

## Kate Lebo

### Ways of Singing

#### LISTENING IN

My ways of hearing have always been different. A problem with sound conduction, my doctors say. Over the years, medical explanations for what's wrong multiplied until they lost the power to explain. Not ossified hearing bones, nor a withered stapes, nor a collapsed eardrum, nor superior canal dehiscence, though I have all those things. By now I've lived with hearing loss so long, I don't think of it as a loss until I think about my son. Will he inherit how I hear? It's too soon to tell.

Via viscera and bone, my unborn baby listens as I laugh with his father or talk to myself or haul my big belly off the couch; via ultrasound and stethoscope, I listen to my baby's cohering body. At each doctor's appointment, I hear his heart. And always that spike of fear right before the doctor's wand touches me—*will I* hear it? When we take a childbirth class, the teacher commands each father to make his voice known. "Dads!" she shouts, "I want you to talk! To your babies! If you talk to your babies every day, they will recognize your voice after they're born!" She says she will know who did as they were told by what happens when Dad walks into the hospital nursery: at the sound of his voice, his baby will turn to face him. She's so emphatic, I worry she may drop in on our son's birth to check Sam's work.

The way our son hears my voice from the womb is, I imagine, the closest he'll come to hearing it the way I do, as a sound that starts with an intake of breath, which he may feel as a physical and audible wave—my diaphragm and lungs expanding above him, plus an inrush-whoosh of air that exits my body with streams of vibrations that shake my chest, throat, sinuses, forehead, ears, and skull. I pitch my voice so I feel physically comfortable with the act of speaking and not annoyed by how I sound. Which is not to say I pitch my voice consciously. Few of us do.

After our son's birth, we will wrap him close to our bodies so he can hear the thrum of our hearts and the pulse of our voices. We will listen for his cries and use them to decipher his most basic needs. He is Sam's third child, so Sam may already understand his language. But he is my first. I will listen hard, so I can learn.

#### HOW TO FAIL A HEARING TEST

In August, during the first year of the COVID pandemic but before wildfires

choke our home with smoke, requiring quarantine upon quarantine, my stepson, Paul, joins us for dinner on our back porch. After dessert, he plays a recording of a Danish black metal band that he loves. The song starts with a puff of static that deepens into a marine layer of white noise. Then a set of organized sounds slowly emerges. They seem to splash at the surface of the noise, defying my attempts to categorize them as human, instrument, or computer, before diving back down to inaudible depths. Trying to catch that part of the music feels like trying to catch his baby brother's foot as it kicks the interior of my stomach and retreats into the bathysphere of my body.

But even more than that, the song sounds, to me, like a hearing test.

When I say this out loud, Paul pitches forward in a swoop of frustration and reaches for his iPhone to turn it off.

“No, leave it!” I say. “Sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

Clearly, “this sounds like a hearing test” is not a ringing endorsement for any kind of music. That I am comparing unfamiliar sounds to something familiar so I might better hear what makes them music doesn’t matter. My job is not to understand the music. Paul does not need us to like what we hear. He just wants to show us, during this bleak and bizarre summer in which we cannot eat together inside or hug, what sort of sounds have the power to reach out and grab him.

### **BORROWING VOICES**

The cast of Tony’s community radio play had plenty of higher and mid-tone female voices, but he’d lost his contralto. If I would join them, I could add a little “fruity gravel,” as Tony called my speaking voice, to help balance the cast’s range. All I can do, I warned him, is myself. No accents. No singing. No voices other than my own. No matter what role you give me, what you hear right now is what you’ll get.

I enjoy making these recordings. We sit around a long table in a high-windowed room at the top of the old firehouse that now houses Spokane Public Radio, give the play a once-through, then cram into the recording booth downstairs. Some cast members are actors, but most are people like me, just amateurs from around town whose voices Tony would like to borrow. We meet on Saturday mornings, when I’m usually in bed drinking coffee and reading a novel. The pleasure of being with these people as we pretend to be the voices of other people is different from what I feel reading a novel, but not totally different.

I do not enjoy listening to these recordings. I hate hearing my own voice reproduced by a sound system and shot into my body from the outside. I would pay money to never again hear how far up inside my nose my voice can sound. The worst, though, happens not with these radio plays, but if I listen to recorded interviews of myself. My piled-up half-phrases and sonic dips of sincerity as I try to sound convincing even if I can’t quite find the words are, to my ear, fake. They are an echo of what I hear while being interviewed, where trying to find the right words can feel like eavesdropping on myself. As I speak, another part

of me listens, monitors, critiques. Was that a worthy idea, properly phrased in a likeable tone? I am real, but I am performing. I want the sound of my words to please. I overcorrect, clam up, ramble, swerve. Via recordings, I re-experience the dissonance of that effort. Via recordings, what was a conversation becomes, to my ear, a self-portrait. Vanity deafens me to anything but how I sound.

### **SOMEWHERE OVER THE VOCAL RANGE**

Soon after I joined the radio play, Tony emailed the cast some links to exercises that would combat vocal fry, a phenomenon that occurs when a person speaks at the lower parts of their register, causing the voice to pop or creak. The links brought me to a YouTube video and digital keyboard I could use to determine the breadth of my own vocal range and thus which notes should be most comfortable for me to use as I speak.

Most people's vocal ranges, according to the video, are an octave plus two notes. (To hear this average range, sing the octave leap of "some—where" from "Over the Rainbow." Start at the very bottom of your vocal range, then sing up the scale two more notes.) The more comfortable speaking notes lie in the middle of this range. I play the fake piano by clicking on key-shapes, matching my vocal tone to each midi note. I have, as I suspected, a shorter vocal range than most—only seven notes. Not even an octave. Next, I try to match my natural speaking tones—the notes I'm most accustomed to hearing from myself—to the keys. I discover something else I've long suspected: I'm most comfortable speaking at the lowest part of my range. Otherwise known as the land of vocal fry.

We do have a little control over how we sound. Not to others, but to ourselves. My voice is largely an inheritance from my mother's side; all my female cousins, my aunts, my mother, and my grandmother have low voices. When a poetry teacher wrote an inappropriate ode to me in my junior year of college, he included a stanza about Lauren Bacall's voice and how I was too young to know who she was (I wasn't). I do not pitch my voice low on purpose, but I do think a low voice sounds smarter. And I do want to sound smart.

Sometimes, to be heard in a crowded room, I'll pitch my voice higher so it emerges from the wash of lower tones that submerge it. This feels ridiculous, like a helium voice. The effort requires extra air and quickly tires me out. I can feel vocal tones rattle through my palate and forehead and sinuses like a telephone ringing, the old kind that hummed through its plastic case a few seconds after the actual ring stopped. The sound makes me feel stupid. But then I see people turn toward me as I speak, and I feel heard.

### **TO BE A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT**

The only moments of *Glitter* that feel alive are the moments when Mariah Carey sings. This isn't a surprise. I already know that Mariah's voice can lift me from my seat—her voice is the whole reason I'll watch this dumb movie. As an actress,

Mariah's main expressions are a sad face, a happy face, her wardrobe, and dialogue so wooden I don't bother to put subtitles on. What I'm watching is not actually a movie. It is a vehicle that drives Mariah's alter ego Billie from obscurity to fame, occasionally stopping for what we really want: the thrill of her voice. It's like Billie can't catch up with Mariah unless she's singing.

In *Glitter* and in music videos, Mariah appears to dance, but she mostly only grooves with her upper body while dancers spin around her. When Mariah must truly move, gorgeous men pick her up and carry her on their shoulders or lift her into a fabulous convertible or place her on a floating pedestal. They treat her like a precious instrument made of material so dense she cannot move herself, all while giving the impression that Mariah is the author of this commotion. Mostly, she is not. She is the eye of a choreographed storm.

Which is exactly how I imagine what it's like to be her voice as it emerges from her body—pure exhalation encased in glittery tumult.

And why, when I saw her in concert during her Las Vegas residency in 2016, I wore a dress of blue glitter and danced in one small place and threw up my arms and made joyful noises and could not stop asking my friends, "Do you see this? Can you believe this?"

I did not ask if they could believe what they were *hearing*. We all know a siren when we hear one.

Nor could I stop myself from supplying the answers to my own questions.

"She's real!" I kept saying. "She's real!"

What is it like to have a body that's also an exquisite musical instrument? What does it feel like to hit notes like Mariah does, like she's smashing them into God? I mean how does it feel deep inside—in the spine, guts, lungs, and throat, all the way up to what Frank Sinatra called the mask, the bones of the face? What does it feel like to have music like Mariah Carey's *erupt out of your face*?

### **MOUTHING THE WORDS**

That night at the Mariah concert in Las Vegas, I did not sing along. Not because I have a bad singing voice (I do) and not because I don't know her hits well enough to join in (I do). I did not sing because minute malformations of my skull would make the sound crash into my hearing organs at a louder volume than Mariah's. If I sang, I wouldn't hear her over my own notes.

Instead, I imagined with my body what the music felt like, singing along not by trying to make Mariah's sounds, but by fitting my mouth silently around her lyrics, synching and dancing, using everything but vocal chords to channel what I imagined she might feel, sheathed in her sparkling gown with a special matching pocket for her wireless mic, belting songs she's been belting since I was old enough to operate my own cassette player. The strength and physicality of that sound. The joy of five octaves—at least forty notes! When I imagine her voice, I can feel that thought in my chest and throat, expanding like a cheer.

Today I am eight months pregnant. When my son kicks, I lay a palm on my belly. I shake him a little, say, “Hi, hi baby,” in case he cannot feel the pressure of my hand. My cat climbs my shoulder and nudges my head with hers. As our skulls connect and soundwaves leap from bone to bone, tiny hairs within my cochlea perk to the sound of her purr.

This, too, is a way of hearing. Our bones transmit frequencies better than air does, which makes our voices sound lower and more ample to ourselves than they sound in played-back recordings. This is true for everyone who speaks and hears, but especially for people with conductive hearing loss. People like me. And, if my genetics repeat themselves, people like my son.

After he’s born, when I don’t know how to soothe him, I’ll sing even though I say I can’t sing. Lullabies, folksongs, TV jingles, radio hits. The music will be there, waiting for me. The words won’t matter. If Sam’s downstairs, he’ll hear me in the baby monitor, off-key no matter what. Within my singing, he will hear the baby settle down. The quiet will mean Cy is listening. ■