

Trans-becomings in western ‘classical’ singing: An intra-active approach

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In collaboration with Demian Seesjärvi

Prelude

This exposition is an attempt to think transgender experiences and existence in relation to voice and particular musical practices. A key source of inspiration for this voice- and music-centred line of exploration is our collaboration with Finnish singer and voice teacher Demian Seesjärvi. Thus, the propositions made here are meant to take form or reverberate in-between Seesjärvi’s vocalizations, his spoken and written reflections on his body/voice and artistic activity, and the research interests and concepts that we bring into these encounters.

The key enabler of the inquiry, Demian Seesjärvi, is a trans man who has been engaged in the medical, social and bodily-mentally experienced process of sex/gender reassignment, or re-affirmation, for the past few years. We use the composite sex/gender here to stress the premise that both sex - which traditionally signals the biological and bodily aspects of sexual difference - and gender - which refers to subjective and social identities within sociocultural gender systems - are in a co-constitutive relationship with one another. Neither pre-exists the other. Instead, the bodily and related materialities (such as hormones) pertaining to sex affect both individual enactments and social conceptions of gender. Meanwhile, understandings of gender, whether in medical or musical practices, affect the formation and existential possibilities of bodies and sexes.

A central distinctive feature of Seesjärvi’s sex/gender re-affirmation process is his embeddedness in the culture and voice practices of western so-called ‘classical’ singing. Seesjärvi has been educated in this music culture, and has trained his voice and body in relation to its repertoires, for many years. As we will discuss, while engaging *the sound examples* of this exposition, he has actively practised classical singing both before and during the sex re-affirmation process in relation to the differing bodily and vocal potentialities of being available to him in these different stages of his life. Even as a youngster, before his systematic studies of ‘classical’ singing, Seesjärvi found vocal role models within this musical tradition. This was the case especially when he attempted to emulate, since early childhood, the voice and manner of singing of the renowned Swedish tenor Jussi Björling (1911-1960). Seesjärvi brought this up in reference to **the first sound sample** we have chosen for the exposition, namely his adjacent performance of “Kotirannan laulu” (A song of the homeshore) at the age of 17. As Seesjärvi explains in **the neighbouring account**, he was infatuated not only with the voice of the young boy who had performed this folk song-like tune on a previous recording, but also with the classically trained vocalicity of Björling. To follow singer and voice studies scholar Anne Tarvainen and several other researchers, the emulation Seesjärvi alludes to is feasible on the basis of humans’ (and some

other animals’) evidenced capacity to corporeally empathize with and mime other bodies’ visible and audible actions. This is enabled by the tactile-kinetic similarities roughly shared by many sound-making, or otherwise acting, bodies. (E.g. Tarvainen 2012: 142-146.) At the same time, Seesjärvi’s performance of “Kotirannan laulu” and his account thereof illustrate the functioning of music - such as the domain of ‘classical’ singing - as powerful milieus for the formation of trans persons’ agency and identity (cf. Välimäki 2014).

In this exposition, we explore the interrelations of trans existence and vocal art practices through Seesjärvi’s distinctive practice in conjunction with the following theoretical aim. By thinking with Seesjärvi’s performances and verbal elaborations on singing, we wish to participate in recent discussions about how materiality - or better, *materialities* - matter a great deal in trans ways of being and the unfolding of trans selves. We concur with the idea already voiced in these discussions that examining the centrality, but also the dynamic and multifarious roles, of materiality in trans ways of being may importantly complement the established medical, biologist and social constructionist understandings of trans existence (see e.g. Hayward 2010). Reaching toward a complementary perspective of this kind is the main objective of this exposition. We seek to highlight practices of classical singing and vocal music-making as significant milieus within which the mattering materialities of trans being - or trans-becoming (ibid.) - take shape and can be grasped. Thus, in addition to participating in the discussions about the materialities of trans selves, we seek to expand them into a new context previously unexamined from this vantage point: studies of singing and the Western ‘classical’ vocal tradition.

Another new contribution of our exploration relates to the main conceptual vehicle that we bring into dialogue with Seesjärvi’s practice. This is the concept of intra-action, famously launched by philosopher of science and feminist new materialist theorist Karen Barad (2003; 2007). We focus on the question of materialities in Seesjärvi’s activities by asking how his artistry and perhaps the music-cultural field of classical singing more generally prompt important insights into *the co-formations of body, voice and sex/gender in trans ways of being*. How do material, cultural and discursive aspects affect one another, and thus co-constitute trans processes and modes of existing in these voice practices? To put this otherwise and in Barad’s terms, how do these aspects intra-act? How can new materialist ideas concerning the emergent, instead of passive or predictable, character of matter, and the mutually related occurrence of material and other phenomena (e.g. Barad 2007: 33, 58, 139, 308-309), advance understandings of materiality, voice and sex/gender in artistic endeavours, and in trans and music studies?

Toward trans-becomings?

In trans studies, social constructionist ideas of gender as a phenomenon that is always conditioned by socio-culturally specific possibilities of expression instead of resulting automatically from anatomy and biology have influenced discussions since the 1990s. However, during the 2000s several commentators began to emphasize that the experiences of trans people do not fit easily within social constructionist models of understanding. This is because, as researchers discovered, the very materiality of the body and bodily experiences matter in various ways to trans persons (see e.g. Rubin 2003; Salamon 2010). There has consequently been increasing focus on the lived and varying materialities of trans bodies and lives, even from new materialist vantage points (e.g. Hayward 2008 & 2010; Vaccaro 2010; Barad 2015; Simpkins 2016; van Midde 2016). However, up to now these projects have not

concentrated on the significances of voice or vocal arts in trans existence. In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in trans perspectives within music studies (e.g. Whitehead-Pleaux et al. 2012; Välimäki 2013a & 2013b; Sunden 2015; Bartolome 2016). Yet these perspectives have not figured prominently in studies of voice (see, however, Constransis 2008; Seesjärvi 2015). Moreover, music researchers working within trans studies have not, to date, elaborated upon new materialist ways of thinking (on development of new materialist ideas in other areas of voice and music studies, see Tiainen 2008 & 2013; Leppänen 2011 & 2017; Neumark 2017; Thompson & Tiainen 2017).

Against this backdrop of previous research, we consider as significant the extent to which the roles of vivid, that is, perceptibly acting and reacting, materiality (see e.g. Coole & Frost 2010: 7-15; Kontturi 2014) came to the fore in Seesjärvi's experiences of his vocal artistry during our research collaboration. This pertained especially to materialities of the human body. It is this realization that leads us to propose western 'classical' singing as an interesting milieu for the relation-bound materiality, and new materialist study, of trans modes of being. As shall be illustrated in the next sections, the concept of intra-action is of help in interrogating Seesjärvi's experiences, in particular the question concerning the co-formations of body, voice and sex/gender. What Karen Barad has sought to grasp with this concept is the way that all kinds of phenomena take shape – or keep emerging – in mutually influencing relations. These relations vary across time and according to the given context, occasion and participants. The encompassing idea of intra-action is, at any rate, that no mode of being can be regarded as ontologically pre-given prior to its relations: “agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense” (Barad 2007: 33). Because of its emphasis on the ongoing relationality of material, discursive and other types of elements, the concept of intra-action provides a fruitful starting point for exploring the specificity, dynamism and complexity of trans ways of being, including the material aspects of trans singers' bodies and voices.

As a hypothesis, we propose that when conceived intra-actively, trans existence appears as trans-becomings. It consists of constant actualizations of experience, capacities to act, and senses of self, whose nature depends on the relations through which the trans person in question exists and has previously existed. Simultaneously, trans-becomings remain open-ended even in the case of each person - singer or otherwise - because they inevitably participate in varying intra-actions.

This exposition has been crafted through intra-actions between one voice artist and two music researchers. We began the process by listening to recordings of Seesjärvi's music-making and by discussing his artistic experiences with him. During these conversations there emerged a focus on the intra-actions of singing voice, body and sex/gender. Thereafter, Seesjärvi elaborated on these conversations by producing written reflections on his singing and identity. Parts of these reflections figure within the exposition and participate in forming its findings and argument. Leppänen and Tiainen consequently engaged with and analyzed the joint discussions and Seesjärvi's reflections, while Seesjärvi commented on several versions of the emerging analysis in turn. The final configuration of the exposition has been assembled on the basis of intra-actions between the three authors' views on the analysis, and by encouraging intra-action among the involved sonic, textual and conceptual elements at the level of listener-readers' experiences and thinking.

Matter-culture intra-actions and classical singing as an apparatus of sex/gender

Western ‘classical’ vocal tradition is a specific way of putting bodies and voices to work and configuring them in relation to sex/gender. On the one hand, this music culture includes firmly gendered classifications and norms concerning vocal sound. The voice types of classical singing range from soprano, mezzo soprano and alto with their various sub-categories to differently defined tenor, baritone and bass voices. As such, voices - and, by extension, many of the repertoires and stage roles associated with them - are divided into male and female vocalities according to a binary gender system (see e.g. Clément 2000; Tiainen 2005: 163-166). Demian Seesjärvi’s current voice type, (lyric) baritone, is one sub-category for male singers within the intricate, but ultimately dualistically gendered, categorizing system of classically trained voices.

On the other hand, feminist and queer music researchers have also perceived subversive aspects in western ‘classical’ singing with regard to relations between body, voice and sex/gender. Evident examples would include the display of physical force, wide vocal range and technical virtuosity in the case of many female-identified singers, and the impressions of delicateness related to falsetto sound in the case of some male singers. Also the listening of classical voices, which vary internally in terms of register, timbre, volume and the voice’s connections to the body (for instance through alternation between head and chest sound), has sometimes been theorized as a process that unsettles established views of what bodies/voices assigned as female or male can do, and what material and social forms sex/gender may assume (e.g. Dame 2006; Wood 2006).

In our conversations with him, Seesjärvi recounted in rich and nuanced detail how he has experienced the bodily and vocal transformations related to his sex/gender re-affirmation process vis-a-vis his training in classical singing. Because a carefully trained voice is Seesjärvi’s most important resource as a professional vocal performer and voice pedagogue, planning the sex/gender re-affirmation process, which inevitably transforms also the body-voice relations, felt frightening to him. Seesjärvi was afraid that he would lose his voice, which had come to encompass specific capacities through meticulous practising in the classical vocal tradition. Against this background, it is interesting to begin the closer consideration of the transforming and interconnected materialities of Seesjärvi’s body and voice by attending to **our second sound sample** and to Seesjärvi’s account of this performance. The sample contains his rendition, back in 2011, of “Erlkönig”, the famous lied composed by Franz Schubert in 1815. Seesjärvi gave this performance before the medical aspects of his sex/gender re-assignment process had begun. In **his adjacent reminiscences** of the performance, Seesjärvi recounts how the approaching affirmation of his identity as a man, but also the mental or psycho-physiological stress he was experiencing while waiting for the diagnosis needed to begin that process, affected his bodily-vocal performance of “Erlkönig”. On the one hand, this impact happened through the chest binder and the male-coded clothes that he was wearing when performing. On the other hand, it materialized in relation to the feelings of distress and pain, which he deliberately allowed to influence the physical and sensorily perceived states of his body and the attendant tones of his voice during the performance.

Seesjärvi’s true sense of self was thus already present in his rendition of “Erlkönig” within the intra-actions, that is, co-constitutive relations between his singing body - its breathing, appearance and interpretive movements - and his voice. However, at the audible level many

listeners may still identify the voice heard within the attached sample as female in so far as our perceptual habits pertaining to voices and bodies are heavily conditioned on a binary logic of sex/gender. When Seesjärvi consequently entered the actual sex/gender re-affirmation process, this began to generate profound changes in the material features and workings of his body, and in its lived interrelationships with his voice. In **the adjacent passage**, Seesjärvi describes how he perceived these changes. He also discusses his experience of his current newly forming singing voice.

Seesjärvi underlines that while entering into the sex/gender re-affirmation process was indispensable for him so that his body would develop such material features that would align with his experience of his sex/gender, the transformation was also difficult both physically and emotionally. This was emphatically the case with regard to his activities as singer. The difficulty Seesjärvi discusses relates no doubt partly to the rigorous singing-technical and aesthetic standards concerning voice production in the modern-day culture of 'classical' singing (see e.g. Potter 1998: 47-67; Cusick 1999: 30). According to our interpretation, another notable factor is that in the western 'classical' tradition, the voice type with which a singer has been associated is usually thought of as fairly fixed. The classification of a singer's voice is based mainly on its range, but also on its timbre and tessitura. It is not unusual that when singers age and their voices 'mature', they might start to sing repertoires linked to a voice type that differs from their previous one. However, this transition is normatively thought of as unfolding over many years. For Seesjärvi, it was fast and dramatic.

Elaborating on the concept of intra-action, we propose that the intra-actions of the shifting matter of Seesjärvi's body - for instance, his changing larynx - with the vocal categories and aesthetic norms of classical singing give his experiences of sex/gender re-affirmation and of the materialities of trans existence a unique dimension. The experiences of trans men and women are always contextually specific. Nonetheless, the aesthetic requirements and voice type logic of classical singing may well have guided Seesjärvi to perceive the transforming workings of his body and voice with such care that would not have materialized in some other field of practice. One outcome of these material-cultural intra-actions may have been a distinctive sense of difficulty, even anxiety.

Applying Karen Barad's notion of the apparatus, feminist new materialist theorist Sari Irni (2013: 48-49) argues that the effects of sex hormones become always knowable within particular apparatuses. Put succinctly, Barad (e.g. 2007: 127-128, 141-146) understands apparatuses as different means of perceiving and giving meaning to the things and phenomena we encounter in the world. Apparatuses include particular material infrastructures, technologies, and related techniques or practices of perception and inspection. However, there are always also specific discourses, concepts and socio-political aims embedded or implicated in a given apparatus. Instead of ensembles of investigative instruments in a narrow sense, apparatuses comprise material and discursive practices of knowing that operate in intra-action with the perceived forms of being. This notion helps in understanding how the effects of sex hormones in Seesjärvi's body and his experiential knowledge thereof have emerged (among other contexts) within his practising of 'classical' singing. This tradition's bodily techniques of producing and feeling sound, ways of carefully distinguishing between aesthetically desirable and unwanted sounds, and gendered vocal norms could be considered as one apparatus of knowing bodies, voices and trans selves.

In bringing up the notion of the apparatus we do not aim to belittle the real challenges Seesjärvi has faced as a vocal practitioner. We do not intend to bypass the ambivalent feelings he describes or the temporal complexity involved in his occasional longing for his previous singing voice. Rather, the perspective we are proposing here provides one means of understanding trans ways of being as interminably varying and context-dependent movements of trans-becoming. For trans scholar Eva Hayward (2010: 226), trans-becoming means “an emergence of a material, psychical, sensual, and social self through corporeal, spatial, and temporal processes that trans-form the lived body.”

This approach is meant to supplement understandings of transsexuality as a psychological condition, a purely sociological production, or even as some biological imperative. Without disputing the significance of these other registers of interpretation, trans-becoming draws attention to the open-ended expressiveness and relations of trans-bodies. (Hayward 2010, 226.) It is this kind of expressiveness that can be seen to take shape in specific ways in the intra-actions among Seesjärvi’s body, vocality, artist and gender identity, and classical singing.

From multiple material agencies to trans as molar and molecular processes

The sex/gender re-affirmation process differs from other kinds of changes of voice type because it so considerably transforms the size, texture and functioning of singing bodies’ several parts and organs, such as larynx and vocal cords, which directly participate in voice production. Because of these changes, also glottis, the opening between the vocal cords, transforms. Material and physiological changes in these organs during a sex/gender re-affirmation are fast and prominent in comparison to modifications of the vocal apparatus related for example to ageing or to transmutations of voice-technical skill.

Notably, Seesjärvi points out in **his adjacent reflection** that the material processes and practices of (‘classical’) singing and the ensuing vocal qualities do not indisputably comply with discursively formed voice categories that follow binary understandings of gender. In our interview, he described how his body in effect differs from cis men’s bodies in relation to singing. Seesjärvi emphasized that although the material specificities of a trans body are processual and modulable through music-cultural technique, they cannot be shaped in any way whatsoever. Bodily specificity also resists manipulation and for its part shapes ways of singing. According to Seesjärvi, the material particularities of his body actively contribute to his identities as a trans man, singer, and performer.

Seesjärvi’s account of how the materialities of his body - and voice - make their mark on his vocal practice, the sung tones, and senses of (trans) self can be associated with new materialist, relational views of agency. Crucially, these views extend the nature and scope of agency beyond the traditional figure of willful and putatively self-directed human individual. They accord agency to any such element or human and non-human process that is able to impact on other elements or the outcome of an event in intra-action with other things. (E.g. Bennett 2010: 1-38; Tiainen, Hongisto & Kontturi 2015.) Resonating with this idea, Seesjärvi’s highlights how the larynx bones, expanding vocal cords, glottis sizes, and other material features of trans men’s bodies have agentic capacity to affect the voices of trans male singers such as himself. These features are not just the object of knowledge, hormonal interventions or singing-technical molding. They have actively influenced his possibilities of

negotiating and gradually acquiring a new voice and performer identity. Considered intra-actively, the body parts and processes whose effectiveness Seesjärvi's has felt appear as multiple material agencies that partake in determining what a trans male body and masculinity can be or do within a specific music-cultural and artistic practice.

Importantly, resonating ideas of the material and experiential specificity of trans male identity can be perceived in the concept of authenticity that is central to Seesjärvi's Master's thesis *Finding An Authentic Voice and Self-expression: Transmales' Voice Change as a Psychophysiological Experience* (2015, in Finnish "Kohti autenttista ääntä ja itseilmaisua. Transmiesten äänenmuutos psykofyysisenä kokemuksena"). In the thesis, Seesjärvi provides a multi-faceted definition of authenticity. On the one hand, he refers with it to the courage of putting vocally forth that which one perceives as significant in one's own gender identity (Seesjärvi 2015: 15). We interpret this postulation to mean that one should work toward such a voice and its bodily production processes that are consistent with one's personal, and hence true, experience of one's gender rather than primarily with the sex/gender that one has been assigned at birth (or within culture and society more generally). On the other hand, Seesjärvi (ibid. 27) also posits that what makes (vocal) action authentic is that one's expressions and experiences do not have to comply with the prevalent understandings of sex/gender. In our view, this latter aspect of authenticity refers to, or affirms, the material specificities and agencies of trans men's bodies, which may be discerned for example in their singing and which may well differ from cis men's corporealities and modes of expression.

What is also noteworthy in Seesjärvi's reflections under discussion in relation to the agency of materialities and the latter dimension of authenticity, is that on the one hand, he identifies as a man, a male singer. On the other hand, he accentuates that his bodily materiality and voice do not conform to binary gender categorizations based on a cis assumption. They involve characteristics that overflow this dominant logic. In this sense, they point to the logic's inadequacy in accounting for the multiple realities of sex/gender within trans lives (and also to an extent within cis lives).

With respect to this aspect of Seesjärvi's views, we propose that the intra-actions of his voice, body and sex/gender could be approached with two significant concepts in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophy, molar and molecular. Molar structures, entities and politics, such as the cis-based dualism of gender, work at the level of binary machines. These divide people into large-scale, often oppositional and asymmetrically valued identity categories: sexes, genders, races, nations and age groups. (Deleuze & Parnet 2002: 128.) Molecular processes, on the other hand, encompass diversities and variations of bodies, capacities and identifications. These variations appear both between and within agents. Through this variability, they challenge the tenability of reductive binary machines. (See e.g. Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 210-232.) Describing himself as a man is a central and irrepressible part of Seesjärvi's gender experience and identity. At the same time, it also seems important for him to acknowledge the variations of his body and voice related to the sex/gender re-affirmation process which diverge from simple sex/gender binaries. This latter aspect could be thought of as manifesting the molecular dimensions of sex/gender. From a molecular perspective, it is consequently possible to think that such vocalities as an "altoish bass voice" or a trans-specific lyric baritone, which challenge cis-binaries of sex/gender, take place "outside or beyond the fixity of subjectivity and the structure of stable unities" (del Río 2008: 115).

To emphasize once more the indispensable, intra-active dependence of our propositions on Seesjärvi's art and words, let us refer to our final, **third sound sample** and to Seesjärvi's comments thereof. The sample is a recording of Seesjärvi's performance of "In der Fremde", the well-known lied composed by Robert Schumann in 1840. In his **neighbouring description** of the sample, Seesjärvi beautifully summarizes and takes pride in his "own voice": in the transformations and irreducible specificity of his body, new baritone vocality, and identity. Among other things, this body, voice and identity are vividly and relationally material.

Postlude

We began this exposition with an impetus to inquire how materialities matter a great deal in the unfolding of trans ways of being and selves, and how vocal art and especially the culture of western 'classical' singing might constitute significant milieus for researching this question. Inspired by our collaboration with Demian Seesjärvi, we wanted to focus in particular on the co-formative relations between body, voice and sex/gender in his singing practice, and on how his artistry and attendant reflections might converse, in turn, with the concept of intra-action inaugurated by Karen Barad.

In relation to these foci and aims, the present exploration has helped us to discover that in Seesjärvi's sex/gender re-affirmation process toward his male identity, his singing body and voice are in constant intra-action with each other as well as with a variety of other elements. The latter include hormones, singing-technical skills and habits, and the distinctive vocal aesthetics and conceptualizations endemic to 'classical' singing. Overall, Seesjärvi's artistic practice consists of intra-actions between at least the following components: gender-coded norms, aesthetics of western 'classical' singing, gendered voice types, the procedures and knowledge systems of western medicine (including the deployment of sex hormones) - and the specific materialities, sensations and changes of his body and voice.

There is a broader conclusion that can be drawn from this finding, which is of relevance to voice art practices as well as to trans studies of music. This conclusion is that a (human) body's and voice's lively materialities, and their intra-actions with various cultural, scientific and discursive practices, significantly influence the formation of sexes, genders and identities, here especially trans identities. These materialities are an irrevocable part of the context-specific and relation-bound actualizations of trans existence - of trans-becomings.

The conventional voice type categorizations of western 'classical' singing are distinctly rigid in terms of sex/gender. As such, they reinforce molar and cis-based understandings of sexed and gendered being. However, the voice/body/sex/gender intra-actions of Seesjärvi's vocal artistry can also be perceived from perspectives that complement and challenge this normative aspect. Indeed, we propose that Seesjärvi's search for new body-voice intra-actions in relation to the sex/gender reaffirmation process can also be approached in enabling terms. It can be conceived of as a journey that has expanded - and is still expanding - his experiences and knowledge of what his body, voice and gender may become, well beyond the expected.

As Seesjärvi has described, the changes of voice during the hormone treatment are unpredictable: it is not possible to foretell how particular bodily materialities involved in voice production will intra-act with the hormones. These molecular becomings of bodies' materialities within sex/gender reassignment processes, exemplified for instance by the alto-like voices developed by some trans male singers, do not necessarily comply with established binary categorizations of sex/gender. While Seesjärvi identifies as a man, a male singer with the prefix trans, molar classifications of being and molecular becomings constantly intra-act within his artistic practice.

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