprano. I did not become the *Queen of the Night*, but *Pamina* and *Michaela*. Girls with their feet planted on the ground. Innocent, but fair and caring, and with loud belligerent tones, which resonated throughout

the orchestra and in full applause. As a student, I was appointed to one of Europe's leading chamber choirs, as first soprano, as group leader. My voice was the ideal of the Nordic choral sound, the silver sound, which blended easily into the ideal homogeneous choral sound, which the choir was world renowned for. But I struggled. Quickly, my voice was tired and I often experienced huskiness, losing the power of my voice. Was it allergies, or knots on the vocal folds? It was as if my voice was living a life outside of me. It hovered here and there, often a little over-pitched, often with a "boy soprano sound". I had a whistle voice, with almost no vibrato. The vocal teachers asked for me to give more bodily support on my voice, a stronger connection to the core. However, the more I activated my support, the more tired I became. But beware, it sounded fine, it was the sound it was supposed to sound, the silver sound.

When I became a mother my voice changed, especially when I was pregnant with twins. My stomach was big, and I felt a low center of gravity and physical anchoring that I had been looking for throughout my career. Now I felt it! My voice got deeper and richer in timbre. I did not get tired singing the high notes, nor did I take it so seriously. I did not have the time to cry over a role I did not get. My voice changed, but so did life. Four children in four and a half years, and in addition a job at a university to feed them. Not quite what I had imagined. A voice and a life of change. But, now I sang well. My biggest voice change happened late in life, when I was not so occupied on fulfilling others wishes about what the sound of my voice or my appearance should be like. Then it loosened. The voice was part of me, and not a constructed sound, produced to meet the demands of vocal teachers, repertoire, choral conductors and coaches. I sang like myself.

Now I could sing for hours without "getting my larynx in my forehead". When I finally cracked the code, it did not matter anymore. I had other things to do, being a mother and teaching at university, a place where I could dig into literature and share my experiences with students. I could listen, uncover and influence. I could opt out of Western art musical ideals with which from I was raised and explore new sound ideals. And, I could do research. Researching the change of voice, the female voice change. I read articles on feminist autoethnography, feminist theory, and I wrote. My fingers floated over the keyboard. I barely read a paragraph before I had to write again. Yes, it sounds like a cliché, but this was my medium, my language, my movement to become a researcher.

I have dwelled a lot on *what* I can share in such an auto-narrative and *why* I might share my experiences in such a way. I have always told stories. Through my singing, on stage, to my students and my children, however, I have mostly told the story of others. In the following section of this article I elaborate on how writing my auto-narratives became the connection to the methodology of feminist performative autoethnography, and I question why I wrote these auto-narratives, and how much could I share without exposing myself too much? I was afraid I would appear as an un-reflected soprano, but actually, those words made me reflect. I had to take a chance to investigate my own prejudices and being vulnerable and open to criticism was a risk I was willing to take. It is the risk of being a researcher, but this risk also made me capable of making a “*pointed truth*” (Averett, 2009, p. 361), where the practice of telling one’s own story can reveal oppressive power structures in society and offers the potential for change.

Diving into Feminist Performative Autoethnography

I noticed that my personal experience as a classical soprano could be seen as knowledge that I carried, that perhaps allowed me to have a particular awareness when encountering my research, a performance sensitive way of knowing (Conquergood, 1998). However, experience means little until it is interpreted, until we interpret the body as evidence (Spry, 2016). Autoethnography can enable such a critical examination, but *Facing the soprano* is not exclusively facing the self. I am building over the course of this article to extend beyond the self. I am using the performative I, as a foundation, and as a way of understanding how my embodied encounters resonates within the wider cultural context, in the methodology of a performative autoethnography (Spry, 2011), which is a self-other-culture narrative construction. Performative autoethnography concentrates on this “intra-activity” (Barad, 2003). To voice the embodied sociopolitical construction of a soprano, I rely on the works of D. Soyini Madison (2006, 2011, 2012), Rose Martin (2019), Ronald J. Pelias (2008, 2018), Craig Gingrich-Philbrook (2005), Della Pollock (2007), Tammy

Spry (2011, 2016), Victor Turner (1986) and others who view ethnography as performative. I see, as Turner (1986) notes, performance as “the explanation and explication of life itself” (p. 21), where lived experience, through theories of embodiment such as critical performance pedagogy (Pineau, 2002), where a focus on various bodies are a medium for learning and critical reflection. I view that this can be a starting point for a more porous way of understanding the voice, and a strategy of gaining understanding and empathy for others. Understanding the embodiment of each individual voice also emphasizes the body’s materiality and its significant contribution into the web of meanings in the sociocultural context of singing. An equal way of understanding a researcher’s becoming, researching with the “inside out”, opens up the possibility of a liberation of women’s voices, both as performers and researchers.

Facing the soprano, I engage with an embodied performative autoethnography, to critically speak the skin write the skin abstract the skin, articulate the skin of the soprano. But still, it was all about the I. How could I go beyond the self? Being a soprano, I had spent hours rehearsing in front of the mirror, focusing on myself, my sound, my timbre, my vocal expression and behaviour. Reading Butler (2005) I found a way away from the mirror; “the ‘I’ that I am is nothing without this “you”, and cannot even begin to refer to itself outside the relation to the other” (2005, p. 82). Maybe autoethnography was not about the self at all, perhaps it was about “the wilful embodiment of ‘we’” (Spry, 2016, p. 15). Thinking with embodiment recognizes the body as experiential and a way of being in and engaging in the world and constitutes such a position one sees the world from. Space and materiality are also a dimension of the work and help to bring human bodies together with the surroundings – the physical, social and cultural. I engage my bodily experiences, positioning my body within a culture – with the performative I as a foundation, connecting myself with the Other. I seek to capture the nuances in my embodied experience, in my complex interaction in the sociocultural context of singing, in music education, in being in the world, working towards “the texture of a living moment” as Pineau (2002, p. 47) beautifully writes. To do this “we seek the language we trust, one that catches the experience” (Pelias, 2004, p. 122).

Extending beyond the self requires a clear positionality from the researcher, a positionality that demands attention beyond the self. As Madison (2012) writes: “We are not simply subjects, but we are subjects in dialogue with others” (p. 10). Extending beyond the self therefore requires a *labor of reflexivity* (Madison, 2011), that will “lead us to the benefit of larger numbers than just ourselves” (p. 129). Articulating *how* Facing the soprano is created through autoethnography is not “merely an implication of the self or being self-conscious about how the self illuminates the social” rather “it is an implication of the knowledge systems, paradigms, and vocabularies we employ in our contemplations to interpret and speak through the self and the social” (Madison, 2011, p. 129). With Madison’s (2011) labor of reflexivity, I seek to use the performative I, as a starting point to fully acknowledge the embodied experience. I seek an reflexivity beyond the mirror, as Homi Bhabha (2004) describes: “this moment of reflection is never simply the mirror of *your* making, *your* frame of thinking, but a stillness sometimes heard in choral music when several voices hold the same note for a moment – *omnes at singulatum* – as it soars beyond any semblance of sameness” (p. iv). This resonates within my singing body. It is the richness, of every single voice, which blends together. A polyphonic sound, but from a single instrument.

Positioning myself as a feminist performative I, the I is no longer a solo, or as Gingrich-Philbrook describes as a “single call” (2005, p. 306). It is a dialogical performative (Madison, 2006, p. 321), where the I with the other, working as a “rhizomatically spreading architecture of multiple possibilities” (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, p. 306), because there is no I before a “we”, or an I without a “you” (Butler, 2005). With such ideas in mind, how is my voice, the performative I, informed by the other, and how does it inform my engagement and representation of others? Instead of asking how the performative I is created, I ask what are the effects of the intra-action between the I with the Other? Intertwining feminist theory with the investigation of my auto-narratives, I seek to reveal the structures in the context of my experience. This has implications for my becoming and positioning as a researcher, a feminist researcher. To situate this further, in the following section I dive into the specific elements of the feminist theory I seek to engage with.

Positioning my Voice Through Feminist Theory

I write my performative I from an epistemological positioning where all knowledge production is understood as located or situated (Haraway, 1991). Critical feminist theory begins from an assumption that research questions are never neutral, with Haraway mentioning the problem of claiming objectivity as “the god trick” (1991, p. 191). From my feminist research position, I do not claim objectivity. My feminist research voice is always present, making my research voice explicit. Based on the situated knowledge I possess, being a performer, through my soprano voice, I saw that there was a connection between epistemology and a narrative position. This resulted in an autoethnographic text which is performative in itself.

Gender as Performative

In this article I view gender as performative, leaning on Judith Butler’s (1990) description of it as a “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 45). I use Butler’s theory of performativity as a way of understanding my actions as a soprano and into the becoming as a feminist researcher. By this I mean what behaviors, patterns of action and norms I have learned through repetition, and how they affect me. Through Butler’s thinking about gender as performative, in order to appear as intelligible as soprano, I have imitated what I perceived as a “feminine practice”. Butler claims these imitative practices, both linguistic and physical, help shape gender identities, and this is how they are understood as performative – gender is not something you are, but rather something you do. Butler speaks of gender as something that is created in a culture and society, however, she does not speak of the body as something predisposed. Butler writes from the perspective that there is no I without first a we (Butler & Berbec, 2017). The body is shaped from the practices it is part of, and it appears to be stylized through speech and body actions, and that it is shaped in response to the other, the we. Articulating the theory of gender, or the body, as one that acts and performs according to

the conversations of gender, conversations that are influenced before one even is born (Butler & Berbec, 2017).

My soprano skin is an effect of the discursive practice situated in the socio-cultural context of singing. I question if it is my inner “female core” that becomes visible as a soprano? I was always told that I was “feminine” performing my soprano. According to Butler, this performance acts to fulfil the expectation of a two-gendered model, to maintain the image of the body explaining our gender. According to Butler, bodies should be understood as political constructs and this is related to who has and does not have power and has consequences for our way of acting. This is how I see gender playing a crucial role in singing, because it both restricts and opens up for creating a soprano voice. The soprano can be regarded as a fixed gendered phenomenon, an object unable to make resistance. But I ask: How might a more porous way to understand the socio-cultural context of singing enable further space, diversity, freedom and voice for those engaged in these practices? In the following auto-narrative, I voice this from an embodied experience on stage.

Without the Operatic Voice

I have been lucky to perform the character of Michaela in Bizet’s opera Carmen. I recognized so much of myself in this character. A country girl, down to earth, caring and good at fulfilling the wishes of others. I loved my costume, the fabric, lace, was almost like a national romantic image. Curly hair, red mouth, but innocent. I experienced the visual and theatrical part of the role well. Having received the part, I started to worry about not fulfilling the aesthetic ideal of operatic singing, not reaching the high notes. I felt I lacked the expected sound. Sure enough, after the performance I overheard someone in the audience (this someone being an authority in the field): “Oh, Michaela was beautiful on stage, but she was the one without the operatic voice”. My heart sank like a stone to my stomach. I had not met the expectations of how to sound in this role. I had failed.

I never told the story of “Michaela” to anyone, until now. I felt ashamed of it. I still do. It punched my stomach, my diaphragm – the singer’s most crucial place for finding the core, a vulnerable place. Viewing my Michaela narrative as an embodiment of possibility and of error (Pollock,

2007), my failure with not producing the expected sound, was an error, but an error of possibility, an error that does not solely exist for me, but for others. My embodied experience, the error, could be used to dismantle and deconstruct normative behaviours from the socio-cultural context of singing. Who was the Other sitting in the audience, punching my stomach? Why did I listen to this one person, who was an authority in the field, and not the other 799 people in the audience?

From the auto-narratives I have shared thus far in this article I see that I perform with a voice that is significant for me. I perform within a discourse which binds members of the socio-cultural context of singing in Western society. I view my performance in the socio-cultural context of singing as repeating acts of the soprano skin. As Butler states, these repeated acts are performed within highly ridged regulatory frames. My voice performs within the frame of the socio-cultural context of singing. My grandmother still worships my light bell-like soprano. I still love to get applause for my *Pamina* and I love wearing a princess costume, but, I am also aware of the acts that do not fit into the repeated stylizing of the culture. With an embodied performative approach I see that the acts that marginalize a part of my voice because they dissonate with the expectations from this discourse. As such, the socio-cultural context of singing can be understood to encourage disciplining acts. I see that the expression *dissonance* is important for me to consider. In music, dissonances are viewed as moments of disruption, a tension of sounds, which require further development or a dissolving resolution. In the previous narrative, *Without the operatic voice*, I experienced a dissonance, a strong tension, a sound that did not fit, which may never have resolved.

With this theoretical terrain as a backdrop, I recall the repeated stylization of the skin of my soprano. As a researcher, I can now see my development from another perspective, an embodied performative, new-material feminist perspective. Dwelling on my auto-narratives, I see they are closely linked to feminine performance, especially in relation to sound and gesture. I can now shed light on aspects from the frames around me, that confirms something, and marginalizes something else. Butler's notion on gender as performative, provides a ground to investigate the discourses *about* the soprano, and how the soprano is a result or a product

of the discourses in the sociocultural context of singing, by performing the discourse. But, as Alaimo and Hekman (2008) state: “this discursive realm is nearly always constituted so as to foreclose attention to lived, material bodies and evolving corporeal practices” (p. 3). The materiality of the body is in fact what makes the body produce sound. Butler talks about the “act” of the body but does not elaborate on sound. Without the materiality of the body, the flesh, the primal sound of the human being, sound cannot be produced, and the singer is left with no instrument, only the discourse. Schlichter (2011) states that Butler’s notion of gender performativity ignores the performative aspects of the voice, asking what it means to think of a body without a voice. The “core” of the voice. Peeling the orange is finding a more porous way to talk about the female singer body and the materiality it inhabits. This is actually what is exclusive with the voice – it is not a pair of strings you can change, it *is* “the I”. Not the I as a representation, but rather the human living body as material, in intra-action with the discourse. It is “material-discursive” (Haraway, 2008, p. 4), which refuses to separate the two.

Making me intelligible as a soprano, I see that there are three repeated acts that arise from investigating my narratives through Butler’s thinking of performativity. These acts are connected to norms and values existing in the socio-cultural context of singing. In the following sections I describe these three acts as: expectations in performing a normative feminine soprano, disciplining, and constructing my soprano.

The Normative Feminine Soprano

It is in appearance that gender can be performed, and the appearance of voice is part of this. Coming back to my narratives, I see I behave to fulfil norms that expect a soprano body to express itself with a “quiet body”. I see historical norms formed by the patriarchy, in how to perform the role, how to take a submissive position, how to experience failure when not producing the correct and expecting sound. What freedom does the soprano then have to perform her own voice? By maintaining these norms not all bodies are given the right to sing. Some will be excluded, because they do not fit into the fixed pattern. And, why did I not think of

these as oppressive norms when performing the role? Being in the role, I experienced the norms as natural habits. My body was deeply culturally constructed. Pineau (2002) advocates for *refreshment*, that appeals the body's innate ability to learn alternative behaviours. Because, habits can be broken.

With a *Critical Performance Pedagogy* Pineau (2002) advocates for a pedagogy that “embraces performance as a critical methodology that can be fully integrated throughout the learning process” (p. 50). This requires consideration of the body as a medium for learning. From where I stand, I view that teachers and students in music education are well suited for such an investigation, given that they have experience and practice of being “performance sensitive” beings. With Pineau’s (2002) perspective in mind, there is the need to consider how those of us in music education might work to free ourselves from rigid frameworks that I see are embedded within music education (Nerland, 2003), and within this from oppressive norms, from dichotomous thinking that separates subject/object, body/mind, nature/culture, female/male, into an “willful embodiment of ‘we’” (Spry, 2016, p. 99). As Pienau (2002) notes, we must strive into a pedagogy that acknowledges that inequities in power and privilege have physical impact on our bodies, that put bodies into action, to help bodies become active, to help them break habits and structures. In this way music educators and researchers can “explore how socio-political relations are simultaneously reflected in and constituted through educational practice at the macro level of public policy as well as the micro level of classroom interaction” (Pineau 2002, p. 41).

Within my soprano self my voice is an instrument that is shaped to adhere to gendered norms. In my auto-narratives my voice is constructed into a porous silhouette of a soprano. In my experiences there have been guidelines for what this silhouette should be like. Through my auto-narratives I see that I have been fulfilling demands for a normative feminine soprano. First and foremost, I see that this is related to two aspects; appearance and sound. The skin of the soprano that I meet the criteria for, is linked to a “girly” look – an innocent and docile behavior is pervasive in the narrative of the female singer articulated within the literature. According to Green (1997) and Rosenberg (2012), singers risk being

“double exposed” to an inquisitive, normative gaze. Borgström Källén and Sandström (2019) points out that it is clear that the voice as an instrument is constructed on the basis of special terms and conditions and can be linked to the singer primarily using her own body in her musical performance. I have experienced this expected sound and behaviour of the soprano as a normative feminine sound. These particular feminine aspects of the voice require discipline of the voice (Björck, 2011; Borgström Källén, 2012, 2014; Hentschel, 2017; Strøm, 2018), and I have disciplined myself through imitating how a soprano “should” be and sound. I have performed my soprano voice within a fixed two-gendered category. Within this category I have fulfilled and repeated the patterns that exist in the socio-cultural context of singing. Only when I step out of the rigid frames of the socio-cultural context of singing do I see what kind of repeated acts that dissonate, and why. When I step out of the frame of the culture, my voice is released. I find my own way, from within my core, because I do not repeat expected actions, but rather, I find new actions. I am aware that my inner core is also sociocultural constructed. My voice is externally and internally co-constructed. Through the process of working on this article I have actively tried to dismantle and deconstruct the normative behaviour that exists in the sociocultural context of singing.

The skin of the soprano is such a gendered phenomenon, that the subject is performed into a socio-cultural context, without being aware of it. This resonates with Butler’s theory that norms cannot be embodied without an action and they cannot continue without an action (Reddy & Butler, 2004). In this way I can act and refuse the norms through action, an action of release. In my second narrative, *A silver soprano voice*, I describe how my vocal teachers asked for more bodily support because my voice sounded like a “boy soprano”. Of course, I did, and this resulted in a silver voice. It was a voice that gave me a lot of vocal challenges, but *it sounded the way it was expected to*. When my focus changed, because life changed, and I stepped out of the ridged frame of the culture, the pieces of my voice “fell together”. Now I was not trying to repeat acts from the social culture of singing. I performed my own voice, finding my core, but now within a different context. I focused on singing repertoire such as folk music, that did not focus so much on timbre, but the text.

Butler claims that; “our responses to social environments over time are part of what produces the so-called ‘facts’ of the biological body” (Reddy & Butler, 2004, p. 118). I was trying to not repeat actions of the culture, but *now* knowing and reading my experiences through Butler’s work, I cannot separate the body, the I from the Other – the sociocultural context of singing and its discourse. Reading my experiences through the lens of Butler’s work, I cannot separate my body from the cultural discourse.

Disciplining the Soprano Skin

In the auto-narratives I share I see a clear disciplining of my body. I moved with femininity on stage in the roles of the naive princess or maid. These feminine traits were often confirmed as correct by conductors, directors, vocal teachers and colleagues. The repertoire I was assigned was adapted to this expected expression as a female singer. In my auto-narratives I see that I can confirm the discipline of the body through my actions. The performative, to make a soprano voice, is rooted in the actions of the body, inclusive of the body’s audio. Meeting norms for a feminine soprano also involves disciplining the vocalizing body. I experienced this as dissonance between my bodily actions and the vocal expression. My voice, in some discursive practices, was considered as a dissonance, as it did not meet the requirement set by the expectations of Western music’s requirements. Trying to fulfill this criterion I got tired in my voice, I could not find my core, my support, because I did not connect to my body. Schlichter (2011) argues that Butler’s notion of gender trouble remains fully contained by the logic of the visual, because Butler focuses on the picture of gender and in this way excludes the voice as “one of the relevant aspects of ‘significant corporeality’” (p. 33). Schlichter continues to argue that this use of gender performativity as a theory “make bodies speak but simultaneously mutes their voices” (p. 33).

Voice is an extension of the soprano skin, from the inside to the outside. My point is that the skin, as a border between the inside and outside is porous. Voice as material, and the body as material, has its own agency. A more porous way of exploring the soprano voice, would be acknowledging the body, the instrument itself with agency. An intertwining

of the I and the Other. Because the suppression comes from the outside, from the socio-cultural context view of the voice as fixed gendered categories, and thereby constructed into a normative feminine voice. Drawing back to my auto-narrative, *Without the operatic voice*, I see there is a “mismatch” between the appearance and the sound; the picture of *Michaela* was perfect but the soprano skin did not sound the way it was expected to. The voice did not support the message in the act of the communication. It interrupted it. It dissonated. Butler’s theory enables me to notice this, as well as to create resistance and further work to develop new flexible concepts. The voice demands it, because of its complexity.

From these embodied memories, as mentioned earlier, I analyze that I perform with a voice that is significant for me, but I perform it within a discourse, which is binding for those within the socio-cultural context of singing in western societies. As a result, I dissonance with the expectations from this discourse. In the literature Schei (2007) describes from a Foucauldian perspective how social structures and cultural patterns shape singers during music education and professional practices. While Nerland (2003) investigates how one-on-one music lessons constitute a cultural practice in relation to the work of Foucault and Bourdieu. When I experienced dissonances – when my soprano sound was not operatic enough, or that my biggest voice changed happened later in life when I became a mother, getting into a teaching position at the university – I was no longer occupied with fulfilling the norms of how my voice should sound and within the dissonance I could break out of the patterns I was accustomed to. Suzanne Cusick (1999), inspired by Butler’s notion of performativity, analyzes speech and song in western culture as forms of discipline of the vocalizing bodies. In relation to Cusick’s work, I see that my soprano body has been subordinated by the vocal and choral field, disciplining me to fulfill the image of the normative feminine soprano. My embodied experiences have created a dissonance, between the expectation and the sound I produced.

My construction as a soprano is based on traditions, where the focus on bodily discipline is taken for granted (Borgström Källén & Sandström, 2019, p. 87). My becoming as a feminist is rooted in these invisible “taken for granted” moments. My feminist position also creates a theoretical

frame for further research exploring possible “hidden” socializations in cultures that contain vocal practices where the female gender is over-represented in its participation. Drawing from Turner’s (1982) thinking, liminal space is both a cultural and personal place where transformation can be made. I have experienced that positioning me as a feminist researcher through autoethnography, has empowered me both as soprano and researcher, because I am able to break out of patterns and thus create a change. A liminal space is therefore a transformative position to hold.

The Construction of my Voice

My soprano voice is constructed by expectation to the skin of the soprano – expectations that come from a thinking of the voice as a gendered fixed category. Applying Butler’s (1990) idea of gender as performative, the soprano has limited possibilities for action and performance outside of “meanings already socially established” (p. 191), and thereby the soprano has no full freedom “to voice”. As a feminist thinker, I see that I am disciplined to fulfill femininity requirements; a constructed normative feminine soprano. The social construction of the soprano also focuses on constructions of gender. There is a preconceived way of viewing and disciplining a soprano, which therefore constructs the soprano’s gender. The imperceptible construction of me as a soprano led to little resistance of such stereotyping. Through Butler’s thinking of gender as performative, *A silver soprano voice* appears willingly to accept the position she is given. Subordination is thus the precondition for resistance and opposition (Davies et al., 2001).

As a soprano I accepted the position of subordination, fulfilling the demands from vocal teachers, directors, and orchestras. This acceptance of the conditions of possibility, does not come from me, but from the power of the practices I have lived in. This tells me something about the power of the practices I have embodied. But, I now face this subordination as a feminist researcher, and I have the possibility of seeing otherwise, as soprano *and* researcher. The position of seeing otherwise leads me to a liminal space, a place of *wondering in the dark* (Bresler, 2019). Carrying my soprano skin with me, I embrace my experiences as

a situated knowledge into my becoming as a researcher. Moving into the end of this article I show how my positioning as a researcher, moving in between knowing and unknowing take me into a liminal space, being both a soprano *and* researcher, into a space of *wondering* and *wandering*.

Moving Into a Liminal Space

I carry my soprano history with me as I become a feminist researcher. I argue that, performing a gender, being a soprano or researcher are not fixed categories, and these roles are also performed. I am the one who brings Butler's ideas on gender as performative into my context, not as soprano or researcher, but as both at the same time. Moving between the fluid and porous border of the skin of the soprano and the feminist researcher, I find my space in between – a liminal space. Music has the possibility of creating a liminal space because it can take us into another dimension (Boyce-Tillman, 2009). Facing my soprano, using autoethnography as a method, I make myself vulnerable, and I throw myself into the unknown. However, as I throw myself into the unknown the boundaries between the soprano and researcher start to dissolve.

In writing this article I have been able to see what an exciting and vulnerable place this is to hold. By carving out my journey from soprano to feminist researcher, I offer a methodological path, a way of investigating, but also an example of positioning research from within a performative practice for those who experience a requirement for research-based teaching and practice in higher music education – for who is perhaps better qualified to see and know in new ways than performers? In this article my emphasis has been on how norms of being a normative feminine soprano has affected my becoming into a feminist researcher. Being a feminist researcher I can challenge the power such norms might hold – not only for the sake of my own change but also to incite change for others too. Not claiming objectivity or using “the God Trick” (Haraway, 1991), but merely writing with my honesty, and questioning my position as a product of the discourse I am investigating. From such a position of situated knowledge and through Butler's thinking of gender as performative, I now rearticulate my voice, from another perspective.

Coda

This article emerged from my porous soprano skin and is a contribution to understanding the performativity of gender that exists in the practice of singing. I continue to ask: How is a singer's feminist performative I created through autoethnography? By revealing how my soprano has been constructed, and through the thinking of Butler's concept of gender as performative, I have stitched together my becoming a feminist researcher. Investigating my journey *is* the becoming as a researcher.

Returning to the orange metaphor I shared at the opening of this article, I see that an orange has no firm core. By peeling the skin of an orange, the pithiness is revealed showing us that there are many more complex facets to the orange, the orange is not simply a mass of flesh, but rather it is the intricate pith that holds it together. Peeling my orange, making myself vulnerable, has enabled me to feel the field and listen to the field with an *expanded way of knowing* (Bresler, 2019) into a transformative position in a liminal space. Perhaps my voice resonates with others, or it strikes out of the homogenous sound of the ensemble, as a solo, with a dissonance. What a dissonance is cannot be determined; it changes based on our context of living and situated knowledge. But, after a dissonance something new might happen – a change, a new timbre and texture.

In writing this article I have tried to better understand the intersection of music education and gender, the becoming of a researcher, researching with the “inside out” and to embrace the material body's actual contribution in (to) the web of meanings in the sociocultural context of singing. My performative actions are constructed according to the soprano as a gendered phenomenon, disciplined and constructed by the socio-cultural context of singing. I therefore have argued that female soprano voices are not given freedom to voice. Drawing on my first auto-narrative, and the words of my feminist mother: “the most important thing is not what you have, but what you are about to become”. Thinking as a soprano feminist, I see that I am in a liminal space of becoming, throwing myself into the unknown, seeking a feminist performative I – a voice that might resonate with other voices, creating a complex melody of the self.

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