

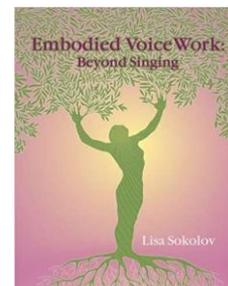
BOOK REVIEW

Embodied voice work: Beyond singing (Sokolov)

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Title: Embodied voice work: Beyond singing **Author:** Lisa Sokolov **Publication year:** 2020
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REVIEWER BIOGRAPHY

Tina Warnock is director and clinical lead for Belltree Music Therapy CIC, which she set up in Brighton, UK in 2009. Since 2018 she has been training as a Vocal Psychotherapist with Diane Austin and is the program director for the Vocal Psychotherapy Distance Training Course, based in the UK. Tina is a singer and songwriter alongside her music therapy and clinical supervision practice and has over twenty years' experience working with people of all ages and abilities for Belltree as well as NHS Mental Health and Child Development services. Her publications have focused on voice and identity, and non-verbal voice work. [tinaw@belltree.org.uk]

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Over the past few decades, we have seen a growth in body and voice-related therapeutic interventions, such as Therapeutic Voicework (Newham, 1997), Body Psychotherapy (Totton, 2020), and the development of advanced music therapy models such as Vocal Psychotherapy (Austin, 2008). The importance of the body and voice to our emotional wellbeing is becoming more widely recognised, particularly in the field of trauma theory (Van der Kolk, 2014). So, from the title of this book, "Embodied Voice Work", I was intrigued to see how it would fit in with existing texts and whether it would offer something new and applicable to music therapy practice.

From the beginning, it became clear that this publication held the author's entire life's work – a life that "has been [...] immersed in music [...] a life of listening, sensing, seeing, singing, teaching and improvising" (p. 4). It also became clear that it was not written specifically for music therapists but for singers, musicians, body workers, teachers, psychologists; anyone who may find the work interesting. The presence of her own poetry, interwoven throughout the book, and the soulful linguistic style sets an ethereal tone for Sokolov's presentation of her method, which she uses in arts education, music therapy and human potential work.

Sokolov begins by sharing her experience as a young person who learned to use her breath and body to manage her own migraine pain, and to begin to support others; she explains how she already identified herself as a musician and singer at a young age, and how this connected her to "something greater" (p. 3).

She presents the core concept behind Embodied Voice Work (EVW), where the whole body is "the human instrument which [...] when not fully inhabited [...] is not living to its full potential" (p. 4), and EVW as a structure of games that have evolved to open up that instrument. Her descriptions frequently allude to the elements and forces and are full of analogies to natural processes:

The body is the riverbed, and the breath is the river,
And the tone is a child's leaf-and-bark boat
Floating on the currents of the river. (p. 6)

Arranged over twenty-three chapters, this book is well organised and takes the reader through the Foundations, the Fundamentals of the Practice of EVW, Sounding the Body, the Essentials of Music and finally an Overview. Each section is rich with information and spans over thirty pages it is certainly not a book to be read cover to cover in one sitting, if one is to assimilate the content.

In chapters three and four, Sokolov communicates her deep belief that “we are all singers” and that non-verbal singing “frees us from the limits and inhibitions experienced in speaking through words”; it addresses the “individual, physical, energetical, emotional and soul aspects of making sound” (p. 20). She explains how EVW follows the developmental line of verbal communication; we learn to navigate spoken language before learning to read and write and this should be the same with our musical language. Her system of games can be played repeatedly, each time going more deeply “from the general to the essential” (p. 21).

The title of chapter 5 “The Attitude of Listening: Radical Receptivity” really caught my attention, particularly the statement “This work is about listening; that is all. And that is a lot” (p. 30). Here she encapsulates the life-long challenge of every music therapist, to develop their listening skills to ever increasing layers of complexity and develop a truly authentic, compassionate, non-judgmental stance – something that cannot be achieved through reading and researching, but through self-exploration and lived experience. She maps out the different levels of “inner sensing” and a message that becomes a mantra through the book to “Notice what you notice. Feel what you feel. Hear what you hear. Know what you know” (p. 30). This chapter is short but thought provoking and makes the reader aware of the different levels of inner dialogue that we engage in continuously with our mind and body.

A core element of Sokolov's EVW is her developmental warm up which she talks us through in depth in chapter 6 and again in the appendix. This sequential exercise prepares the participant for the work to come. It is a clear example of how her method uses a directive, structured approach to provide a safe framework within which people can explore using the five tools: breath, tone, touch, imagery and improvisation. She then organises the process of EVW into five stages: Exploration, Awareness, Release, A New Balance of Strength and Openness, and Integration and goes on to illustrate how these are experienced in the body. On page 58 there is a useful illustration of how Sokolov perceives the body to be in four quadrants which interact with “energetical landscapes” that she goes later on to define. This term – one of several ‘neologisms’ used in the book that the author has coined herself – “is a description of a geography of qualities and how they map in the body” (p. 100).

By chapter 9 I found that my motivation to continue reading was occasionally challenged by the abundant abstract analogies, esoteric language and a mantra-like repetition of key messages, almost preaching in style. However, the content was intriguing, and as I read on, I began to get absorbed in the content of the exercises which combine yoga and meditation techniques (the author's knowledge of anatomy and physiology is impressive) with poetry and storytelling, and the

essentials of non-verbal voice work; the body as a house with many rooms; resonance profiles; the path to breath; explorations of vowels and consonants. The detail and level of analysis is captivating and informative.

The Vowel Game in chapter 19 “The Soundscape” is presented as “the deepest game I have developed” (p. 153). My keen interest in non-verbal voice work made this chapter particularly alluring and I found myself following along with my breath and voice to fully absorb what she was attempting to convey with words. Her analysis of how singing vowels “transforms our instrument” (p. 155) was indeed enriching.

Turning to the “Overview”, I felt the book was coming to its conclusion. However, there were a further 33 pages of distillation, and some rewording of the previous content. Here the author brings in more poetry and some significant lengthy prose about her stance and philosophical (as opposed to theoretical) backdrop, some case vignettes about and from her students and some specifics about how a session might look. Finally, the appendix with detailed descriptions of her warm-ups and games – a rich resource for people who use directive voice-based activities with individuals or groups.

The absence of references to key psychological theorists in this book may be deliberate, to enable the author to fit her entire method into one volume. However, this made me question the place that Sokolov’s work has in the music therapy literature. Her “Supplemental Reading” (p. 225) and acknowledgements towards the end reinforce the feeling that this book, although of potential interest to music therapists, has a much wider reach towards people who seek a deeper knowledge of holistic vocal practice.

To end, I believe this book carries some important messages for music therapists about the potential power in their vocal instruments, and the spectrum of skills needed to engage in compassionate listening: “If we are not willing or able to let our own wide range of human emotions play through us, we are not ready to ask another to do that. This is the work” (p. 176). However, it will sit on a different part of the shelf to books with a more clinical emphasis and stronger theoretical foundation.

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