

Theodora Nestorova interviewed by Paul M. Patinka
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Paul Patinka: So, our first question is: can you tell us a little bit about some of the projects you're currently working on or have recently finished?

Theodora Nestorova: So, actually, continuing from the presentation that I gave at PAVA I have been continuing the, I guess, next phase of my vibrato research. And I just finished a pilot study in which I was going off of looking at quantifying vibrato by genre and analyzing, particularly, vibrato extents rate of change over time. And this phase was (since at PAVA I presented on a new kind of quantification measure of coefficient of variation that I found in looking at the variability of vibrato) this phase was looking specifically at the shapes since there are so many different vibrato contour shapes, but based on genre, based on individual. So, I was really looking and examining different representations of complex vibrato patterns. And I piloted a study which I sent out a protocol to about—I currently have about 20 subjects, I'm hoping to get more—in three different genres. Classical, musical theater, and jazz. Looking at different genre-blind kind of genre-fluid repertoire song selections/excerpts (the same one) and then also vocal exercise tasks. And it's been a very interesting go at analyzing them. Actually, that's been my favorite part because I get to go through each sample and really look at the individuality of each artist and their vibrato. So, that's very exciting.

So, I finished the pilot study, looking at how we're going to hopefully through regression techniques, represent these graphically and visually, and then hopefully we'll use it with greater pedagogical precision and as a diagnostic tool, perhaps, and a teaching tool. It's interesting because patterns are appearing in regions, and types, and, like, archetypes of vibrato that different genre-ed singers (professional singers) are using. So that—patterns are always exciting in sciences I've found. So that's been an exciting trip. And Josh Glasner, who you know as well, has also worked on looking at rate and extent in historical recordings. He's been a big help. We've been discussing half-extent and different particular, specific, granular measures with him. So that's the project that is underway and, kind of, I'm plugging along at, as I'm going.

And then another one that is a future project, but that I'm also kind of taking on now in the new year, is a study or look at Bulgarian lyric diction. I'm originally Bulgarian. So, for me, this has always been a passion project I suppose. I sang as a singer—I sing in a lot of Slavic languages and I love that body of repertoire. But, with Jamie Dahman who has done a Fulbright in Bulgaria a few years ago, with him, we've been working on kind of fashioning an article together, elevating and highlighting Bulgarian lyric diction just as much as

Russian lyric diction is in the repertoire. Showing the differences and intricacies and nuances of that as well. So hopefully something will emerge from that in the new year.

PP: Yeah, that's awesome. And I love, love those Slavic languages. And, like you said, there's so much that's missing from the repertoire. In the broader repertoire, right? It's not that the music isn't there, it's just that we, you know, we don't know it. That's awesome. Yeah. I'll be definitely looking forward to taking a look at that article.

TD: Yeah.

PP: So how did you get into the vibrato research? I—this is something I wanted to ask at PAVA but didn't get a chance to. Cause it's, it's pretty cool and it's huge. It's a huge project to be working on.

TD: Yes, vibrato itself is a very contentious subject. I've read a lot of things on looking at the background. I've also spent a lot of time with my advisor at New England Conservatory (Ian Howell) and I have spent a lot of time actually looking at the theory of how do we even...How do we even express ourselves about vibrato? Because it is mentioned in vocal pedagogy literature of the past, but it's something that's almost always been shrouded in mystery, or we don't know quite as much as we wish. So, yeah. So, I feel it's important, and your work as well, to highlight that and start to at least chip away at the research gap that that exists. But how I started was just, I came upon it really.

After I graduated from the Oberlin conservatory in 2018, I received a Fulbright study research grant to study in Vienna at the conservatory there. And while I was there, you know, I was staying primarily in the voice department. But I (because I've always been interested in vocal pedagogy and voice science) I found Dr. Christian Herbst who is, as you know, a premier voice scientist in the field and I was just very excited. I attended a pedagogy symposium at which he spoke. We connected and I told him, you know, where I was coming from, about the fact that actually prior to that the New England Conservatory had deferred me. I had applied for master's programs in vocal pedagogy and to work with Dr. Howell and they had deferred me. And I told him that, you know, I'm continuing to stay in contact with him during my Fulbright year. And he said, "this is very interesting. What are you interested in studying?" And I've always been interested in studying the different genre bodies of singing technique, but also stylistic differences by genre. Because especially in our current 21st century world of, of pedagogy and singing, crossover abounds.

So, to me, it was always interesting to listen for different stylistic differences to even talk around the dinner table. My parents, my family—they aren't musicians. But they would always ask me: "Well, so why do you sing like this in this genre and this in this genre?" And I would be like, "you know, that's a very interesting topic, really." So, for me, it was just kind of, I came upon this and we were talking with him and I found an operetta called *Im weissen Rössl* (The White Horse Inn) that I—at school we had a bunch of different records from historical recordings and also CDs from different singers. And there was one particular version which Jonas Kaufmann sang. He sang an aria from it solo. Very operatically, you know, as he sounds. Then there was a duet recording with him and a Schlager singer, an Austrian pop kind of top hits singer. And he sounded completely differently, but only occasionally in some of the stylistic things he would do. And then there was one that he was doing in a studio recording versus the live one in which it was almost like a mix of the two.

So, when I found that and I heard it, I was like, this is very interesting to even just look at a premiere operatic singer change the way their vocalism and their stylistic

technique. I brought that to Dr. Herbst and he was like, you know, it's really interesting. We looked at it spectrographically. I went and visited him in Salzburg when he was at the Mozarteum at the time. And we started looking into the vibrato contours and we started kind of quantifying all of these recordings that I then gathered from. The Austrian national library and all this stuff of this particular work, how many different versions there were even in the United States as well, since it was translated, particularly at the differences in vibrato. So that's where it's kind of went. And then I came back to New England Conservatory. I came, started, at New England Conservatory. I started my masters, brought this huge data set, the audio work to Dr. Howell and we sat down and really started granularly, parsing it out. From kind of the guidance that I had received from Dr. Herbst and yeah, that was the dawn of it. So just kind of accidentally came upon it.

PP: Yeah, that's awesome! And I love those research inquiries that come out of "oh, I wonder what is different about these two things?" And it seems like such a simple question at first and then getting into is like, "oh, this is much more complicated than I had thought."

TD: Absolutely.

PP: Yeah. Yeah. That's so awesome. And you know, I, it makes me think, too, of, like, all the Pavarotti Recordings because he did so much crossover and how sometimes he really sounded different. And then sometimes it was kind of, like, "oh, that's Pavarotti singing." You know? Yeah. And the changes that maybe he either intentionally or unintentionally made as well. Cool, yeah. I'm very excited to hear the results of this and see where it goes. And like you mentioned that, you know, like, the cross disciplinary (sort of Multicultural as well) but multi-genre singing and pedagogy that we have to engage in, especially as young pedagogues, I think is so important. And the more research we have about that, the better. Which leads me almost perfectly into the next question, which is, what about vocalization fascinates you the most? And maybe it's vibrato, but maybe it's something completely different.

TD: Yeah, it's definitely tied to that. I think for me, it's the fact that the human voice mechanism can create so many different sounds that are natural to it. And also, raw expressions of our spirit, our singing spirit and body. And the capabilities of the voice, really, that I think that's what fascinates me. And so, vibrato is one of them. I think it's definitely something that we intentionally, and culturally, and genre by genre change. But it's also something that we use as a tool of expression, as we do a lot of different, you know, registration or mode, you know, just singing in different modes, timbre all of these aspects of voicing. So, I think it's definitely that. I think it's the fact that we can make all these sounds and the vocal tract is so malleable and our capability is—Once professional singers go through training and we, in the process of training, figure out the capabilities of our bodies and our voices. So, that for sure.

PP: And would you say, is that what sort of, like, spurred you into a career as a vocologist or into the vocology field?

TD: Yeah, certainly the inquiry. I think I'm very curious and I want to know why. And it was never enough for me as a singer growing up, and developing even now, to just accept, "well, we do this this way because." And I want to know, well, why? Because, you know, how does this work? How does this function? How does this happen? How does the

results in the product stem from what we are causing it to do? So, I think, definitely, it's the fact that I am not easily satiated with information or I always want to know more. And I, as a singer too, I've always had to struggle to find my technique and to struggle to find a technique that works for me. And so, knowing from my individuality and my individual journey and that as well, knowing why and how, and the methodology to doing that. I think that's what has led me down this path.

PP: Yeah. And again, you're, you know, you so beautifully sort of meld all of these different aspects together, which I think is so wonderful. And, I think, really represents, like, the spirit of vocology and, you know, of course, PAVA as a whole. Of pulling in all these little pieces together and saying, "oh yes, and now this explains something new," or this gives us a new, you know, sort of inquiry into that.

TD: Yeah.

PP: Which again, leads me into my third question of what excites you about being a member of PAVA and how does it fit into your overall career trajectory or goals? Especially being such a young organization, of course, being a young pedagogue, and, and researcher and singer and all those things. How do you see this sort of fitting into your overall life?

TD: Yeah, I'm, well, I'm very excited and thrilled to be a part of PAVA. First of all, because it's been an organization that I've admired through, you know, its members and through reading their work. So, for me, what excites me is just being in the community and getting to speak with people like you and to speak about this stuff, and to learn, and to attend the webinars, and to attend the conferences and see what advances in voice science and vocology are being made as they are being made. That's the most exciting part. So, for me, how it fits into my career trajectory or goals. I didn't know about vocology maybe six years ago if you asked me. Yeah, I had, well, I had an idea that something of that sort existed, but now being able to put kind of a terminology and a face of an organization onto the idea and the concept is exciting for me to be a part of that, and to have integrated that into and incorporate it into my future career. Because I definitely want, you know, I'm very much about evidence-based vocal pedagogy and also about vocology based vocal pedagogy. So, yeah, that would be the most exciting part I would say.

PP: Yeah, that's awesome. Yeah. And again, that sort of holistic approach to pedagogy, I think, not only informs pedagogy and, like, our, you know, our own teaching, but also then allows us to create new things and share them with other people, as well, when we find them. And then we have it, like you said, there's a reason for it. It's not just sort of a magical soup that pops out of nowhere.

TD: Yeah.

PP: Yeah. That's awesome. And so, was the conference this summer, was that your first one? The first PAVA one?

TD: It was, yeah. Yeah, it was. I was encouraged by Dr. Ian Howell to submit my abstract for my broader research and the fact, I think also that it was online (and I was excited to go to Minnesota) but yeah, it was online and had all of these different kind of, you know, mixer events, discussion events, where you could go into breakout rooms and speak with people

was even a better—I think it was a more welcoming kind of environment for a PAVA first timer. Yeah. So yeah, absolutely.

PP: To me that was one of the best conferences I attended this summer for that reason, the way it was set up with all the rooms and everything.

TD: Yeah. Yeah. It was really well organized.

PP: So, you know, you talked about, Dr. Howell quite a bit. But would you say that you have a member in the field that you look up to and then, and who would that person be and why?

TD: Yeah, well certainly him, you know, working so closely with him in his work and currently in the pandemic and always being at the forefront of innovation and finding out how we can still be making music via, like, low-latency technology. So that's been exciting for me to be a part of and to kind of work alongside him and have him advise me as well. I think also, as I mentioned, Dr. Christian Herbst. He's been a huge (is a huge) mentor for me and somebody who I look up to just for his trajectory, and his path, and his huge body of inquiry, and in the field, you know? And then, of course, for PAVA, I mean, being able to hear and be in the same zoom room as Ingo Titze was really exciting. And his work has been, you know, I've read it, cover to cover and then back again. So, other, you know, PAVA members, Ken Bozeman, Joanne Boseman, both of their works have been instrumental to me as I've grown up in the field, I think, especially of acoustic vocal pedagogy.

PP: Yeah absolutely.

TD: And for the inquiry that I'm taking, I guess, into my more—into the diction side of things as my personal background, I have had some talks from, since the PAVA conference, with Anna Hersey and her work in Scandinavian lyric diction. And she was a Fulbrighter as well. So, those are some people that I definitely look up to and in this field.

PP: Yeah. And how would you say that their mentorship has helped you?

TD: Just the fact that I've been able to speak with all of them is so, I mean, I don't know, it's a strange thing. And in the singing world, as I'm a classical singer as well, we go and we see concerts of, you know, these big, famed singers and maybe we're so lucky to have a masterclass if they come to our conservatory and maybe even have a lesson, I don't know. But for as, since I've entered into the voice science community, into the vocology community, the fact that all of these people who are, who have such, you know, who have made an impact on the body of voice science and vocology are so open to even just conversing like this has been a huge part of the mentorship for me. Because if it hadn't been, for example, for my original call two years ago with Dr. Christian Herbst. When I was meeting him in person just having a conversation, or with Ian Howell, you know, going to his lab and spending, like, two hours, just talking about things like this. That's been what's so important to me and significant in their mentorship is that they're always so open and willing to, to converse in different stages of my career and guide me and help me. So, yeah, their openness.

PP: Yea, absolutely. I think that the accessibility is so, like, you said, it's so different than this sort of professional singing world where it's a little bit built a little bit differently. Like I

said, you could just be in the same room as, Ingo Titze. And he'll ask you a question out of your presentation and it's terrifying, but exciting

TD: Exactly!

PP: But it's cool to be able to hear from someone like that, you know, like, literally wrote the book on vocology and then get to interact with them in real life. And Anna Hersey is, oh my god. She's such a delight, I love her.

TD: Yeah, yeah!

PP: Great, great person to be working for on the diction stuff too. So, my last question here, is, so if you had unlimited, and this is honestly my favorite question, because—

TD: Oh, I like this, now, especially, yeah.

PP: Thinking pre COVID or post COVID too. If you had unlimited resources and a year of vacation, what is something fun that you would do with that time?

TD: I think that I would travel. I would definitely use it to travel actually. So, yeah. To travel to places where I haven't been. I've been mostly, since I'm originally European and Bulgarian as well, I've, and I was born in the UK, I've been to every country in Europe except for eight.

PP: Okay!

TD: But I want to spread out the less Eurocentric. And I've always wanted to go to Asia and South America and, you know, Australia and even, I don't know, Antarctica! I think that I would travel and spend time really immersing myself in the culture, of each place. And then I hopefully travel with some sort of equipment where I can—I'm really interested in, you know, the folk music of each of each country. Maybe get even some samples to bring back after my year of vacation and analyze and find an interesting research question from that. So that's what I would do for sure.

PP: Yeah, that's awesome. And if you had to pick, like, one place that you would go to or, like, your top one destination, where would it be? It's such a hard question, I know.

TD: That is really hard. I think I would probably go to somewhere in the Himalayas, you know, because Himalayan singing in general is very, very interesting and very rich acoustically. So somewhere in the Himalayas. Yeah, for sure. Asia, definitely Asia. East Asia, even, you know, the Middle East, if possible, would be the first area of choice.

PP: Yeah. Yeah. And I think the musical traditions in those spaces again, are so different too, which is something else that could be really interesting to do some research on. The research never ends, right?

TD: Nope!

PP: Well, awesome! Well, thank you so much for this. It's so lovely to be able to meet other members of PAVA and get a little bit of an in-depth look at what we're all doing with our

lives. And, even during these crazy COVID times that we're able to still produce and get to meet each other and interact in some ways. So, thank you very much.

TD: Thank you. Thank you, Paul. It's been fun.