

## **CompoSing Awareness: Approaching Somaesthetics Through Voice and Yoga**

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***Abstract:** This paper aligns the fundamental principles of somaesthetics with pressing issues in the field of voice in Karnatik music, the music of Southern India. In doing so, it unpacks both compositional and singing processes from a bodily perspective, weaving together the philosophies of yoga and body awareness into the pragmatic paradigm of vocalized and perceived sound. By embodying raga-based music, the author interrogates established convention in relation to movement and gesture in Karnatik music. The creative processes in the composition and embodiment of the context of the musical composition, “Sonic River,” are unpacked in conjunction with yogic poses that align with the composition’s melodic contour, and accounts of lived experience as journal entries. A critical analysis of these informants yields a four-pronged framework to aid in the understanding of the crucial role of body awareness in achieving and inspiring a fulfilling and free artistic expression, particularly in the context of voice.*

***Keywords:** soma, Karnatik music, voice, composition, yoga.*

### **Background: Ways to Acknowledge the Body**

According to Merleau-Ponty’s (2013) established theories of phenomenology, understanding at an embodied, pre-reflective level prefigures the cognition and intellectualization that follows. Such an approach challenges the Cartesian body-mind duality dictum that is predicated on the mind’s independent capacity to analyze, strategize and learn/understand even experienced phenomena such as abstractions (Descartes, 1975). The theories of phenomenology have assumed primacy in the burgeoning disciplines of artistic research in music and voice studies over the last few decades, not least in paving the way to a better understanding of how music is listened to, perceived, understood, expressed and conceptualized. The fields of cognitive science and neuroscience have been inundated over the last few decades with definitive theories that privilege the body as the site of knowing, including Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999) “embodied mind” and Antonio Damasio’s (1994) “body minded brain.” Laterally, the materiality of a “socio-semiotic body” whose awareness and pre-conditioned perceptions derive from, on the one hand, its cultural encrustations, and on the other, its signification and communication with its

immediate society and environment, has emerged as a key node of study (Waskul & Vannini, 2006) in the field of embodiment.

A refreshing strand of embodied philosophy in action that has emerged fairly recently is Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics. He describes it very simply: "it means putting one's body where one's mouth is; to really walk the walk, not just talk the talk" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 4). Somaesthetics, in essence, is a philosophy in action that transcends theory and sustains itself through self-improving, culturally contingent, and practical approaches to unpack the aesthetics created and perceived by the body (Shusterman, 2012, p. 4). Shusterman's terminology and theory of somaesthetics draws on a foundation of around two decades, and has looked to bodily conditioning, bodily awareness and reflective/corrective processes of iterative self-improvement, as overarching ways to adopt a body-centric lived philosophy of life; a way to achieve processes and outcomes across contexts in a better manner.

A somaesthetics approach notably aligns with body shaping and mental conditioning not as silos but as a reconfigured whole. Further, for participating individuals, somaesthetics is a pragmatic philosophy that also engenders a self-refining socio-cultural feedback loop with the phenomenological world. Such a philosophy is rhizomatically imagined by Shusterman trans-contextually, using tools such as yoga, the Feldenkrais Method, and the Alexander Technique, and has found wide application in fields as varied as learning, dancing and, recently, singing (Tarvainen, 2018a, 2018b). Artistic Research theorist Darla Crispin (2013, p. 59) uses the word "rhizomatically" to describe the expansive way in which the tentacles of artistic practice reach out into the realm of artistic research, and vice versa. When I use this word in the current context, it is intended to communicate that the propagation of ideas in a somaesthetics approach is often irregular, interesting, and lattice-like, while also providing a supportive framework that is dynamically evolving and readjusting.

According to Shusterman (2012, p. 42), somatic perception notably concerns itself with the importance of consciousness of a person's bodily movements in and as action—the discipline is directed to developing movement consciousness as a tool to explore the body's shaping by socio-cultural forces and habits, and the body's paradoxical functions as both a keeper and a destabilizer of these socio-cultural values. As Heinrich (2018, p. 6) notes: "the vocabulary of somaesthetics seems to be able to embrace and facilitate this novel demand for aesthetics and knowledge," the novelty being led by the pragmatic philosophical underpinnings of the field of somaesthetics. Such a novelty invites exploration through sound and the body, as creative compositional practice led by the voice wherein knowledge construction emerges from being aesthetically attuned to the body. I call this exploration *CompoSing*, a state of creating music through vocal practice that is in synchrony with a *composed* (as in, calm and attuned to one's bodily state) mode of awareness.

### **Contextualizing Soma in an Intercultural Vocal Paradigm**

The privileging of the body as the first receiver, processor and the producer of cultural knowledge in performative contexts has been invaluable in the field of voice and sound studies, with influential scholars from Barthes (1977) through Cavarero (2005) and Dolar (2006) to Järviö (2006) and Thomaidis (2013) (to name but a few), exploring newer pathways to yoke the voice, its modes of manifestation and meaning, and its significance, to the living body that is inextricably linked to it. The pathway that linked bodily awareness to sound for Pauline Oliveros was listening (Bell & Oliveros, 2017). For Thomaidis (2013), it was his physio-vocal practice,

which he repurposed as a tool in his actor/singer training. For Järviö (2006), it was the felt connection of the singing body to the moving vocal apparatus as well as to the function of being a pedagogue. It would therefore be safe to construe that body consciousness is relational; likewise, sound is relational—the act of sounding is physically impossible without a physical environment supporting its propagation as longitudinal waves.

The body senses the ecologies of practices and ontologies around it; it also senses itself, as Merleau-Ponty's (2013, pp. 130–55) *reversibility thesis* establishes. In producing sound, the voice rightly described by Dolar (2006) as “the flesh of the soul, its ineradicable materiality,” senses itself, standing-in as both the first messenger and primary recipient of sonic stimulus in relation to the body. It reports to the body, it receives from the body, and is that “truncated body” that Dolar (2006) refers to. The aesthetic of the sound of the voice is thus inextricably linked to the aesthetic of the body, *soma*. As a female singer of Karnatik music of South India, I have gradually come to understand that my vocal sound and the sounds that I listen to are mirrors that both reflect the pains and pleasures experienced by my body—to the world as voice and back to my body itself, to be inscribed in it as an indelible “somatic marker” of sound (Hunter, 2013).

### **Sonic River: Content, Rationale and Interrogations**

This article describes the process of body–sound linkage as witnessed through the lens of somaesthetics. I draw on literature and philosophies across cultures and disciplines, my own experiences as a composer/vocal practitioner. I use a piece of music for two voices that I have recently composed and recorded, “Sonic River,” (May 2019) as the focal point for this study. For the text in “Sonic River,” I drew on the well-known *Shanti mantra* (chant for peace) from the oldest *Upanishad* (vedic scripture) in Sanskrit, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (canto 1.2.28). The text is as follows:

*Asatoma sadgamaya*

*Tamasoma jyotirgamaya*

*Mrityorma amritam gamaya*

*Om Shanti, Shanti, Shantihi.*

[From the unreal lead me to real,

From darkness lead me to light,

From death lead me to immortality,

Peace, Peace, Peace].

The recording for this has been vocalized in a Karnatik style by myself and my sister, Srimathumitha Mani, a professional singer in the Karnatik fold who is also a certified yoga instructor. Through this article, I identify and share certain highlights from the conception and delivery phases of this work by adopting somaesthetics as the lens, tool and rationale.

Throughout this exposition, I draw on the role of the *soma* in the context of the voice in Karnatik music, the Classical music of South India. The linking of a philosophy of bodily awareness and of acknowledgement with a practice of singing that has traditional constraints poses problems, particularly in relation to the political and social situatedness of the female voice in Karnatik singing practice. In order for the reader to come to terms with the gravity of

embodied approaches in Karnatik music, I offer some context here. When considering Karnatik music, one must consider the status of the form across three very distinct periods in history—pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial.

To outline briefly, a community of female singer-dancers known as the *devadasis* were historically the pioneers of the art form, and spread their embodied style of music-making far and wide across the world as early as the eighteenth century. The singing body was central to Karnatik music and dance in their practice, specifically in the context of female temple performers. With the wave of British colonization of India, on the one hand, a Victorian sense of propriety and modesty came to be imposed upon the Indian woman, and on the other, a nationalist movement spearheaded by the educated upper classes (*brahmins*) took it upon itself to actively seek out a cultural medium to propagate the nationalist spirit which was by then laced with patriarchy—both from an Indian and British perspective. Karnatik music became the medium through which *brahmin* women (and men) would symbolize Indian culture, values and morals. In the case of women, these values were instated by the males, as the singer/activist T. M. Krishna (2013) explains.

In the mid-twentieth century, following a complex legislative process, the *devadasis* were robbed of their rights to sing and dance at temples, and their earlier temple dedication rituals were abolished. While this legislation did put an end to certain undesirable institutions in *devadasi* practice, such as the dedication of children to temples and their abuse by powerful men in the community, it also obliterated the role of the performing body in the context of the Karnatik music of the feminine. In summary, in the post-colonial era, a purging of corporeality continued in the garb of stage decorum, and Karnatik music was sanitized of any earlier somatic practices. Acknowledging the bodily senses, according to those involved in the nationalist revival of the art form, meant allowing for the weakness of the flesh to manifest (Weidman, 2006). This was not ideal, given that the performers of this revised Karnatik music belonged to the upper caste and had to be *respectable*—heightened respectability being directly linked to a distancing of the voice from the body. The Karnatik voice, from this point in history, became emblematic of the virginal—it was to be pure, untouched by the rather corruptible soma. A notion of purity became all-important (and therefore problematic), specifically in the context of women performers.

In the current Karnatik *kacceri* construct, the singer is seated on a platform erected on the stage, centrally and cross-legged. The microphone is placed in front of the singer on a stand, and the singer sings into it from this seated position. The accompanists are seated on either side of the singer, and overall there is little room for movement and gesture, except from the hands and head. Further, the facial expressions that are usually observed are related more to the effort of singing rather than to the expressivity inhered in the soundings. For performers of the younger generation, such as myself, who wish to move and express themselves while singing, who wish to fully sensorially enjoy the sound, there is really no avenue to do so. While I do acknowledge that bodily awareness is not merely related to overtly perceived movement or gesture and can span those minutiae of internal movements that happen during singing as well as those moments of stillness, I do find that a negation of the corporeal has become a problem in Karnatik music, and that it closely ties in with the classist and elitist framework that sadly sustains it. This issue of gestural freedom and women performers' lack of this freedom is one of few pressing issues that I have raised in my doctoral thesis, and addressed through the artmaking itself—from an embodied, intercultural perspective (Mani, 2019a).

## Sensing the Organic Body: A Case of Karnatik Voice

I expand on the context further, only to situate the importance and advocacy that an acknowledgement of bodily pain and pleasure in Karnatik singing brings to this article. The spiritual nature of Karnatik music was overemphasized during the nationalist rebranding of Karnatik music, and the impersonal purity of the voice as the divine vehicle to attain godhead was played up, as if to compensate for the loss of the bodily involvement. The body was dubbed as a lesser, rather surface-level phenomenon, compared to the deeper truth of the *brahman* (the soul).

However, it would be parsimonious to suggest that bodily involvement is lacking in Karnatik music. On the contrary, the role of voice, in and as movement of the vocal apparatus, including the glottis and larynx, is strikingly apparent in the way the various Ragas (Karnatik melody types) and ornaments typical of them (*gamakas*) are delivered (Durga, 1983). For instance, in case of the *brigha*, a characteristic ornamentation of Karnatik music known for its lightning fast quality, vocal diminutions fall into fractional note values and scatter brilliantly like an inflorescence of sound, exemplifying the effective integration of *prana* (life force as breath) on the one hand, with the rapidly moving larynx and accompanying glottal closures on the other (Mani, 2019a, pp. 170–179). Likewise, in Karnatik voice, a resonant sound is normative, and the larynx rises when the pitch increases, unlike Western operatic voice culture in the Romantic era and afterwards.<sup>1</sup> These movements that reside behind the veneer of the outward-facing singing body are seldom mentioned, however, in music classes with a *guru* or in performance. A student of Karnatik music is therefore left to undertake a lonely personal journey into perceiving the activities in their body, and often such a conscious “tuning into” one’s body is regarded as the nemesis of spontaneous performance. Performance is considered by many a *guru* as one that is at the service of a greater musical tradition and technique; as one that needs to transcend the distracting body.

The place of the body in current discourses on Karnatik voice is arguably limited to mapping the emergence of the voice to the various *yogic chakras* (energy centers) in the body. The *vishuddhi chakra* located at the throat, known popularly in the West as the “throat chakra” is associated with the voice, and well-known Karnatik compositions such as *Sobillu Saptaswara* of Thyagaraja serve to reinstate in the minds of listeners and performers that the body is a receptacle that allows for the flow of divine sonic energy through its *chakras* (and therefore must not be regarded as a vessel of enjoyment and sensorial awareness). For instance, Thyagaraja in this line from *Sobillu* maps vocal sound to anatomy:

*Nabhi, hrd, kantha, rasana, nasadula entho, sobhillu saptaswara*

[From the navel, to the throat, the nasal cavity, and through the mouth emanate the seven primary notes of music].

Upon close reading and examination of the trends in vocal studies in Karnatik music, and based on three decades’ worth of guru-led learning, conditioning, and performance in the field, I have come to understand that bodily awareness and body focus in the context of Karnatik singing are barely mentioned in pedagogical, performative or academic contexts. When they are, it is discussed with a veneration, sometimes through the media of transcendence (proximate to

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Wistreich (2000) unpacks this aspect of laryngeal motion as a key difference between the pre-romantic and Romantic styles of Western vocal training. See also Mani (2019b, pp. 410–417) for a comparative analysis of Western voice and the Karnatik voice, relating both also to movement.

Järviö's (2006, p. 69) classification of the “subjective singing body”), and at other times through the lenses of vocal health and physiognomy (i.e., in terms of what Järviö (2006, p. 69) refers to as the “objective body”) —*seldom* in its irrefutable role as the single most powerful bearer of corporeally experienced sensory feeling in a performer (proximate to Järviö's (2006, p. 69) classification of “organic body”). I have come to realize that approaches to keeping the vocal sound impersonal, in any way possible, are the only ones that are embraced and propagated in the current patriarchally-driven system. Lived bodily experiences of participation in music-making are seldom acknowledged or shared in Karnatik music, let alone written about in an academic context. This could partly be because the “organic singing body” is side-lined in preference to the pre-eminent, “disembodied” voice, as cultural anthropologist Amanda Weidman (2006) observes, particularly in the context of the feminine Karnatik singing body. Such a pointed ignoring of felt bodily experience is symptomatic of a greater issue—a sense of shame associated with the female performing body, as the rather limited but powerful niche of critical Karnatik literature affirms (Krishna, 2013; Weidman, 2006).

In approaches such as those of Jacques Dalcroze, however, bodily experiences are an aggregate of both the sound and bodily movements, and eminently pre-empt musical understanding— affectively and as motion (Juntunen & Hyvönen, 2004). In this line of approach, kinaesthetics are given a pride of place in feeling and communicating sound. In my earlier study of 2018, I demonstrated a connection between the aural, visual and kinesthetic in communicating Karnatik Raga using a customized tool, the “RagaCurve,” and effectively combining it with hand gesture (Mani, 2018a). As part of my doctoral study (2016–2019), across two different case studies, I harnessed the role of the singing *soma* as the fulcrum of reference in intercultural music-making between early Opera and Karnatik music (Mani, 2018b; 2018c; 2019a). Upon reflection on these projects, I now realize that I may have conferred on somaesthetics the power of activism by instating it as a tool to illustrate one means through which a feminist approach to Karnatik voice may be undertaken.

I worked on intercultural opera from the premise that my voice is very much rooted in my bodily connection to the world—as a colored woman and embodied performer. The affects induced in me and my bodily responses to these affects linked to my vocal expression. The outside temperature and the way my skin felt linked to my voice. The contour traced by my fingertips in the air as I processed the raga linked to my vocal awareness—as breath, as rasps, as sounds, and microtonal inflections typical of Karnatik music ornamentation processes (*gamakas*). I would argue that my vocal sound became the ephemeral instantiation of the intensity of my *soma* in this world. I strove consciously to not regard my body as a conduit to the divine through the voice. Further, I ensured that I did not attribute the sound to any yogic practice or to the belief that it may be linked to the divine energy, *kundalini*, rising as *nada* (sound). All these may very well be true of the voice—but for me, as an affective performer interested in the cross-modal potential of sound (Küssner & Leech-Wilkinson, 2014), the vocal sound began and ended with my body, as it embraced it and allowed it to ripple through, to teach, and to learn; as it remained rooted in this world of sensory pleasure and pain. Within this bodily embrace, the vital energy, the breath of life encircles—as *prana*, as Järviö (2006, p. 70) rightly alludes to in referring to the *vedic* context of vocal sound.

Interestingly, Thyagaraja, the famed Karnatik composer-saint, wrote:

*prana anala samyogamu valla*

*pranava nadamu sapta swaramulai bhava*

[The fire of vital energy as breath

Gives rise to the primordial sound (nada) – forming seven notes and associated emotions.]

The operative word that invites comment in the above line of text is *bhava*, meaning emotion. This text acknowledges that a deeper psychophysical factor that is felt, processed and reflected as sound by the singer's body, is at play in the context of "sounding," and inevitably enfold the sound in a primarily body-sphere.

### **Etymology: Soma**

A brief discussion and clarification of the meaning of the word *soma* is warranted here, not least due to the intercultural nature of this article's subject matter. While *soma* in its Greek *avatar* refers to the living corporeal body that is very much rooted in the world, *soma* in Sanskrit is a *vedic* term that pertains to a few different things. Firstly, the *Soma Mandala* section in the *Rig Veda* (regarded as the oldest of the *vedas*, over 4000 years old) refers to *soma* as a ritual drink. The plant from which the *soma* is extracted is also referred to as *soma* itself. *Soma* also refers to the moon, and other Hindu deities, including Shiva (*someshwara* / *somanatha*). There seem to be, on the surface, no etymological links between the Greek notion of *soma*, the body, and its Sanskrit connotation, however, a deeper study might be warranted in this issue, given the history of proximity between the two ancient civilizations. For instance, the plant and the juice yielded from the plant are both *soma*—the cause and the resultant effect. A parallel may be drawn between the body and the sound—the yelder and the yield—*soma*. By this logic, the sound is the juice of the body, and is the essence in itself; a tangible *soma*, brewed to be felt and experienced cyclically by the body, as the source and product of being aware.

A socio-semiotic understanding of the *soma* is also called for here, particularly in the context of a singing body steeped in the cultural traditions of Karnatik music, now venturing into the domain of intercultural music-making. As Waskul and Vannini (2006, p. 10) note: "despite its essential biological nature, as soon as the body becomes an object of discourse it is invested with symbolic meaning and symbolic value – use-value, sign-value, exchange-value... through the functioning of a discursive and material order." The sound made, felt and processed by this cultural signifier *soma* is embossed in such a *soma* with its own socio-semiotic signature. In an interactionist paradigm of intercultural music-making, a combination of socio-culturally contingent bodily responses to the sound and sonic responses to the body consciousness cascade through one another—creating ripples which, I believed, established an ecosystem of "philosophy of intercultural music-making" for me in dialogue with a "philosophy of embodied singing" (Montero, 2006, p. 976).

### **Bodily Habit, Voice, and Mapping Models for Vocal Somaesthetics**

Recent publications in the field of cultural musicology that draw on the nexus between sound, bodily senses, materiality and signification include those by Eidsheim (2015) and Neumark (2010). Adding to this very valuable corpus is the emerging work of Anne Tarvainen, one of the few researchers currently working at the unique junction of singing and somaesthetics. Tarvainen (2018a, p. 121) attempts to define the context for voice and the somaesthetics principles that jointly reside here; she notes: "Vocal somaesthetics will be interested in the bodily sensations of what it feels like to vocalize."

In proposing a direction for vocal somaesthetics, Tarvainen (2018a, p. 122) observes “instead of focusing on the acoustic or physiological facts in vocalizing, I suggest that vocal somaesthetics will prioritize the study and cultivation of the bodily-vocal experiences instead – the inside perspective to human vocality.” She proposes that both affective and motional dimensions of vocalizing are activated when turning one’s focus to the bodily feelings in the “act of singing.” She goes on to note: “Becoming aware of these shifts [in bodily focus while singing] and learning to use them consciously is one of the lessons somaesthetics can teach us.” (2018a, p. 134). Drawing on Anne Tarvainen’s (2018b, p. 105) call for a “diversity of experiences and bodies” as a means of “broadening and democratizing” singing, I may be offering one approach to answer the following question, which has been a contentious issue in Karnatik voice for over a century now: How can we democratize Karnatik singing so that it is a form of aesthetic expression that is evolving, equitable, non-gendered, and embodied—for both affective and motional dimensions of voicing to thrive?

In cultivating a bodily habit of linking vocalizing to gesture and unified bodily movement, I looked to the vast body of literature on embodiment, singing and its intersections with Shusterman’s ideas of body awareness. I wished to attune to my bodily feelings—pre-physiovocality as somatic perception—to work on them, thereby resisting the pre-formed restrictive habits and patterns which I felt have hitherto hampered my free singing. Shusterman (2012, pp. 66, 189) argues that even racial hostility is an encrusted phenomenon that builds over time due to bodily experience and not necessarily practical reasoning. Singing for me, in my mind, has always been a dynamic process, however, I was shaped by a controlling patriarchal social construct in the field of Karnatik music, and my body was habituated to those socio-cultural regulations—a sense of disembodied voice was ingrained in me as I have unpacked in Mani (2017). These regulations have restricted women performers from acknowledging and feeling comfortable with their bodies in the field of Indian music. To interrogate these encrusted habits and further, to acquire a sense of reconciliation and peace with my singerly body, and to explore the implications of body-mind dimensions of yogic practice on singing, I turned to somaesthetics as an approach to the piece “Sonic River”. The primary aim of this study is to apply somaesthetics as a tool to access the bodily sensations related to vocalizing, and further as a key to unlock an awareness of yoga–music connection in being thus aware of the body. The study also aims to instate gestural and sensorial freedom in Karnatik singing, and to demonstrate the intercultural and cross-modal correspondences afforded by somaesthetics as a discipline. For, as Eidsheim (2015, p. 124) calls for: “There is another way of thinking about signification [of the sounding body] in relation to the body’s actions,” and through somaesthetics, I sought to explore this way.

## Methodology

Drawing on Tarvainen (2018a, 2018b), in this, the latter part of this essay, I share both the affective and motional body sensations that I felt in composing and co-singing “Sonic River”. In doing so, I describe to the reader, how these realizations derived from the body became loci of learning and self-improvement in my life as a singer. Also, as I explained earlier, the very act of acknowledging and sharing these bodily sensations in singing was therapeutic and liberating for me as a female Karnatik singer, and makes a strong point to the broader scholarly and performance community—a way of engaging with feminist activism using vocal somaesthetics as the tool.



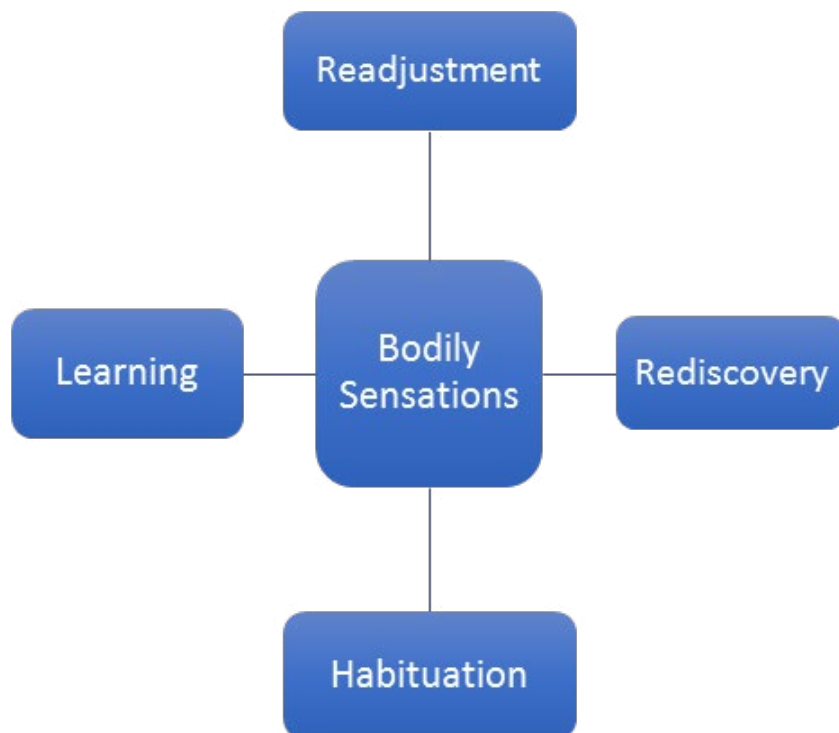
For the methodology to unpack the creation and singing process of “Sonic River,” I referred to the various ideas adumbrated in the recently available Somatic Toolkit materials from Spatz (2019). I was increasingly attuning to my body and had developed a habit of journaling my bodily feelings through my immersion in the somatic processes. I employed this method to record my impressions—through the processes of composition and recording. I also drew on an experiential free-flowing writing style as my signature form of expression in the journals. I had reflective conversations with Srimathumitha on her yoga-based interpretation of the perception of sound, I referred to her journal entries and analyzed them for key themes based on their resonances with my own perceived reflections. She had also begun journaling regularly and shared her ideas with me over a period of a few months, as we awaited the joint recording. I composed the piece between January and February 2019, and along with Srimathumitha, I sang and recorded the work in May 2019. My journal entries would often unfold as autoethnographic stories of my body coming face to face with sonic reality (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009). The sung sound and the received impulse, in juxtaposition, would feedback to one another like an overlapping dialogic exchange between two kindred spirits. As Shusterman (2013, p. 8) observes:

*The advocacy of somatic training for wisdom and virtue is even more striking in Asian philosophical traditions, where self-cultivation includes a distinctive bodily dimension developed through ritual and artistic practice (both conceived in highly embodied terms) and through specifically somatic training (such as disciplines of breathing, yoga, Zen meditation, and martial arts) that aim at instilling proper body-mind harmony, proper demeanor, and superior skill for appropriate action.*

Srimathumitha’s yoga immersion and my embodied Karnatik styled composition both fall into the categories identified in Shusterman (2013), however, this article is not only about vindicating the good aspects of such tradition, but interrogating and thwarting the controlling aspects of such tradition, as expressed in the earlier section about the prevailing attitudes towards the Karnatik singing body. In relation to certain key narration points in the analysis that follows, I have referenced a time-pointer from the recording. Listening to the clip at these specified times while reading the narrative/reflection that speaks to it might help the reader orient themselves to our worlds of bodily sensation, readjustment, rediscovery, habituation and learning.

### **Analysis: Reflections and Realizations in and from the Creative Process**

Using bodily sensations as the central lens, I present my analysis across four themes: readjustment, rediscovery, habituation and learning (see Figure 1). These themes naturally unfolded as Srimathumitha and I journeyed towards the realization of “Sonic River,” in tandem, and accessed our hitherto untapped sonic and somatic worlds. They have been derived from a thematic analysis of the reflective journal entries that resulted from examining the self during the “arriving” (into the body through breath, body scan, and awareness) and “yielding” (allowing the self to sensitize to the ecologies) processes, as understood from the Somatics Toolkit (Spatz, 2019; Ashley, 2019), and of reflections of various stages of body scanning. By situating them within relevant literature, I could gain a three-dimensional view of the process-product-senses prism in the analysis section across the four key themes that have been identified here as readjustment, rediscovery, habituation, and learning. I observed a chronological order in their unfolding, however, it must be noted that several micro-elements that formed the processual framework underwent these stages of maturity in a staged manner that rendered the macro-effect cascading rather than monotonously linear.



**Figure 1:** Analysis framework for “Sonic River” across musical composition, vocal delivery, and yogic flow

## 1. Readjustment

Shusterman (2012, pp. 327–330) proposes the idea of conscious proprioception (in the context of dance), the cultivation of an ability to inform oneself of one’s movements and an awareness of how various practices—such as body scan and reflective corporeal practice—can improve one’s ability to focus on one’s body. I found that when I focused on my body and its responses to what I was experiencing as sound, the singing became freer. I was no longer a slave to my vocal limitations, to the conventional rules of the Karnatik *kacceri* system that rendered me rooted to the ground in a sitting position, and to those doubts in my mind that questioned my physio-vocal fitness to execute a complex passage. My journal entry dated February 2, 2019, demonstrates my frame of mind at the time of composing.

*I found, in many instances, that the complexity of the passage became trivial in comparison to the joyful fluidity that being conscious of my body’s musical movement afforded me. While, for Pauline Oliveros the listening of sounds and sonic minutiae became a source of bodily comfort, for me, awareness and relaxation through bodily awareness and proprioception translated into a comparable sense of comfort and flow in the singing. In my two decades of traditional Karnatik singing practice I had not experienced such a sense of comfort and effortlessness in singing.*

My journal entry made during the time of CompoSing, (a term that I have coined and explained earlier as a form of *composing through singing and bodily awareness as the tools*) yields an operative phrase: “mindless,” in the following entry from my journal dated February 13, 2019:

*Where am I in the raga contour?—I am unaware.*

*What is the ornament blossoming?—I am unaware.*

*I am blissfully and mindlessly unaware of anything except my good old body. The torso and the arms are the heralds, the hands that rise up as if they are drawing on the very depths of the universe to gather with love, a visceral energy, are a receptacle of 'nada' - the divine sound championed by the body.*

*It's ok... It's fine to just be the music. To allow, give, yield, feel, embrace, flow, fall, surrender, and then take control without force. With only effortless intent born from being aware.*

It felt to me that CompoSing became a way to approach creativity through voice, embodied understanding of melody, and a composure through bodily and sensorial awareness. Somaesthetics was the key that unlocked this holistic experience, a sense of composing not only the music and being aware of the text, but also composing and conditioning the body in tune with the sound. In the journaled passage above, I also reference the notion of “yielding” in somatic practice, drawing on Tamara Ashley’s (2019) work with the Somatics Toolkit. In all my years as a Karnatik singer, I was longing to break with tradition, yet hadn’t quite calculated the pathway to it. Through this practice, I found that I was allowing myself to experience that redrawing of the horizons of freeness of state from the interstices of effort, yielding, and readjustment.

## 2. Rediscovery

The rediscovery, for me, happened across two levels: my discovering my musical idiom again, using my body consciousness as a tool, and my understanding the deeper relationships that I nurtured unacknowledged to myself until then, with my voice. During the composition phase, I would begin my sessions by extending my arms as wide as possible, and embrace the warrior poses—extending my torso while energizing my legs and spine. I would then regroup, and go into the reverse warrior; as I flowed from one mode of being into another, I would imagine the raga under consideration, *Saramati*, as space (Mani, 2014). The minor third and the minor sixth notes of the raga carve out the fundamental gamut. I would think of these as my twin nodes as I warmed-up to the space that they metaphorically enfolded. In translationally imagining this space as my bodily extension I would become aware of the raga contour as gesture and the rise and fall of the Sanskrit syllables in their long (*dirgha*) and short (*hrsva*) forms as key postures that connect the raga trajectory, in line with Godøy’s (2017) study of the gestural qualities of music.

I imagined and composed the harmonies for the vocal line as a canon. I would feel them as ripples of warmth and light coursing through my body. The intercultural nature of the work unfolded in this dimension. As I ventured into the Western domains of harmony, counterpoint, contrary motion and a “rounds” styled form, I realized that who I had become—a migrant music researcher in an Australian conservatoire—had habituated me to newer approaches to my own music. I nominate the journal entry dated February 23, 2019, as an effective example of the cross-modal correspondence that ensued between my body, my imagined sound and my voice, in this intercultural paradigm:

*I feel music as space, as depth, as texture, as mutable gelatinous substance, as the surf in the ocean and as photons of light. I swim in this sea of song. My soma is one with the ephemeral.*

*How can I explain the intimacy of feelings of music in my heart. I give way to tears in sheer abandon. I cry unhindered. As tears flow, I think of the elusive beauty of music. As I sing my vision is blurry with tears. I think, ‘if only I could grasp this beauty through the film of tears!’ But I cannot—not through words, not as tears, not through the musical symbols. Only through action, through feeling it as motion, as space, as particles of conscious energy, can I try.*

The essentially monodic (a single line of sound at a time) nature of the human voice has its advantages and limitations. The advantage is that it allows for a listening of the produced sound and an imagining of such sound as a layer in a greater musical landscape that a single musicking body can only imagine. The limitation is that the materiality of the other sonic layers cannot be produced *in-situ* by the same body. The body then relies solely on embodied cognition to “mirror” the other layers, in itself (Cox, 2011). This way of looking at harmonized western music was new to me, owing to my essentially monody-based Karnatik background (Krishna, 2013), but I regarded this as an opportunity to evoke a cross-modal awareness in my sounding and listening abilities. I would sometimes use a piano accompaniment to create a vertical sonic space—a variety of tonal color. A combined awareness of the body, the raga and the effects that the singing and harmonizing produced across the affective and motional dimensions of my existence at the time, together informed the composition ([available here](#)).

### 3. Habituation

A key theme that emerged as a critical product of the analysis was habituation, particularly for Srimathumitha, who was forging those mind-body-music connections through yoga. Before the recording of the piece, I shared my vocal interpretation and a score with her. I provided my vocal sketch as a home recording made with a *tanpura*<sup>2</sup> in the background. I was keen to learn how she perceived the sound, given her yoga expertise and embodied sonic practice. While I turned to my body to help me fathom the sonic potential of the combination of the ancient Sanskrit text (*shabda*) and its relationship to the raga *Saramati* and harmony, she had noted that she would “approach the work firstly through her bodily listening and movements, as yogic poses, and then realize it” through her voice. In the initial weeks of engaging with the composition, Srimathumitha reflected in her journal entry dated March 4, 2019:

*Yoga itself means yuj or a bind. It is a state of being. Not being scattered but streamlined. I listen to my body, I go into a state of Pratyahara (tuning the senses inward rather than outward). When I do so, the noise is very less and what remains for me is the music and my singerly state of being.*

In parallel, I had tuned into my senses—tactile, kinesthetic, even olfactory—to awaken my relationship to the Raga contour (Harrison, 2019). As Shusterman (2012, p. 4) notes, it was a case of attuning to “one’s philosophy through one’s own bodily example, expressing it through one’s manner of living.” Until then music and singing had been separate from my lifestyle and bodily identity. Through this experiential engagement, I may have found a way to link these spheres of personal and professional identity. Srimathumitha then writes of the process that she undertook in unpacking Sonic River (entry dated March 10, 2019):

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<sup>2</sup> The *tanpura* is a drone characteristic of Indian music. The tonic, fifth and the octave notes (*swaras*) sound in succession to one another through this plucked instrument and give rise to a substrate-cum-zone for music-making.

*When I listened to Sonic River being sung out with the harmonies I initially felt peace and flow. I then imagined it as a sonic embodiment of my bodily awareness and composed a yogic flow for it. As I did that, my body sang.*

In the same entry, she continues to share the correspondences of her yogic practice with the opening of the piece as “Om Shreem,” audible in the time bracket 2” to 22”:

*I kept going back to chest opening Asanas (poses). For me, this piece facilitated opening of the Anahata (Heart Chakra). The piece opens with "Om Shreem." Traditionally, Shreem directly addresses Goddess Lakshmi who is seated on a pink lotus flower. It symbolizes feminine power and a very powerful flow of the feminine energy. The blooming of lotus is associated with the opening of the heart and this is exactly what came to my mind when I flowed bodily for Sonic River. I became the lotus in a sea of sound.*

Mantras (Sanskrit chants) such as *Shreem* are specifically designed ancient sounds constituting syllables that act on specific bodily *chakras*. They create vibrations that act upon and strengthen the *prana* (life force) at that particular site in the body. *Shreem* is one such mantra referring to abundance, grace, beauty, however, its sonic activation (for Srimathumitha) is linked to bodily exploration.

Srimathumitha maps certain *asanas* (yogic postures) to the flow of music. A yogic *vinyasa* flow is here being likened to the flow of musical contour (journal entry dated March 12, 2019):

*Chest opening poses like Anjaneyasana (Figure 2), Eka Pada Vyagarasana (Figure 3), Bhujangasana and Natrajasana (Figure 4) automatically found their way into my body. Instead of just my mind being immersed in the singing, now my body was actively engaging with and expressing the notes, sounds and all the different emotions that I felt. I think this is a very sacred and visceral space to get into for singers.*



**Figure 2:** Upward gliding through octave inspires *Anjaneyasana* for Srimathumitha



**Figure 3:** *Eka paada vyaagrasana* (one-legged tiger pose)



**Figure 4:** *Natrajasana* (the dancer's pose) is an uprising of the body in tune with the sound

#### 4. Learning

Through the trope of learning, I analyzed those moments when Srimathumitha and I both felt settled and centered, exuding a feeling of having assimilated the key outcomes from our journey with “Sonic River” thus far. For my part, I felt a great sense of wellness and emotional stability while composing this piece, as well as while recording the final version of it in the voices of Srimathumitha and myself. During composition, the harmonies between the second and fifth scale degrees used to give me horripilation. I recall feeling the rush of warmth in my skin in those moments of arousal during the composition phase. The sessions of composing sometimes took place in my garden. It was the rainy season here in Brisbane, and this journal entry dated February 24, 2019, contextualizes my heightened sensorial awareness:

*I feel cool earth as I touch the mud. The lower fifth seeps into my being like a root taking form. It is indeed the harmony of the body-earth. I bend forward. I am emboldened by the texture of the earth. I am aware of its wetness in my fingers. I steady myself and embrace the lower fifth, travelling with my spine turning upwards. My feet dig deep into the soil. I am rooted, and I grow.*

The section that sonically captures the moments described in the above journal entry occurs between 47” and 1’05”. These moments in the recording are followed by 30 seconds of voicelessness—the tambura alone filling the aural space. In parallel, Srimathumitha describes her bodily mapping of the final section of the piece (2’10” onwards to the end) to the Anjaneyasana (see Figure 1)

*Harmonies translated into imagining my body coming into a beautiful pose. The Anjaneyasana inspired me at the end of Sonic River where my body mirrors the upward gliding of the raga from the second to the octave. It overshoots the octave, only to return to it and unite. The flow into Anjaneyasana is similar. As the arms rise, I feel the chest opening. My throat feels open. My arms are raised. A beautiful backbend unfolds from the lower back. The hip is also open.*

After a few days of immersing herself in the piece, she noted (journal entry dated February 27, 2019):

*My body is so tuned in to following the sound and the sound is so tuned in to following the body. This forms a beautiful cycle of listening to myself. It is not about attaining anything but being in the best possible state of existence physically and mentally at any given moment in time.*

During the final recording Srimathumitha and I had conversations about our singular journeys into the piece, comparing notes across various sections and taking in the wholeness of the experience. We both tapped into the embedded multisensorial memories in the body (Harrison, 2019, pp. 8–9). She frequently revisited her *asana* photographs. This final recording ([available here](#)) is shared in the context of this paper and holds the encrusted memories of process. It references the physio-vocal philosophies of voice as witnessed in the work of voice studies and sound studies by scholar Nina Sun Eidsheim (2015), albeit in a subtle way. The interaction—between voice, sound, the body and its state of being through which it achieves comfort and performativity—emerges as a fascinating locus of further research in somaesthetics, sound studies, and cultural studies.

## Conclusions

In summation, Shusterman’s (2012, p. 26) key idea that the body is “the basic instrument of all human performance, our tool of tools, a necessity for all our perception, action and even thought” was explored through voice-led CompoSinging and singing in the piece “Sonic River.” Using this experience as a lens, I could suggest that if a composer/singer had to express a philosophy of life as practice, or an aesthetic of living as a singerly being, then the approach shared here could be a plausible and effective exemplar. The character of sound as an aggregate of thought, perception, movement, and affect, has come to mark the philosophies of musical and orally transmitted subject matters, including the *vedas*, across a wide variety of cultures. Shusterman (2013) differentiated between analytical, pragmatic and practical somaesthetics in his noteworthy essay. These distinctive paradigms from somaesthetics could be mapped to sound and music-making. In the same essay, he makes a clear case for somaesthetics as a bridging philosophy between theory and practice, not least because the currently emerging discipline studies “the living, feeling, sentient body” *theoretically*, while also advancing methods to implement *practical* approaches to “improving specific somatic skills of performance”



through “somatic understanding and awareness” (Shusterman, 2013, p. 16). Contextualizing this statement in the current context, in adopting a greater sensitivity towards the *soma*—while composing and singing with enhanced awareness—I believe that I may have achieved a greater sense of fulfilment, as an artist-academic who approaches research in creativity using her body as a central tool.

Through this journey I was also able to interrogate the established patriarchy in the Karnatik music of South India through the idiom of movement, within sound (as harmony) and through sound (as the movement of the singing and the yoga-engaged body). Bodily knowledge marks artistic research, “research done by artists in, through, or by means of their artistic practice” (Kirkkopelto, 2017, p. 134). As an artist-researcher whose practice is very much rooted in voice and its embodied vocality, I found that somaesthetics could be a method, product, and rationale. For, as Lilja (2015, p. 56) observes, “in artistic research there are no standard methods. We have a great acceptance for individual or genre specific methods and the evolution of methods over time during the process of work and research.” Somaesthetics has a good ally in artistic research and vice-versa. Drawing on my experiences in this study, I recommend that Karnatik music performance practice open its doors to somatic approaches to free itself from the imposed conventions that have rendered its identity rather dissociated from the body. I also call for more research in the fertile intersections that I have identified here, namely artistic research and somaesthetics, and singing and yoga. This paper anticipates a greater and rewarding application of somaesthetics in the contexts of music, voice studies, and sound studies.

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