

Institution: Birkbeck, University of London

Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature

Title of case study: Voiceworks: promoting voice in collaborative practice and the making of new song repertoire

1. Summary of the impact

[Voiceworks](#) exemplifies the impact of Birkbeck's Contemporary Poetics Research Centre and its contribution to cultural life and creative industries, specifically in the field of song, composition and performance. A seven-year collaboration between poets from the Centre, composers and singers from Guildhall Conservatoire, and Wigmore Hall, Voiceworks annually creates new works for voice from a long process of reflective exchange, improvisation and practice. These are performed publicly at Wigmore Hall, and form new repertoire, accessible online. An emerging generation of creative Voiceworks practitioners have developed their practice in innovative directions, and continue to collaborate successfully on projects nationally and internationally.

2. Underpinning research

After an approach from Wigmore Hall, London's international venue for song, Voiceworks was established in 2006 by the directors of the Contemporary Poetics Research Centre (CPRC), Professors Carol Watts and William Rowe, with colleagues from Guildhall. The resulting collaboration shifted the traditional 'setting' of poetic text to music onto innovative ground. Drawing on the rich experimental research culture of the Centre, and under its aegis, on students and practitioners within and outside Birkbeck, Watts and Rowe opened up a range of poetic practice and research, including sound, and visual and digital forms of poetic material. The aim is to transform the thinking and practice of cross-arts collaboration, creating a twenty-first-century song repertoire for a new generation of artists.

Practice-based research has threaded through a continuous series of related events at the Centre and public venues, exploring voice and sound: innovative work with singular voice, evidenced in the essays and videos of the multimedia 'Constellation: Alice Notley' (2008); poet Susan Howe's seminar with her collaborator, musician David Grubbs, and public performance on London's South Bank (jointly organized with Royal Holloway); open seminars on acoustics and notation (2009); on video poetry and music (2009); on polyvocality (2011). Voiceworks' development was further informed by cross-arts research collaborations PartlyWriting (with poet Caroline Bergvall and Bury Text Festival, 2005), and the rolling colloquium Translated Acts (with the International Centre for Fine Art Research at Central St. Martin's and Southampton University, 2009).

Voiceworks' collaborative processes unusually involve the poet and composer working with the voice of the singer from the outset to generate song compositions. This encounter with voice is central to reflective experiment, testing the practice and communication of collaboration, and to the production of new repertoire at Wigmore. As Voiceworks developed, poets and composers began to report on this ongoing work, eg. 'Documents of Collaboration: The Poem in Song and Opera' (2009); TEXTMUSIC/TEXTMUSIC (2009), a colloquium exploring Voiceworks findings with international musicians, academics and performers with public performances at the Horse Hospital in London; and VOX//XOV in 2013 with renowned sound poet, musician and Schwitters specialist Jaap Blonk. These events inform the exchange of those taking part in Voiceworks, shaping their understanding of the practice of voice, text and sound. The critical and poetic work of Watts and Rowe has similarly been fully engaged. Watts' published research includes an essay on site-specific practice and harmonics (Ref 1); Rowe's pays close attention to lyric voice (Refs 2 & 3).

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Watts' collection *Occasionals* (Ref 4) pushes voice and breath through a score of 'irrational cuts', while Rowe's poetry explores political 'pulse' as a condition of song.

Watts' article on collaboration and the concept of encounter (Ref 5) draws explicitly on Voiceworks, challenging notions of text setting. Her discussion of US composer Michael Pisaro's work with poetry led to public discussions with Pisaro and performances as a voice among musicians realizing Wandelweiser scores. Her practice-based explorations of text and sound, with collaborator Will Montgomery, eg 'Pitch' (Ref 6), have been performed, exhibited, and played on internet radio. This consistent investigation of voice, sound and collaboration has emerged from the Voiceworks project and also feeds it: like the Voiceworks participants, Watts' practice has been transformed.

3. References to the research

1. Carol Watts, '[Zeta Landscape: Poetry, Place, Pastoral](#)' in *Placing Poetry*, edited by Ian Davidson and Zoe Skoulding (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012). On harmonics and site-specific poetic practice.
2. William Rowe, *The Earth Has Been Destroyed* (London: Veer Books, 2009). Political poetry that draws on Rowe's long engagement with song, history and pulse, which fed into the Voiceworks project.
3. William Rowe, *Three Lyric Poets: Harwood, Torrance and MacSweeney* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2009). Alive to the vocality of lyric practice: 'In one arresting passage he scores Harwood's punctuation and spacing, measures it against a recording of the poet in performance to give a close-read musical sense of the subtlety of this delightful poet's approach to meaning: his broken narratives, his gaps, his questioning suspensions' (Review by [John Muckle](#)).
4. Carol Watts, *Occasionals* (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2011). Reflects Watts' research based poetic practice, testing voice and a Deleuzian concept of irrational cuts. One reviewer wrote 'I have seldom read a poetry so exact, yet so longing, expressive of what just might be, somewhere. So abundant, yet with such awareness of our partialness. A poetry that makes of its sentences an architecture that invokes, at the same time, brokenness and clarity.' ([Review 03/05/2012](#))
5. Carol Watts, '[Set, Unset: Collaboration, Encounter and the Scene of Poetry](#)', *Contemporary Music Review* 29:2 (April 2010), 145-57. Article that reflects on Voiceworks and collaborative practice in poetry and music, questioning the concept of text setting and exploring the translation of poetry by composer Michael Pisaro.
6. Carol Watts, text collaboration with sound artist Will Montgomery, [Pitch. Homage to Luigi Nono](#). Electronic composition (2011). 'Pitch nestles in the contours of protest work. Its language is the persistent unpinnable shiver left by shock and loss of articulate response and agency', Caroline Bergvall, 'Indiscreet Ghosts', catalogue essay for *The Whisper Heard* exhibition by Imogen Stidworthy, Matt's Gallery.

Funding:

2010: AHRC Digital Equipment and Database Enhancement for Impact grant (£136,498) for Voiceworks project (Watts as P.I.)

4. Details of the impact

The major feature of the Voiceworks project has been the partnership between Birkbeck, Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and Wigmore Hall, UK's leading venue for chamber music and song. As a consequence it has made a significant, ongoing impact on cultural life, through developing the creative expertise of a new generation of composers, singers and poets, creating new repertoire and performances. It has also helped an important cultural institution transform contemporary song and interest audiences in new classical and experimental material. For Wigmore Hall, 'Voiceworks is a vital part of the development of the genre, introducing Song as a living art form to a new

generation of writers, composers and artists, and fostering a career-long engagement with the genre' (Testimonial 1). The venue provides various platforms for young artists, including competitions and recitals, and the Voiceworks project forms a unique part of that strategy by nurturing young composers, song writers and performers.

Wigmore Learning, which reaches over 8000 young people every year, piloted a Voiceworks programme with school children aged 12-18, initiated by Carol Watts, which resulted in work integrated into the main Voiceworks Wigmore performance in May 2012. The Head of Wigmore Learning writes: 'As the number of Voiceworks alumni grows and those who have been part of the programme become established as professionals, their experience gained through the project will not only influence their work but also have an impact on those with whom they collaborate.' She adds that Voiceworks is unique because 'the collaborative writing process is still a relatively rare thing within the classical music world and something the students and young professionals involved in Voiceworks will take with them into their careers' (Testimonial 1). One of the school students, whose work was performed, went on to win the BBC Proms Inspire Young Composer's Competition in 2012 (12-16 age category). Wigmore Learning plan to extend the Voiceworks project into their schools programme triennially from 2013.

For the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, the Director of Composition writes, 'Voiceworks has had a major and significant impact on the creative practice not only of ...[our] composers but also on the depth and meaning of cross-collaboration between composers, singers and instrumental performers over the past seven years. This has been powered at its heart from the deep thoughtfulness and intellectual curiosity that staff and student poets from Birkbeck College have brought into the creative culture of the Guildhall school.' He adds, 'It has completely transformed our postgraduate composers' sense of what cross-art collaboration means in terms of creative practice and in a very specific sense inculcated in student composers a far greater degree of sensitivity and responsiveness to text and the limitless potential of its relationship to sonic/musical material' (Testimonial 2). The deputy head of Vocal Studies explains, 'the unique value of Voiceworks is the space it offers for practitioners ... to encounter each other's practice. Out of this opportunity have emerged lasting artistic relationships between Voiceworks participants, and an interest in working collaboratively has been kindled especially among singers whose involvement would conventionally only be in the later stages of the creation of new work.' Individual participants have gone on to involve other non-Voiceworks collaborators in this interdisciplinary mode of practice, extending its impact (Testimonial 3).

There are now over 130 alumni of the Voiceworks programme, many of whom have used it to launch or develop their creative careers; it has enabled them to extend their portfolios (with new commissions and collaborative work), and several continue to work in collaborative teams. Alumni indicate that the experience has profoundly influenced their approach to creative composition and led to new opportunities in their working lives. A young singer (Voiceworks, 2010-11), for example, 'feel(s) very grateful to Voiceworks for sparking what has been an exciting collaboration. My interest in contemporary music has continued to grow and I feel more courageous in tackling new ideas and works. This ... has helped me in my career. I am currently involved in a new opera ... at the Linbury Studio, Royal Opera House with four other performers. The audition process asked me to vocally improvise – to feel free to create, a task I would not have been so comfortable doing had I not taken part in Voiceworks' (email 21/08/2013, Source 7).

A prizewinning composer, whose song cycles have been performed at numerous venues in the UK and internationally and on BBC Radio 3, also testifies that 'I do feel my vocal music written before and after *Voiceworks* are different, particularly in terms of the increased awareness of the interworking of text and music, the impact of vocal writing on both the interpreters and the impression the resultant work will make on the its listeners' (email, 22/08/2013, Source 7). As a

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freelance poet writes, 'I consider *Voiceworks* to have been a true launch-pad for my practice. ... As a result of the work I produced for *Voiceworks*... I was successful in my application to work on a newly commissioned project for Dartington International Summer School' (email 10/09/13, Source 7).

As a further outcome of *Voiceworks*, Carol Watts is an advisor on collaborative practice on London Sinfonietta's Jerwood funded Blue Touchpaper scheme and an alumni of the project won one of its hugely competitive commissions (Source 4). Other organisations which have recognized and benefited from the expertise of *Voiceworks* alumni include Royal Opera House, Welsh National Opera, Arcola Theatre, Traverse Theatre, the Liverpool Biennial, Museum of Art, Bury Museum of Art (Source 5), Manchester, the Wellcome Institute and the Dana Centre at the Science Museum, and literary and music festivals in the UK and internationally (Paxos, Switzerland, Hong Kong, South Africa, US, France, Spain).

The digital repertoire of *Voiceworks* now extends to at least 48 pieces, all available on the website, developed with an AHRC Digital Equipment and Database Enhancement for Impact grant designed and led by Carol Watts. In one year from June 2012, the website recorded 69,156 sessions with an average of 7 minutes per session (Sources 8 and 9). Live performances have been captured digitally, building a growing body of work stored on the website. As *Voiceworks*' Guildhall partners express it, 'On every level, we regard *Voiceworks* as a paradigm for the formative development of creative practitioners and the effective dissemination of the fruits of their collaborative endeavours' (Source 2).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Testimonials

1. Head of Wigmore Learning (factual statement)
2. Director of Composition, Guildhall School of Music and Drama (factual statement)
3. Deputy Head of Vocal Studies, Guildhall School of Music and Drama (factual statement)
4. Chief Executive, London Sinfonietta (factual statement)
5. Director of Museum of Art, Bury, Manchester (and Text Festival Director) (factual statement)

Other evidence

6. A full list of 130 participating artists since 2006 (114 within the REF period) is available on the *Voiceworks* [website](#). It features short biographies of each of the participants, together with details of their explorations in composing, writing and performing reflected in their blogs.
7. Participant feedback: We can supply a folder of statements by alumni with feedback on the effect of the programme on their careers and creative approach, from which we have drawn some of the quotations above.
8. The [Voiceworks website](#) lists 48 pieces (41 sound files, 33 in REF period) that have been performed at Wigmore Hall with explanations about how they were created.
9. Analytics of *Voiceworks* website usage available on request.