

John Nix interviewed by Paul M. Patinka
December 14, 2020

Paul Patinka: So, our first question is, can you tell us a little about some of the projects either you're currently working on, maybe some you just finished off, or maybe some you're starting? Just what you've got going on right now.

John Nix: Sure. Well, I have—I could turn the camera over that way. And, on the guestroom bed are piles of research papers and books and things. Two articles that are long overdue. The one that Sarah Miga and I did on the manually occluded vocal tract posture. I'm hoping over Christmas break I'll get that done. It's all outlined. And there's one on vocal fry that Whitney Chappell and Mackenzie Powell. Whitney is in linguistics here at UTSA and Mackenzie is a 2016 graduate of UTSA in performance and ped. And so that one's a vocal fry thing that we did looking at people's perc—Well, we had a questionnaire that they did, and we had them read the Rainbow Passage, and then they did this questionnaire. They were listening to singers who were and were and were not using vocal fry. We did a matched guise experiment where they recorded them with the vocal fry, you know, like they would do: "and I," you know, they would do a little creaky onset and things like that. And, we had the master recording with them doing that. And, then I went in, and I shaved the vocal fry off and having people listen to those and rate those on this questionnaire, and then they read the Rainbow Passage again. And we looked at whether the percentage of vocal fry in their speech changed after having sat there and listened to people use vocal fry singing in kind of a pop style. And we presented that at the Voice Foundation in 2019. You were there for that. And just haven't gotten the article written. So that the Voice Foundation does not completely hate me I think I need to probably get those done.

And, then I have a little small thing that my wife and I did where we were the subjects. This was, "well what can you do in the midst of COVID" kind of thing, and we tried out two different masks. A disposable mask that was, like, the number one seller on Amazon at the time. And, then a cloth mask which was the number one cloth mask at the time back when we bought these in the summer. And we went in and we sang with and sang without. And so, have a little experiment that I've almost finished analyzing the data on for that. And, then there's this straw phonation study, which was kind of a parallel to the manually occluded vocal tract one. And, I have all the data and I just—you know, finding the time to analyze the data and write things up. The number of experiments done versus the number of experiments published is—everybody will tell you that's kind of a tricky thing. And, I mean, I'm picking rep for my students for next semester and, you know, trying to stay out of trouble.

PP: You could say you're pretty busy.

JN: Pretty busy. Oh, and I'm working—the Journal of Singing. Sorry, the NATS Voice Science Advisory Committee. I'm co-chair. I could remember how it's called. David Meyer and I are finishing up some stuff on an article. We have a series of three articles, the first of which is just coming out. Just came out, I think. No. Just coming out in January. That the committee has written of no-tech and then low-tech and then high-tech things for voice teachers, so that was a series of three articles. Those are going to be appearing in Scott McCoy's pedagogy column. And we're finishing up the work on the third one. So, the first two, the first one is going to be published there in January. And, then I was the lead person and David, and Ron Scherer and D.D. Michael were coauthors with me on the second one, which will come out in March, and then the third one will come out in May-June.

PP: You do a lot of collaboration with students, too, right?

JN: Yes. Yes, exactly. I wanted to mention Julieta Garcia-Reyes has got a project going on right now about teaching voice with people who have physical handicaps. And so, she—it's been a—online survey, because, again, doing lab measurements in a sound booth, that's probably not going to happen with COVID. So anyway, but this is something she feels very passionate about. And a survey of teacher's attitudes towards working with people with disabilities, and then also looking at their training in teaching people with disabilities, and then the accessibility of their facilities to people with disabilities. So, I'm learning a lot from her. She's really passionate about it. And I mean, I've related, you know, some of my stories of working with someone who had cerebral palsy, and a student who was born with a cleft palate and had surgical and, you know, restoration, and working with a student who is legally blind. And, you know, just how I was not prepared through pedagogy courses that I took to work with that population and how I had to really just learn on the fly. Which seems to be a lot of what I've done in my life. That's how I've learned about statistics. You know, it's like, oh, OK, well, I need to learn how to do that, so.

PP: Yeah, that's awesome! And I think one of the things I've always loved about you is how collaborative you are with other people and students. And I think almost all the projects that you just mentioned were with other people, which is—I mean, it's really inspiring to see because there's never enough of that, you know?

JN: Oh, well, no one's an expert on everything. I mean, you want to find smart people who have great ideas, and you work with them, and you bring what you have, and you learn from them. So that's what it's all about.

PP: Yeah. And, you know, something we've talked about before, you know, on our own is you tend to sort of like go into a lot of different topics. And, I was wondering, where do you find, sort of, the inspiration to probe into all these things? What sort of drives your research questions?

JN: Well, I've been interested in vibrato for a very long time, and I've, you know, published a lot of that. And I've always been interested in the semi included postures and I've written a good bit about that. So, I mean, those are some common threads that you see through a lot of these things. The vocal fry was something that Mackenzie was very interested in as a graduate student and that led us into her work, which landed us on Science Friday, which is kind of cool. And, then to, you know, these two other presentations and one of them has

been published and that all kind of came from, again, just a collaboration with a student and then finding a colleague on campus who was very interested in that. You know, the paper that you and I did together. Was your project. And that was the vibrato based. Sometimes it's just a curiosity. You know, I've gotten really curious about motor learning. And so, I read up a lot on that. I think something that's really helped foster my curiosity about, you know, just kind of a wide variety of singing-voice related topics is the work on the Oxford books, because getting to work with people who are experts in these sub-areas of the greater vocal pedagogy kind of world, kind of whets your appetite for "hmm I think I'd like to look at that some more" or "how does that relate to what I do, teaching primarily Western classical and musical theater kind of students."

PP: Yeah, absolutely, and those were very large projects, I can imagine, to have worked on. So, there's lots of little nuggets in there to get curious about.

JN: Yeah, I mean, I'm staring at the book, it's over on my table right here, and I was flipping through it looking for something just last night. And, realizing I read every single word in this book, you know? In fact, I edited every word in this book, you know, that just absolutely blows my mind that I did that much work on something. So, anyway!

PP: Thank you for doing that work, because I know we all appreciate it. I use that book as a reference a lot.

JN: And it's great as a doorstep too!

PP: It's certainly big enough.

JN: Or building the bicep up to, you know?

PP: You can do a little corona workout with it, right?

PP: What about vocalization fascinates or inspires you the most? I know we started to touch briefly on the vibrato thing, but what is it that maybe sort of drew you into doing what you do?

JN: I saw Pavarotti on *The Tonight Show* the summer before my senior year in high school, and I had been a pianist for years and years and years. Well, okay, I was 16 at the time. So about 12 years. And, I just really thought, that is so cool. I want to learn how to do that. And, then I did. And, of course, I was always drawn—I started college as pre-med, and I was going to go into sports medicine, and I guess I kind of did end up being involved in, you know, sports medicine and exercise physiology, but just related to something artistic, which is singing. So, you know, I've always found myself kind of drawn in these two directions of the artistic and the scientific. And, singing is a great way to kind of meld those two interests. I'm a person who's very much a believer in, you know, "let the facts drive what we do," whether it's the environment or politics, which is—we're not going to go there. But, you know, very much as the NATS chat last night was, you know, evidence-based pedagogy. And, encountering Barbara Doscher during college and seeing this whole world of really evidence-based voice teaching really drew me in because that was a way to tie my love of the performing arts and the music that moved me on a spiritual, emotional level, and visceral level, and my interest in the science and how things work. And. My own personal struggles just you know—it hasn't always been the easiest

road. I wasn't one of those just magic, "here: everything's going to work for you" kind of singers. So, I was just practicing right before we started this call. So, there you go.

PP: And, so if you had to pick, like, something a little nugget within all that, what about vocalization, sort of fascinates you or what aspect of it maybe are you most curious about?

JN: I think, you know, voice acoustics has always been probably the thing that's really excited me. Because that was the thing that, that understanding of voice acoustics was what made such a difference for me when I started working with Doscher and just; "Oh! So, if I know this stuff about vowels that I can make the whole thing work a whole lot easier." That was just like a ray of sunshine just going "bing!" you know. So, I think that's—in terms of the, you know, if we're talking about the Vocology kind of thing, I think that was the thing that really drew me in. You know, was this the fact that, you know, I mean, I was always interested in anatomy and physiology, how things work and stuff. But the acoustic information and how that could help you with bridging registers, and having an even sound, and being able to acquire a professionally acceptable sound, a marketable sound, you know. And the difference that it started to make when I started applying that to working with people. Other people. That it wasn't just, "OK, well, this thing works for me," but, you know, or "from my own personal experience." But these were some guiding principles that really have an impact on everybody. So, yeah.

PP: And that was in the NATS chat last night too that was highlighted quite a bit was the acoustic and all the different variants of acoustics as well. But the need for understanding acoustics to really be—Yeah, to be a well-rounded teacher I think is really important.

Yeah, that's awesome! What excites you most about being a member of PAVA? And then how does PAVA fit into your overall career trajectory or goals, and I know you've been sort of like a part of many different parties that have all sort of come together to create PAVA. Seeing that it's still fairly new. But first, what excites it, or what excites you the most about PAVA?

JN: I think the way that it brings people from all the related voice disciplines together so that we share the strengths from our own, you know, sub-disciplines. And it's so fascinating to, you know, to talk to people who, you know, they have bachelor's degrees in—I mean, a former UTSA student. Bachelor's degree in voice performance here. And he did a master's in performance and pedagogy at Westminster Choir College. Then he went to Bowling Green and he did a master's in speech pathology. And now he's getting his Ph.D. in voice science. And so, he's kind of been in three worlds, you know, and that kind of eclectic melding of the voice disciplines is what I really think is a real strength of PAVA. I mean, I was literally there at its founding and was—what was I? It wasn't vice president. I was—I forget my title, but for two years, while we were making PAVA, you know, come into being, I was working really closely with Lynn Holding, and Lynn Maxfield, and Ingo, and Eric Hunter, you know, and we really kind of helped birth that baby. And, then I served as vice president for two years in that initial time after—what was it, the October...The October 2015? Oh, no, I guess it was the years prior to that. At any rate, I'm jumbling up my years, but, you know, I obviously feel very passionate about the organization because I wouldn't have invested that kind of time in helping to bring it into existence.

And, certainly, there was some motivation on my part for the singing teachers who've invested, you know, more than just, "okay you know about vocal literature. And you've done lots of recitals." But the people who've really invested in knowing about voice

disorders and implementing the information from voice science in their teaching, that some way to find some kind of a credential to set those people—I wouldn't say set them apart, but to recognize them for that additional knowledge base and experience that they have. And, of course, we, you know, that is coming to fruition now with the PAVA recognized vocologist and so on. So, it's been a long time coming. And I think to get to your second part of your question about how does it fit into my overall career trajectory and stuff. Well, certainly, you know, that was a big part of my professional life at that time, being involved in that and, you know, that was—I was more involved in PAVA in some respects in those years than maybe I was with NATS. And, you know, in the last about four years, I've been on the Voice Science Advisory Committee. I'm the co-chair of that. And I'm on the editorial board of the Journal of Singing that's been in the last couple of years. So, you know, some of my focus's kind of shift over to serving NATS here in, you know, because I felt like, OK, I had dedicated a number of years to PAVA and it was time for some other people with other ideas to come in and do some work.

So, it filled that part of my life of, you know, serving the profession for those years. And, certainly, in terms of just my overall goals and trajectories, I think the people that I encountered in working with PAVA and still, you know, I mean, just the other day, Friday afternoon, we had a meeting. It was me, and Leda Scarce, and Eric Hunter, and Lynn Maxfield, and Lynn Holding. And we were—and Aaron Johnson popped in for part of it—and we're working on building the archive of all the stuff from that early period. So, I think those relationships, working with people on the board and with getting those first meetings off the ground, you know, that was a big part of my life then. And those connections that I made in that time will stay with me for the rest of my career. So. You know, how does it fit into my goals? Well, certainly I would love to see that kind of recognition be available for teachers all over the country and all over the hemisphere. And I certainly would want to be one of the people in line saying, "hey, I would like to be!"

PP: Right.

JN: And I would love to serve to you know, if there's, you know, some mentoring of people coming up. I've done some of that for NATS where, you know, doing some with the NATS mentoring program. Be happy to do that for PAVA as well. So, you know, again, that's just kind of paying the karma bank back for, you know, the help that I've gotten from other people. And I know that leads to your next question.

PP: It does!

JN: Maybe I'll stop right there.

PP: Well, I was going to say, you know, again, you know, knowing you, I think fairly well at this point, your involvement in PAVA totally makes sense to me just because of what a collaborative and mentoring kind of person you are who again likes to look at all these pieces and work with other people and build those relationships, which I think is what PAVA's all about. So, yeah, that's it. It totally makes sense to me that you would be involved at the ground floor working on those things because that's, you know, that's just you. Do you have a mentor in your own field who's like you look up to you and then who is it and why?

JN: Absolutely. I would say first and foremost, it was Barbara Doscher who was my singing teacher, my pedagogy teacher, teaching mentor. She used to just—I would have

questions about students, and she'd say, well, (because I had a graduate assistantship at University of Colorado), and she'd go, "Well, why don't you just bring him in during my lunch on Tuesday? And I'll just sit and watch you teach while I eat my lunch." And, she might say one sentence the whole time. But she'd watch me teach, and be finished, and she'd say, "it's going really well with him. Watch that second vocalise, I think that's a little too difficult for him" or "you might look at this piece, but you're doing a good job." And it was just that reassurance of, you know, that you're getting it. You're getting it. And, so I watched her teach hundreds of times and she watched me teach, oh, I don't know, probably a dozen or more times. And, so obviously, that mentoring for me as a singer and as a teacher was just absolutely fundamental. And I learned so much from her and still think of her every day when I'm practicing or when I'm teaching, you know, there's that little voice in my head that says well "what would Barbara say?" You know, or I find myself saying things, you know, it's like, "oh, yeah, she used to say that."

And then, you know, certainly, for Vocology the line forms behind Ingo. I mean, I worked for Ingo, and I worked with him on the birthing of PAVA, so, you know, he's certainly a huge mentor to me. Starting back in 2000 when I took the Vocology classes with him in the first Summer Vocology Program there, which was in Denver and then hired me. And I worked for the National Center for Voice and Speech for more than four years, which helped me get the job that I'm in now. Because it was that—I mean, that was one of the things they were looking for when they advertised the job that I'm in, which is they wanted to bring that Vocology approach to actually to choral music to—I was hired to kind of head up a DMA or a Ph.D. in choral pedagogy, which was a great idea. And the University of Kansas got there kind of ahead of us because the Coordinating Board for Higher Education in Texas said "we have too many doctorates already. We're not going to." And they stopped it. So that never really happened. But we ended up building a really strong master's program, which you know a lot about.

PP: I do.

JN: Painfully! So, yeah, I think my big mentors certainly would be Barbara Doscher as a teacher and Ingo with the Vocology. And then, along the way, you know, I feel Sten Ternström has you know, in our interactions, we've written, you know, book chapters together, and we just recently published an article together, learned a lot from him. He's just very quiet, you know, gentle guidance and love that about him. And he's so, so smart. And, getting to know people like David Howard and Graham Welch in working on the Oxford Handbook. And, Don Miller, of course, who just recently passed away over the summer in terms of Voce Vista and applying that voice acoustics, technology, and information to teaching. I think a lot of my thinking about voice registers owes a lot to, you know, first my work with Doscher and then the work with Ingo and then, you know, just knowing Don. And, let me think if I can think of anybody else. I mean, people who have, who were peers, as in going through some of the Vocology stuff, who've really, you know, become great colleagues and stuff, you know, Eric Hunter, and Lynn Maxfield, and Lynn Holding, and, you know, just continuing to learn from people who are in this profession. And as I said earlier on, you know, no one's expert at everything. And so, you try to surround yourself, you know, latch on to, bring into your fold, whatever, people who are really knowledgeable about and passionate about different aspects of our field and just learn from them.

PP: Yeah, absolutely. And, again, I think that that totally fits in well with exactly what PAVA is all about. Right? That that collaborative spirit. And it's also lovely to hear you talk about

your mentors. And I always thought this as a student as well, because especially, you know, as somewhat of a younger pedagogue, it helped me sort of trace like where all these ideas come from and then also know that it's not any one person sort of doing everything on their own, but it's—everything is a group collaboration. And, if you are that one person doing everything on your own, you're probably not doing as much as you could be. You know that everything involved with this work with other people in this, this mentorship that, again, you were so good to give me and that you clearly received from so many other people. So, thank you for that. Yeah.

JN: Well, you're welcome, Paul. It was a pleasure. And I continue to learn from you.

PP: And I you, all the time. Well, my last question and you said this is the one that the answer might surprise people, so I've gotta say this is the one I'm most excited for.

JN: OK.

PP: If you had unlimited resources and a year of vacation, what is something fun that you would like to do with that time?

JN: These are the kind of the bucket list things. There's a couple of them. I mean, one of them would be to go to Antarctica. I always thought that would be just fascinating because it's so otherworldly. So, Antarctica would be one. I've always had this kind of yen for a—hike the Appalachian Trail, you know, start in the south in the spring and kind of follow spring going northward. And, of course, I like sleeping in a bed and taking a shower every day. So, I'm not sure how that one's going to work out. That'd be a little glamping rather than camping. And, obviously, Australia and New Zealand have always been real high on my bucket list and traveling there. And, then the last one that's kind of nutty would be—I've always wanted to do, you know, like have a bike and to ride across the United States on a bicycle. Or north or south to north or north to south. Doing something really, you know, physically challenging, you know, kind of on an endurance level, but also, you know, just to kind of see and experience the country in a different way. Now that one, of course, you know, to do it safely, you've got to have probably somebody riding support with you. So, you've got to have somebody in a van, you know, who's got a spare tire, you know, and, you know, that kind of stuff. So, yeah, those are the things I would probably do. They don't have anything to do with singing or Vocology. They're more you either see the world or do something kind of physical.

PP: Yeah. Yeah. I got to see the Antarctica one. That was definitely surprising to me. The biking one I was like "that sounds like Mr. Nix." But Antarctica! How long have you wanted to do that for?

JN: How long have I wanted to go to Antarctica? Oh gosh. A long, long, long time. And it was only fed by—I read Jerri Neilsen's book. She was the physician who was down on the at the Scott Edmundson station over a winter and she discovered that she had breast cancer. You know, and it's her whole story of being trapped there and having to you know, first of all, just adapting to the life there and then having this health crisis in the midst of it. So, yeah, that and one of my father's colleagues went there. He was a painter. My father taught photography and art education at the University of Georgia. And one of his colleagues, Alan Campbell, went to Antarctica. He had a grant, and he went down to Antarctica and he painted.

PP: That's really cool. That had to be so cold, but that's so cool.

JN: Yeah, I'm kind of a cold person. And, right now, I have a student, a grad student who came here from Fairbanks, Alaska. And, so, you know, I've enjoyed talking with her about life in Alaska and winter versus spring and so on. You know, this time of year, you know, she said you can get on YouTube (and I have) you can look and see what is it like, you know, on, you know, mid-December, you know, and the sun just barely clears the horizon. And it's up for like three and a half hours and then poof it's gone again. So, I don't know. Anna Hersey did a Fulbright. And she was over in Sweden and Scandinavia for a whole year. And I remember her posting pictures on Facebook of being at the Arctic Circle on, I guess, probably the solstice. So, yeah, I've always been fascinated with the polar regions for some reason.

PP: I mean, yeah, again, I can't say that was something that I predicted, but that's a really cool response. But yeah, that would be a really fun trip. I think, like I said, it would be very cold. And I do also like the cold, but that might be too much for me. But I hope you get to do those things. That sounds like, you know, a trip to Antarctica doesn't sound like a bad time.

JN: Yeah, maybe I could figure out some grant project to study vocalization in dry, cold, high altitude climates, because that's what the, you know, the South Pole station, it's like almost 10,000 foot elevation and it's like the driest, coldest place you can find.

PP: Yeah, drink a lot of water. You could do penguin studies on some penguin vocalizations.

JN: Which brings us to that song by John Duke. Yes. "Penguin Geometry."

PP: Thank you so much for your time and for answering the questions for us. And I hope the membership gets to enjoy getting to know a little bit more about you.

JN: Great! I'm honored to be interviewed.