

Book Review

Embodied Voice Work: Beyond Singing

Lisa Sokolov

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Lisa Sokolov's 2020 book *Embodied Voice Work: Beyond Singing* is a 238-page love letter to the human instrument: the voice. Sokolov lays her life's work out on the page with great care; her years of self-investigation and work with others is presented in bold colours. This book offers not only an exploration of the human voice, but also a way of approaching and engaging with life through the whole body. Her method of embodied voice work is undeniably rooted in her work as a jazz musician and music therapist, combining aesthetic and therapeutic elements. As a classically trained singer and newly-minted music therapist with a long-standing interest in body work myself, I was eager to explore this publication.

The book is divided into five sections: "Foundations," "The Fundamentals of the Practice of Embodied Voicework," "Sounding the Body," "The Essentials of Music," and "Overview." Scattered between the sections are poems—written for the most part by Sokolov herself—adding an element of whimsy and reminding the reader that the author is, above all, an artist. The introduction, in which Sokolov introduces both herself and her methodology, states that the book is for "singers" as well as "people who have forgotten they are singers." This is indeed a core belief for the author: "we are all singers," she writes. Sokolov returns again and again to the theory that most people have forgotten to sing with their whole being. The purpose of this book is to invite people back into their bodies and back into the full resonant power of their voices.

Sokolov lays out her method by way of games, introducing the essential element of playful inquiry to the reader. The games encourage introspection, reflection, connection, and, of course, vocalization. Sokolov approaches the act of singing from an eclectic background clearly rooted as much in body work and holistic philosophies as in a scientific understanding of the vocal apparatus. To her, singing is not simply the act of making sound; it is an *embodied* act of self-expression that incorporates the whole being. The games may be played alone or in groups, providing potential resources for music therapists who are interested in expanding their use of voice in their clinical work. It is worth noting that Sokolov's language is allegorical throughout, and she writes using a surfeit of metaphors which occasionally cloud the meaning rather than clarify it. There is a great deal of pertinent and useful information contained in this book, but it is at times shrouded in prose.

The jewel of the book is Chapter 13, "The Path of Breath," an in-depth exploration of the movement of breath in the body. Sokolov demonstrates a clear understanding of anatomy, and yet, the chapter reads like a fairy tale recounting the magical, miraculous act of breathing. Her language is florid but in this case the detail *adds* to the experience, allowing us to visualize the

anatomy and physical processes that are standardly hidden from us. Her description of the limitations of focusing solely on the central diaphragm as a support for healthy singing is refreshing, as she rightly points out its involuntary nature in the “Integrated Body” chapter. There is some creative use of the word “diaphragm,” as she applies the term not only to the true diaphragms of the body but also the vocal folds and soles of the feet.

The “Essentials of Music” section is a well-constructed explication of tone and resonance, leading the reader through a series of games meant to encourage deeper listening through attention and understanding. The science of sound is well grounded in fact and lovingly described by the author.

Sokolov refers to bodies as “living poems” and continually encourages the reader to be in communion with their bodies, to explore and experience themselves and their voices on a deeper level. What is missing in this treatise is any reference to adaptation for people with disabilities or limited ranges of motion. The elaborate 32-step “Developmental Warm-Up Sequence”—designed by the author as something to come back to over and over—requires the reader to have a body capable of all movements. In it, the reader “moves from curling up on the floor into rolling over, into lying on the belly, into creeping, crawling, moving into sitting, and then coming to standing.” No modifications are provided or suggested. Similarly, the “Spine Roll”—which has its own chapter and is referred to by Sokolov as “central to the work”—assumes a fully mobile spine and the ability to stand. The language throughout the book supposes an able body and, again, no adaptations are discussed for any of the movements or games. At times, Sokolov refers to her belief that the modern world has driven a wedge between people and their bodies. While this may be true, there is a through line in her writing that implies all bodies are fundamentally the same and that physical pain or discomfort is a manifestation of psychological imbalance. True injury or physical limitations are never addressed and, while this may be beyond the scope of her methodology, in an ideal world, Embodied Voice Work would be accessibly described to include all bodies.

Another practical criticism is the lack of supporting materials for the book. The reader is invited to listen to an audio guide for the elaborate warm-up; at the time of writing this review, the author’s website still does not contain a working link to this recording.

Lisa Sokolov presents to us in this book an exploration of the voice that engages all the senses and encourages us to slow down and listen deeply, both to ourselves and to others. As music therapists, we are called to listen, to pay attention to the material that emerges in our clinical work. A sound understanding of the functioning of the human voice is foundational to both our work with others and our own vocal health. While books with a more straight-ahead approach—such as Schwartz et al.’s (2018) *Functional Voice Skills for Music Therapists*—exist, Sokolov’s contribution may appeal to those who seek a more esoteric approach to their voicework, whether in dyad or group settings or simply by themselves.

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Charlotte is a recent Music Therapy graduate from Concordia University in Montréal where she works as a freelance singer, notably with la Chapelle de Québec, le Studio de musique ancienne de Montréal, and the professional core of the Montréal Symphony Orchestra choir. She currently sits on the board of Union des artistes and has been actively involved in the negotiation of several collective agreements.