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Silence as Borderland: a Semiotic Approach to the 'Silent' Pupil in Nineteenth Century Vocal Education

Josephine Hoegaerts

In 1855, Eduard Mennechet introduced his *Etudes sur la lecture à haute voix* by describing the successful lectures of M. Andrieux, who taught literature at the Collège de France. The professor did not cut an imposing figure, according to Mennechet: "a little old man, whose features were imprinted with the kind of spiritual ugliness that, in men, is often preferable over beauty".¹ Though visually unappealing, Andrieux's lectures attracted large numbers of listeners who would crowd the benches of the *Collège*, applaud him thunderously, and sit in nervous anticipation whispering, chattering and gossiping. When the professor started his lecture, however, silence immediately descended over the lecture hall.

The moment a hand gesture had requested silence, silence descended as if by magic, not the silence of the theatre, full of murmurs and the thousands little sounds that can float around a concert hall, but the silence one can barely find among the wax figures of Curtius. Not a word, not even a murmur or a twitch; even the common cold went quiet when M. Andrieux made to speak.²

Mennechet's admiration for Andrieux as a lecturer was not only based on the professor's great erudition and knowledge, but also on his capacity to arouse silence, a very particular kind of silence, in his audience. At first sight, it seems as if Andrieux commanded such rapturous silent attention by his powerful mode of speech. According to Mennechet, however, he did not possess a strong voice or great vocal skills. He was a good speaker, Mennechet argued, precisely because he did not have a naturally powerful instrument. "Where does this privilege that those who speak in public vainly claim come from? It is this: of the three voices given to man, M. Andrieux had none".³ Possessing neither a low, middle or high voice (the 'three voices' refer to the division of men's voices into tenors, barytons and basses), this lecturer appears to have no voice at all. Mennechet's explanation of Andrieux' success as a speaker was one pointing at the value and powers of (vocal) education: the professor's lack of all of the three voices had forced him to be vocally and rhetorically precise, and thoroughly trained. By carefully educating himself and preparing his speeches, he "made up for the absence of his voice so much, that one eventually believed him to have one".⁴

The silence and sounds of Mr. Andrieux' lectures speak powerfully to the paradoxical role both played in nineteenth century education, in which silence and speech were both praised and vilified simultaneously and in equal measure. The celebrated professor was notable for lacking voice, yet praised for his great speech, his audience's bustling and noisy presence was a testament to the lectures' popularity, but its silence underscored their quality. Both sound and silence are given an important place in the process of learning, of acquiring and imparting knowledge. This was the case for higher education – as in the lectures of Andrieux – but also in the education of younger children, whose silence on the schoolbenches was often assumed (or at least wished for) whilst they were being educated to speak properly. The nineteenth-

¹ E. Mennechet, *Etudes sur la lecture à haute voix* (Paris: Langlois et Leclerq, 1855), 13. "un petit homme, déjà vieux, dont les traits étaient empreints de cette laideur spirituelle, qui, chez les hommes, est souvent préférable à la beauté".

² *ibid.*, 14. "Aussitôt qu'un geste de sa main avait réclamé le silence, le silence se faisait comme par enchantement, non ce silence de théâtre entremêlé de chuchotements et de ces mille petits bruits qui se perdent dans l'étendue d'une salle de spectacle, mais ce silence qu'on ne trouve guère que parmi les figures de cire de Curtius. Pas un mot, pas un murmure, pas un mouvement; les rhumes mêmes se taisaient quand M. Andrieux allait parler".

³ *idem.* "Et pourquoi ce privilège que réclament vainement ceux qui parlent en public? Le voici: des trois voix que possède l'homme, M. Andrieux n'en avait aucune".

⁴ *idem.* "Il suppléait tellement à l'absence de sa voix, qu'on finissait par lui en croire une".

century classroom was designed to contain orderly children – quiet under the disciplinary gaze of the teacher. However, the ‘sound method’ of voicing individual letters when learning how to spell was practiced widely to teach literacy, and children were encouraged regularly to voice texts (such as songs and prayers). As Katherine Robson has shown in her study of memorized poems in the nineteenth century classroom the practice of learning poetry was largely based on constant and repeated vocalization.⁵ Practices of recitation were central to education throughout Europe and the US. It was also the subject of Mennechet’s manual in which Andrieux played such a pivotal role. At the same time, children’s instinctive noisiness was addressed by educators as well. Boys, in particular, were thought of as naturally boisterous creatures whose wild exhortations of (violent) play had to be molded into the more civilized utterances associated with adult men. Although the noise of boyishness was generally tolerated on the playground and even encouraged as school manuals and teachers’ journals represented war-games and rough play as proper activities for boys, it was to be contrasted with quietude in the classroom. Their silence in the classroom was the result of discipline, but had – as will become clear throughout this text - an emancipatory echo as it was mobilized in an effort to turn (male) children into adults and citizens.

In what follows, I attempt to disentangle the different meanings and roles silence could have in nineteenth century practices of vocal education, pertaining mainly to speech and pronunciation (rather than singing⁶). Being able to speak publicly, and to speak well, is a central skill for the modern citizen. In a representative democracy – in which voting and making one’s voice ‘heard’ is the driving metaphor *and* a central practice of gaining access to power. ‘Audibility’ therefore has a very real impact on one’s social and political possibilities. This was, perhaps, even more the case in nineteenth-century representative democracies in which the vote was still to be acquired by several groups who would claim their rights through passionate speeches, or loud protests. And, more practically, in which voices without technical amplification had to hold sway. In order to be (politically) audible in the nineteenth century parliament, church, court and other public spaces, having not only the requisite rhetorical skills, but being able to make them heard acoustically, was essential.⁷ Young people’s education as vocalists was therefore highly important both within the institutions of education and far beyond them, and different practice of silence were central to that education.⁸

Throughout the century, a plethora of manuals guiding aspiring orators and their educators toward good use of the voice and proper speech were published. I am basing my analysis of the role of silence in vocal education on a database of c.600 documents consisting of such manuals, along with treatises on vocal pathology and ‘improper’ use of the voice. Held in collections in Paris, London and Leipzig,⁹ these

⁵ Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats. Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Princeton University press, 2013).

⁶ Singing represents a somewhat special case of vocalization: the voice in song is accorded another social role than the voice in speech. It is, for example, generally connected more closely to the female realm of childcare, or to the notions of childish innocence. (cf. Ian Biddle, “Caught in the Silken Throat: Modernist Investments in the Male Vocal Fetish” in *Masculinity in Western Musical Practice*, eds. Ian Biddle and Kirsten Gibson (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 259-278.

⁷ See Josephine Hoegaerts, “Speaking like Intelligent Men: Vocal Articulations of Authority and Identity in the House of Commons in the Nineteenth Century”, *Radical History Review* (themed issue: Sound Politics), 121, (2015): 123-144. Róisín Ryan-Flood, Rosalind Gill, *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections* (Routledge, 2010).

⁸ Joseph Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2001).

⁹ More particularly, I base my analysis on a corpus of texts on vocal pathology and education, held at the Wellcome Library and the libraries of the Royal College of Music and Royal Academy of Music in London; the Bibliothèque National de France (containing the historical library of the Conservatoire National de Paris), and the libraries of the Samuel Heinicke Institut and the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Felix Mendelssohn in Leipzig.

documents represent the knowledge available to experts and educators in most of Western Europe.¹⁰ They were written by a growing class of voice professionals: laryngologists, speech therapists, singing masters, etc, all of whom became increasingly specialized and 'scientific' throughout the nineteenth century.¹¹ As their respective disciplines grew and became more mainstream, their writings also spread more widely, and the database also contains a large number of manuals for non-experts, thus spreading notions of proper speech and its production amongst a large audience of middle-class readers, including teachers, who were often explicitly addressed as the educators of the citizens and orators of the future.

In what follows, I first explore what silence meant to these voice professionals and their audience through discourse-analysis:¹² how they used the term, what definitions of silence were presented to them and what sounds or noises they juxtaposed to silence. Secondly, I move away from discourse analysis and offer an alternative reading of the same body of texts. I will reframe the roles these differently understood silences could play in nineteenth-century education. Drawing upon semioticians' theories of silence as an 'empty mark', I aim to go beyond a description of historical discourse on silence, and try to understand the meanings these silences could carry in nineteenth century vocal education. In a third and final section, I focus on the educational use of silence as a tool to, ultimately, shape speech, zeroing in on the paradoxical roles of sound in (vocal) education and its fraught relationship with the cultivation of civilization and citizenship.

What is silence? – 19th century discourse

Before going into the use and value of silence for (vocal) education, let us have a look at what silence represented for nineteenth-century educators. Coming to a clear conclusion on their opinions is difficult, as interpretations and understandings of silence differed widely. The contradictions are of course rooted in the ambiguous notions of proper behavior for boys and girls, adults and children, citizens and 'others' in the nineteenth century,¹³ but perhaps also connected to the uncanny nature of silence itself.¹⁴ How do we note the 'presence' of silence, after all? Or: how can we really interpret what is essentially a 'gap', an 'empty space' between sounds?¹⁵ Edwin Lee, who published his handbook on the 'removal' of stammering

¹⁰ Although there are, obviously, cultural and linguistic differences between the knowledge generated in these three places, their scientific and educational discourse circulated quite easily between the three centres of knowledge (through scientists' correspondence, translations of manuals and studies, and the mobility of their authors).

¹¹ On the development of vocal health and speech pathology as a scientific field, see e.g. Denyse Rockey, *Speech Disorder in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Croom Helm, 1980), Heini Hakosalo, *On Speaking Terms. Scientific Boundary Work and the Discovery of Aphasia, 1861-1874* (Oulu, PhD diss, 2006).

¹² I have searched these texts, first and foremost, for their use of the word silence (or its French and German equivalents *silence* and *Stille*) along with phrases and verbs denoting practices of silence (*schweigen*, *se taire*, keep quiet). Terms related to, but not synonymous with, silence have been taken into account as well. Words such as *leise*, quiet, *doux*, etc can be used to describe degrees of both sound and silence, depending on context. Including them in the analysis gave a more broad sense of nineteenth-century understandings of silence and, more importantly, helped me to avoid the common oversimplification of defining silence as the mere absence of sound.

¹³ On the gendered implications of citizenship in the nineteenth century, see e.g. Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870–1920*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ On the uncanny quality of silence, see e.g. Mladen Dolar, "The Linguistics of the Voice" in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012) 539-554, 540.

¹⁵ The interpretation of silence as a 'pause' is current both in music/musicology (the 'rests' between the notes or breathing pauses) and linguistics (in which interpunction is read as signs of silence). See e.g. Erja Hannula, "Sign Between", in *Snow, Forest, Silence. The Finnish Tradition of Semiotics*, ed. Eero Tarasti (Bloomsbury: Indiana University Press, 1999), 372-385.

and squinting in 1841 provides a good example of the ambiguity that derived from attempting to understand a concept that was mainly defined by what it is not: it is *not* sound, noise, speech or music – and yet it is intimately connected to all those things.

Idiots, who have no ideas to express, are generally dumb, or can merely articulate a few words or phrases without meaning, of which they will cause their ordinary wants to be supplied, but they are incapable of conversing. Speech, however, is not a natural gift, but is acquired by education: hence those born deaf are also dumb [...] Dumbness, therefore, does not consist in the absence of voice, but of speech and the deficiency of ideas, as most dumb persons can utter a variety of inarticulate sounds; but it by no means follows that a facility in speaking necessarily exists in proportion to the quantity of the ideas or the power of the mind. Many men of genius and great imaginative powers are but little talkers, and some not unfrequently experience difficulty in expressing their thoughts on any particular subject; while empty-headed fellows are frequently very loquacious [...] On the other hand, many highly intellectual men are great talkers, and not unfrequently jest or talk nonsense by way of relaxation; so that silence and gravity of demeanor are not always a proof of superior wisdom, though they are frequently considered so by the multitude, and are in consequence sometimes assumed by persons who either have nothing to say, or who wish to impress others with a sense of their superiority.¹⁶

If nothing else, Lee's confusion alerts us to the complexity of the issue, and to the way opinions were generally split.

Lee's distinction between 'silence' and 'dumbness' points to an important dichotomy that runs through the discourse of vocal educators in the nineteenth century (although it is generally expressed with much less clarity). The absence of speech, according to Lee, can take two very distinct forms. On the one hand, it could be the result of a corresponding lack on intelligence: those who missed the natural ability to coherently marshal their thoughts as well as those deprived of the education allowing them to frame their thoughts in a proper manner were bound to remain silent. Those with sufficient ability as well as the right educational background, on the other hand, could make a conscious choice to withhold comment. Education and 'proper' breeding, therefore, defined the meaning of particular silences for Lee and other authors: it's what affords people the capacity of speech and language, and what allows them to choose silence rather than be reduced to it. (This ability was considered central to political practice as well: 'dignified' silence could play a large role in building an individual career in politics or mounting an individual career in politics or mounting a political campaign).¹⁷

The importance of 'choice' or willful practice for the interpretation of the dignified form of silence described by different authors also resulted in the recognition that active silence can have many meanings – as many, or perhaps more, than can be expressed by speech. Honoré Mathieu, a French author attempting to "perfect" the speech of "all men" noted that there was as much art in silence as in speech

¹⁶ Edwin Lee, *On Stammering and Squinting and on the methods for their removal* (London John Churchill, 1841), 3-4.

¹⁷ Josephine Hoegaerts, "Burgerlijke stilte in het parlement" (Bourgeois silence in parliament) in *Stilte: essays over macht, cultuur en verandering*, eds. Pieter Verstraete and Josephine Hoegaerts (Ghent: Academic Scientific Publishers, 2015).

if there is a lot of art in knowing how to speak well, there is no less in knowing when to keep quiet. There is a sort of eloquent silence that can approve or condemn; there is a silence of discretion and one of respect.¹⁸

The great communicative power of these silences was believed to derive from the richness of thought that lies behind it. In a sense, silence could be read (or heard) as a sign of an educated mind at work. Adolf Kussmaul, a physician whose work was concerned explicitly with teaching people how to speak 'correctly', likewise insisted that actively not speaking (in German *schweigen*) was a way to enable thinking and philosophy. "The philosophical, thought of the highest level, is best achieved in silence".¹⁹ This, too, is an active choice for silence, though, and one that ultimately leads to superior speech: "Clever clogs and deep thinkers are, in my experience, rather reticent with words, children and uncouth people, however, just say anything that comes into their heads".²⁰

What this type of active silence signals is, ultimately, a great capacity for vocal and mental/moral control. Silence could therefore not only signal intellectual a philosophical ability, but strength as well. Albert Lemoine's, lecturer at a Paris teachers' college, associated conscious silence with detached endurance, comparing the ability to refrain from crying with the control needed to keep one's body still.

We say of a man that he is strong, that he has power over himself, when he can bear pain without showing it, when he can lock his anger in his heart and show an impassive face to onlookers. He is strong, he proves his strength by not showing any sign of the state of his soul, because he imposes silence on his cries, and consciously uses his muscles to keep his body still.²¹

Lemoine's notion of silence – as not just the 'absence' of cries but the active suppression of sound, 'imposing' silence, underscores the active nature of this silence, and hints at its entanglement with identities defined by age and gender as well. It is no coincidence that his example of stoic silence and the suppression of pain and emotions is presented as "un homme". This silence is ultimately a political one – one that articulates power in different social settings and one that can be mobilized in representative politics as well. As any master of eloquence knew, the effective public/political speaker was the one who could indeed 'impose' silence, not only on the world around him, but also on his own embodied performance of calm and rationality. Eugène Paignon, writing of the passions that played a role in parliamentary speech very explicitly connected the recovery of 'calm' in modern political debate with silence. Parliamentary debate, and the French parliament in particular, was notorious for its passionate nature – a state of affairs that became increasingly distrusted in the nineteenth-century age of science and rationality.²² By the time Paignon was writing, gentlemen (including politicians) were increasingly expected

¹⁸ Honoré Mathieu, *De la parole et du bégaiement* (chez l'auteur, 1847), 98. "s'il y a beaucoup d'art.. à savoir.. parler à propos.. il n'y en a pas moins.. à savoir se taire. Il y a.. un silence éloquent.. qui sert à approuver.. et à condamner;.. il y a un silence..de discrétion.. et de respect."

¹⁹ Adolf Kussmaul, *Störungen der Sprache. Versuch einer Pathologie der Sprache* (Leipzig: Verlag von F.C.W. Vogel, 1877), 61. "Das philosophische, in den höchsten Abstractionen sich ergehende Denken vollzieht sich zuletzt am besten schweigend".

²⁰ idem, "Kluge Köpfe und tiefe Denker sind erfahrungsgemäss mit Worten zurückhaltend, Kinder aber und unbedachte Menschen schätzen Alles heraus was ihnen einfällt".

²¹ Albert Lemoine, *De la physionomie et de la parole* (Paris: G. Baillière, 1865), 108. "On dit d'un homme qu'il est fort, qu'il a du pouvoir sur lui-même, lorsqu'il supporte sans se trahir une vive douleur, renferme sa colère dans son cœur et offre à ceux qui le regardent un visage impassible. Il est fort, il fait preuve de force en ne révélant par aucun signe l'état de son âme, parce qu'il impose silence à ses cris, maintient par la volonté tous les muscles de son corps dans l'immobilité".

²² On the history of rhetorics and expressions of passion in the house of commons see Chris Reid, *Imprison'd Wranglers: The Rhetorical Culture of the House of Commons, 1760-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), on

to exude reason and logic, rather than displaying emotion. Doing so, it seems, depended largely on keeping a dignified silence: 'le calme' would ultimately carry more power than the noisy 'voice' of passion.

The world is quiet (*fait silence*) and if sometimes the lost voice of political passion is raised, it only calls to what is no longer there, and peacefulness (*le calme*) answers.²³

If the political world Paignon and his fellow rhetoricians were interested in actively chose and 'did' silence, others were deemed incapable of making or doing anything else – and thus were silent out of necessity, in an essentially passive way. The choice not to speak was open to interpretation, and could be a sign of great intelligence, rationality or calm. Constant silence, however, was the realm of the 'idiot' who did not refrain from but simply had no access to speech or language. According to surgeon and military doctor Mansuès-François Ramont

It is because man only speaks in order to express his thoughts, that idiotism or the complete obliteration of all intellectual faculties necessarily leads to silence. Therefore, in a man born an idiot, language does not develop.²⁴

Like Edwin Lee, Ramont equated the absence of speech with the absence of ideas to express – thus amalgamating 'mutism' and 'dumbness' with idiocy. For these authors, the silence of the 'dumb' adult or child is not a choice, but the necessary result of a defect so profound it almost strips these silent beings of their humanity. Rather than painstakingly trying to analyze their silence, mining it for the various meanings that were thought to lie behind the 'active' silence of dignified speakers choosing to withhold sound, this silence was quickly dismissed as empty of meaning.

The linear causal relationship between a lack of thought and 'mutism' was expressed as a necessary, automatic –if not always physiological - one. Physiologist (and self-appointed 'phoniatriest') Colombat de l'Isère²⁵ also stressed the 'necessity' of a silence connected to a lack of thought:

If we did not have the great advantage of thinking and abstracting, we would be condemned to absolute silence; it is obvious that without ideas we would not be talking, because speech is the audible expression of our thoughts and the true picture of our sensations. Cretins and idiots are usually silent because they are more or less completely deprived of ideas; which, as I have said, necessarily entails silence.²⁶

rhetorics in French parliamentary history see ed. D'Almeida, Fabrice, *L'éloquence politique en France et en Italie de 1870 à nos jours* (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 2001).

²³ Eugène Paignon, *Eloquence et improvisation: art de la parole oratoire au barreau, à la tribune, à la chaire* (Paris: Cotillon, 1846), 60. "Le monde fait silence et attend, et si parfois la voix perdue des passions politiques s'élève, elle appelle ce qui n'est plus, et le calme lui répond".

²⁴ Mansuès-François Ramont, *De la voix et de la parole* (Paris: Imprimerie de Feugueray, 1803). "C'est encore parce que l'homme ne parle que pour exprimer ses pensées, que l'idiotisme ou l'oblitération totale des facultés intellectuelles entraîne nécessairement le silence. Ainsi qu'un homme soit né idiot, la parole ne se développera point chez lui."

²⁵ de l'Isère specialized in the study of the organs of speech. His work could (and was) therefore often classified as 'physiology' (the study of organs), although he himself would often use the more specific neologism 'phoniatrie' to denote his specific interest in the organs of sound and speech (and the importance of phonology in his work).

²⁶ Colombat de l'Isère, *L'orthophonie ou physiologie et thérapeutique du bégaiement et de tous les vices de la prononciation* (Paris: Mansut Fils, 1833). "Si nous n'avions pas le précieux avantage de penser et d'abstraire, nous serions condamnés à un mutisme absolu ; car il est évident que sans idées nous ne parlerions pas, puisque la parole n'est que l'expression sonore de nos pensées et le tableau fidèle de nos sensations. Les crétins et les autres idiots ne sont ordinairement muets que parce qu'ils sont plus ou moins complètement privés d'idées ; ce qui, comme je viens de le dire, entraîne nécessairement le silence"

This, as we will see later, had consequences for the place of silence in discourses of vocal education. It meant that silence could be both pathology and cure. Whereas ‘thinking and abstracting’ was a practice associated with quiet contemplation, it was not a part of the ‘idiot’s’ repertoire of silence. Or rather, the silence of rational thought was not absolute, it was relative – and commensurate – to the level of thoughtful speech that would follow it, a cure to the noisy madness of modern life, allowing the ‘we’ addressed in the text to eventually rise above meaningless chatter and speak clearly and meaningfully. By defining speech as the ‘audible expression of our thoughts’, de l’Isère created a hierarchy between different sounds (speech versus mere sounds that do not reflect thought), but also between different silences (the silence preceding expression, and the absolute silence to which one could be ‘condemned’ through mental illness). The difference between curable and incurable mutism was therefore not related to physical impediments (such as deafness, or an uncooperative tongue), but rather to cognitive abilities or the lack thereof.²⁷

Silence as Borderland: a semiotic approach

The above analysis shows to some extent what cultural currency silence had in nineteenth century Europe – but mainly approaches silence as a concept rather than a practice. Even the distinction between active, willful silence and passive silence, as a pathology or (cognitive) lack is ultimately a discursive one. In retracing how authors defined the term silence and its place in a wider educational and political discourse, we learn more about the place of silence in written language than in actual (acoustic) practice. It is no surprise, perhaps, that their main interpretation of silence as a sign of wisdom and calm corresponds with the image of silence we essentially know: the one that has been anchored in sayings in several European languages.²⁸ Most authors cited in the above section would stereotypically agree that ‘speaking is silver and silence is gold’, even if some silences were distrusted. Whether silence is a sign of wisdom or idiocy, however, it remains to be seen how it *works* and what it could *do*. I will therefore base my analysis on a different method of interpretation, that of semiotics, aiming to understand not only how silence was defined, but what it signified. As semiotician Pirjo Kukkonen notes, silence does not signify in self-evident ways.

How should we analyze silence, the missing and the unobservable structure in discourse, the empty mark, the form that simultaneously exists and yet does not exist?²⁹

In Kukkonen’s analysis, noise (a “sign that does not refer to anything”) figures as the opposite of silence (an empty mark full of meaning). And so silence appears as the absence of a sign – and yet this absence *can* refer to different thing, can be a meaningful element of discourse, but without offering a univocal sign to aid our understanding, thus forcing us to rely on cultural, linguistic and social contexts more than a word or sound would.

As the discourse-analysis in the previous section of this paper showed as well, silence is not only dependent on its cultural and historical contexts, but is culturally and historically variable itself. Acknowledging and analyzing its cultural specificity and historicity is central to how the concept of silence has generally been studied thus far: with anthropological and cultural historical approaches. David le Breton’s anthropology of silence *Du silence* focusses on the social and cultural associations attached to silence in different societies

²⁷ The enduring confusion between ‘mutism’, ‘dumbness’ and a lack of thought points to the casual infantilisation of Deaf speakers and signers alike, which lead to their (political) silencing, but also placed mutism in an educational context (as seemingly eternal infants, the speechless seemed to be in constant need of education)

²⁸ Pirjo Kukkonen, “On Silence: the Semiotics of Silence”, in *Acta Semiotica Fennica*, ed. Eero Tarasti (Imatra: International Semiotics Institute, 1993), 283-298, 287.

²⁹ Idem, p.283.

(mainly contrasting silence with a tendency to hyper-communication he identifies as modern).³⁰ Likewise, histories of silence such as Alain Corbin's *Histoire du Silence* and the cultural history under direction of Marjo Kaarinen (*Hiljaisuuden Kulttuurihistoria*) bear witness to the existence of different silences.³¹ They go a long way in documenting and explaining the changes in how silence has been defined and how the concept has been mobilized at different times and in different societies. Like I am in this analysis, however, these anthropologies and histories of silence struggle with the particular nature of silence and the difficulty of studying it through texts. Written texts are necessarily 'quiet' in themselves, but refer to language in a way that makes silence either disappear, or turns it into a 'sign' (the word silence, a comma, a rest in a musical score) of which the signification is unclear.

Especially when studying silence in the past – including the nineteenth century educational silences under scrutiny here – we are nevertheless reduced to looking for it in written documents. Practices of silence, like those of sound, are temporary and therefore inaccessible to historians.³² In an effort to uncover more than the changing definition of silence as a concept, I therefore turn to Kukkonen and her fellow semioticians to study silence not as a 'term' but as an 'empty mark'. "Silence", she writes, "means what it conveys". The empty space carries meaning by interacting with the sounds, noises and expectations surrounding it. Crucially, there is meaning in the empty mark itself – it does not derive its meaning from its surroundings, the creation of meaning is the result of a mutual exchange between signs (speech, text) and the empty mark (silence). In Debora Tannen and Muriel Troike's *Perspectives on Silence* this notions is further developed by Jaakko Lehtonen and Kari Sajavaara in a chapter on "The Silent Finn", in which silence is forwarded as a practice in its own right, rather than the lack or opposite of communicative practice. Although the chapter at first sight appears to be an anthropological account of the use of silence in a particular culture (referring to the stereotypical trope of a particularly 'Finnish' dislike for speech),³³ Lehtonen and Sajavaara effectively present a radically different approach. Their study of the "use and tolerance of silence" present silence as the primary stuff of conversation, interspersed with speech, rather than the other way around. Not as rests or breaths in the main material of the sentence, but as an essential part of communication. Central to their argument is therefore not where speech begins and ends, but rather what are "the limits of silence which will be tolerated by participants in conversation before they feel compelled to speak".³⁴

Rather than mere 'pauses' in sound or conversation, then, silences are treated here as an integral part of human communication and cultural signification. They do not appear as chosen or necessary interruptions in practices of sound, but as meaningful practices in their own right. In the 1993 *Acta Semiotica Fennica*, Richard Littlefield makes a similar argument for the role of silence in music. Rather than focusing on the pauses and breaths that characterize music, Littlefield describes silences as a 'frame' that provides the border separating a piece of music from its context. "Silences", he notes, "play a constitutive role by

³⁰ David Le Breton, *Du Silence* (Paris: Métalié, 1997). See also Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, "Silence", in *Keywords in Sound* eds. David Nivak and Matt Sakakeeny, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

³¹ Marjo Kaartinen, *Hiljaisuuden Kulttuurihistoria* (Turku: University of Turku Press, 2015) and Alain Corbin, *Histoire du Silence* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2016).

³² New approaches in 'sound studies' have laid out a number of strategies to study the sounds of the past, but few of those could also be applied to silence. See e.g. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (Oxford: Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies, 2012).

³³ Intriguingly, semiotic approaches to silence seem to have been developed mainly within the 'Finnish' school of semiotics. Whilst cultural (and sometimes linguistic-ethnic) associations between Finnishness and silence abound in this research in ways that may suggest these theories have a limited applicability, the impetus to dig into the meaning of silence on a theoretical level is a valuable one and offers possibilities far outside the Fenno-Ugric landscape.

³⁴ Jaakko Lehtonen and Kari Sajavaara, "The Silent Finn" in *Perspectives on Silence* eds. Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike, (Ablex Publishing, 1985), 193-201, 194.

separating the musical act from the world".³⁵ In a visual representation of the silences 'framing' music, Littlefield distinguishes between horizontal, temporal silences that signify the beginning and end of a musical performance. These, he notes, are defined by convention or, as Lehtonen and Sajaraava would have it, by the limits of silence the musicians and audience will tolerate. On the vertical axis, there are silences that represent the physical limits of the human ear, a 'necessary silence' defined by which pitches or volumes constitute sound or silence to the listener. Musical practice, in this representation, appears as something that is explicitly limited by borders defined as either natural or cultural (although both are explicitly human contexts).

Kuva 1 R. Littlefield, *Musical Borderlines, Silence as Frame*, p.325

In very simple terms, the silence in the concert hall when the conductor raises his baton, and when he lowers it, signal the beginning and end of what counts as music (something John Cage thoroughly understood: his 4'33" explicitly ruptures this distinction). And whilst listening to this piece of music contained between temporary silences, what we hear is also limited by the physiology of our ears and the range of the instruments and singers involved.

This representation of silence as a multi-faceted 'frame' also applies, I would argue, for the notions of citizenship and humanity that are represented in nineteenth century texts concerning vocal education. Littlefield's distinction between 'natural' silences and those defined by convention overlap with the categories employed by these authors. Whereas, for the 'idiot', silence defines his given (physical) abilities and is not limited in time, the wise man's silence is temporal and determined by convention, "modalized by audience's expectations of what will follow".³⁶ As an empty mark, the silence of both 'idiots' and wise men is filled with meaning by its audience, who bases these on silence's interaction with the speech that follows it (or fails to follow). Moreover, the silence 'preceding' music (or, in our case, rational speech), has an "active quality of doing", it announces discourse and therefore already carries meaning. Re-drawing

³⁵ Richard Littlefield, "Musical Borderlines: Silence as Frame", in *Acta Semiotica Fennica*, 323-334, 331.

³⁶ Ibid, p.326.

Littlefield's visualization of silence as a frame with the above examples on the role of silence as a harbinger of dignity or 'dumbness' in mind, we come to an understanding of the role of silence in education that did not present itself in a discourse-analysis of these texts. Discursively, silence was generally defined through what it was not (i.e. not rational speech, in the case of the necessary silence of the 'idiot', and not noise, in the case of the chosen silence of the wise man). But the practices of silence proposed for education were far more than punctuation or 'rests' between sounds carrying meaning. Silences played an important role in defining conventional speech and conventional speakers by 'framing' moments of speech, and by 'framing' the identity of a good speaker with a path of educational growth. The cultivation of adult, proper speakers and of their meaningful speech depended on this framework of empty markers, as will become clear in the following section.

Silence as the path to (civilized) speech

The examples cited above show mainly how different silences work on a short-term scale. The accomplished, rational speaker announces his own speech by a limited amount of silence (the audience essentially knows that the silence of a calm politician will come to an end soon). In doing so, he already distinguishes himself *in* silence from those whose silences are understood as physical. For the accomplished speaker also knows, as Lehtonen and Sajavaara suggest how much silence is acceptable or bearable in the general cultural context and specific situation in which they are expected to speak. Those whose silence is defined as a 'necessary' result of their lack of intellect are not silent 'acoustically', after all, they just misjudge which sounds are considered proper, 'human' speech or fail to recognize the 'right' balance between speech and silence. The notion of silence as a 'frame' worked on a more long-term scale as well, over the course of one's 'coming of age' rather than just within a period of conversation. The silence to the left of the frame, active and defined by convention, was considered to be crucial to education and to be an important part of the process of becoming a rational, vocally competent adult.

The silence of the music lesson is a case in point. Although different systems of musical education circulated in Europe (some of which involved movement as well as sound), the music classroom was thought generally to benefit from silence and quietude. One of the main goals of singing education was to smooth away the rough edges of children's – specifically male and lower class children's - voices and teach them to sing (and speak) quietly and calmly. Or, as choirmaster and educator John Evans phrased it, "every opportunity should be taken advantage of for correcting the rough, noisy and unpleasant speaking of the children, either in the schoolroom or the playground. The teacher should aim to establish a quiet, gentle and refined manner of speaking".³⁷ German music educator Kurt Schilling even stated that some children should keep quiet entirely during choral practice.

Now observe your pupils. Can you hear and see the trumpeters? You know, the ones who turn blue in the face! Make them go out of the way and be quiet. But those over there, who press their chin into their chest when singing deeper tones, let them sing you scales: can you hear how the clear tone falls apart, and starts to sound more hoarse and tense? And there one even keels over, and the high notes sound plaintive and weepy, as if produced by a different organ altogether. There's a whole bunch of such singers in the classroom; make them keep quiet. To those also add those who sing so prettily 'through the nose'. (Now you will be convinced there would be no particular advantage in letting them sing *wie ihnen der Schnabel gewachsen ist* (after their own fashion [literally: as they are beaked])). [...] Now listen to the sound: grand, but not harsh or shouty, rather full and rounded; not hoarse, but

³⁷ John Evans, *The school music teacher. A guide to teaching singing in schools by tonic sol-fa notation and staff notation* (London: J. Curwen and sons, 1903), 252-253.

clear and not croaked; in the high register bright yet not shrill, and in the lower registers calm, and not as if they want to finish you off.³⁸

At first sight, Schilling's remarks seem to confirm the stereotypical image of disciplinary order in the late nineteenth – early twentieth century classroom. A harsh regime in which those who do not conform to the (vocal) norms and reigning esthetics of the bourgeois standards of education are simply ignored, and 'silenced' in the most literal way. In an educational context, however, this silence too must be placed at the left of our 'frame'. In the end all pupils would have to join in the music lesson, which makes their silence – though imposed – temporal and indeed active, infused with a practice of listening and re-learning how to use their voice.

Even children whose voice was considered to be pathological (a stammering one, for example, which was generally seen as a physical impediment) were held to this particular type of silence. There was a general notion, among therapists with an 'educational' approach to speech impediments, that temporary silence would be beneficial to stammerers. This allowed them to 'rest their voice', and to distance themselves from the "bad habits" they were thought to have acquired.³⁹ For adults and children alike, forcing them to keep an active silence for several days was pre-scribed as the start of their cure. Like those barred from singing in class, however, this silence had to lead ultimately to speech/vocal production. Stammering-expert Walter Yearsley prescribed a week of 'silence' to his patients, after which they were expected to pick up speech again.

Silence, so far as relating to the cure, means, no attempt to conversation with anyone, under any circumstance (and this must be observed) for a period of at least seven days. [...] In the presence of others, he must be dumb. [...] Silence does not imply that the pupil is debarred from any speech whatever during this course, but that he shall not practise conversation with others. Stammerers and stutterers are all capable of practising reading, or any vocal exercise when alone.⁴⁰

The precise definition of silence could differ between different authors, but for all of them it constituted a willful suppression of otherwise intuitive practices. In fact, stammerers were encouraged to display the kind of control generally attributed to competent speakers. They were to show strength and control much in the

³⁸ Kurt Schilling, *Schulpraktische Richtlinien für Singen, Sprechen und Rechtschreiben*, (Meissen: Sächsische Schulbuchhandlung, 1915). "Da beobachte einmal Deine Kinder! Hörst un siehst Du die Trompeter? Weisst schon, die so blau anlaufen im Gesicht! Die stelle abseits und lass sie schweigen. Aber von dem dort, der bei dem tiefen Tone das Kinn so an die Brust drückte, lass Dir eine Tonleiter vorsingen: hörst Du, wie der strenge Ton auseinanderflattert, heiser und angestrengt klingt? Und jetzt kippt er gar um, und wie von einem ganz anderen Organe klingts in der Höhe wichlich und heulend. Noch eine ganze Unzahl solcher Sanger steckt in der Klasse; lass sie schweigen. Auch die stelle dazu, die so angenehm "durch die Nase" singen. (Hier bist Du wohl überzeugt, dass es kein besonderer Vorteil wäre, wenn die weitersingen wollen, "wie ihnen der Schnabel gewachsen ist"! [...]) Nun höre den Ton: Doll, und doch nicht hart und schreiend, sonder rund und weich; nicht heisser, sondern klar und doch niet quäkig; in der Höhe leuchtend und doch nicht schrill; und in der Tiefe ruhig und nich, als wollte sie Dir den Garaus machen."

³⁹ e.g. Harold Barwell, *Diseases of the larynx*, Oxford Med, 1907, p.44, "The voice must be rested as much as possible"; Lucien Bourdy, *Cours pour la cure du bégaiement. Rapport à la Société de médecine de la Sarthe sur la méthode de Chervin, par une commission officielle*, (Paris: impr. de A. Leguicheux, 1872), "Par ce silence, on rompt avec les mauvaises habitudes et l'on est plus apte à se guérir". See also Josephine Hoegaerts, "Is it a habit or is it a disease?": the changing social meaning of stammering in nineteenth-century Western Europe. *Terrains et Travaux*, 23 (2), (2013), 17-37.

⁴⁰ Walter A. Yearsley, *A practical self-cure of stammering and stuttering* (Copyrighted and Registered, published by Mrs. Yearsley, 1909), 106.

way Lemoine represented it: “he proves his strength by not showing any sign of the state of his soul, because he imposes silence on his cries” (or because he imposes silence on his syncopated, stuttering sounds). As Jules Godard expressed it, there was a reason for this silence – it was, in other words, not only an active but also a purposeful one. This silence was not about discipline, but about the practices and discourse ahead.

The reason for this strict silence seems very just. After a lesson of one hour one day, a few days of the same lesson, the respiratory disorder that was to disappear, still exists: therefore, if the subject moved back into his old conditions he would necessarily stammer again, and so lose the benefit of his work, because he will not have had the chance to assimilate the good habits his teacher has tried to develop. Moreover, this silence certainly has a happy effect on the morale of students: they calm down, so to speak, they collect themselves while sparing their organs, the contractions, spasms and other conditions in which they are cornered. Isn't immobility usually the first thing we impose on an injured body?⁴¹

After having gone through a period of silence, the ‘injured’ voice – like the injured body – was expected to become functional and indeed ameliorated, and therefore this period had to be clearly limited in time and in definition (i.e. silence is a lack of conversation with other pupils, or a source of calm). For educators of children, the amount of active silence that is ‘bearable’ as a precursor to speech, was defined not only by the broad cultural context in which they operated, but also in the particular context of the institution in which this silence was imposed. Auguste Boyer readily admitted to the limits of the usefulness of silence, even for children with a speech impediment: “it will be understood that it is impossible to demand absolute silence of the child for such a period of time, and even if one would want to, it could not be obtained”.⁴²

Even if we think of the nineteenth century classroom as a place of disciplinary silence, Boyer's suggestion shows that educators generally accepted that this was not the reality: not only did he expect the classroom to not be silent for any length of time; he, like other educators, specifically thought of silence as a ‘frame’ to the practices honed in therapeutic and educational settings. Silence thus appears as a borderland, a sign in between: between ‘proper’ vocalization and the wider acoustic landscape, but also between imperfect speakers (children, stammerers) and their transformation into vocally competent citizens. In order to speak well, these authors argue ultimately, one has to spend some time being silent. Not because it enhances discipline, but because it ‘frames’ moments of song and speech. Silence in and of itself, then, is not enough: after this framing practice, one had to ‘chew Demosthenes’ pebbles’ as one rhetorician phrased it:

It must be noted, unfortunately, that our education does not require us to speak in public. Silence is held up to youth as if it were decency. In the *Lycée*, a lesson is announced, homework is read, and that's it. There are no improvisation exercises. This is wrong, because

⁴¹ Jules Godard, *Du Bégaiement et de son traitement physiologique* (Paris: J.B. Baillière et fils, 1877). “La raison de ce silence rigoureux nous paraît très-juste. Au bout d'une heure de leçon, d'un jour, de quelques jours même de leçon, le trouble respiratoire, qu'il s'agissait de faire disparaître, existe encore: par conséquent, si le sujet se replace dans ses anciennes conditions, il bégaiera forcément, et perdra ainsi le bénéfice de son travail, car il n'aura pu s'assimiler en aussi peu de temps les bonnes habitudes qu'on s'efforce de lui donner. De plus, ce silence agit certainement d'une façon très heureuse sur le moral des élèves: ils se calment pour ainsi dire, ils se recueillent tout en évitant à leurs organes, les contractions, les spasmes et autres troubles dont ils sont le siège. L'immobilité n'est-elle pas, dans un autre ordre d'idées, la première condition imposée à un organe lésé?”.

⁴² Auguste Boyer, *De la mue de la voix chez le jeune sourd parlant : thèse pour l'agrégation de l'enseignement des sourds-muets présentée et soutenue en octobre 1892* (Paris: G. Carré et C. Naud, 1896), 26. “on comprendra qu'il est impossible d'exiger un silence absolu de l'enfant pendant un tel espace de temps, et, du reste, le voudrait-on, on ne pourrait l'obtenir”.

the art of speech must be learned and in order to be an orator one always has to, more or less, chew the pebble of Demosthenes.⁴³

Conclusion

It may have seemed like a counterintuitive research question. Why would one study the history of silence and look for it in vocal education, a practice that seems exclusively concerned with sound? As I have attempted to show throughout this text, silence was not only present in the cultivation of pupils' voices by nineteenth century educators, it was considered essential. Parts of the importance accorded to silence in (vocal) education derived from the close connection between practices of silence and articulations of power in nineteenth-century European social contexts. That connection, however, was hardly straightforward: silence did not necessarily denote submission, and even enforced silence was not necessarily mobilized to ensure discipline. Rather, the cultivation of vocal skills went hand in hand with an education that embraced carefully controlled practices of silence. The vocabulary of silence employed in the documents pertaining to such an education was, as shown in the first section of this text, a sophisticated and multi-faceted one that allowed for distinctions between different silences, articulating different identities for those deploying them. Most importantly, it distinguished between temporary silences (the result of human choice, either by pupils themselves, or imposed by teachers) and 'absolute' silence, defined by circumstance (such as illness or disability).

As temporary silences were generally read as signs of intelligence, an attribute of the modern, rational speaker, they could be mobilized in educational practices in order to buttress the cultivation of proper speech and the construction of the proper speaker as well. Silence was thus central to vocal education not as an aspect of educational discipline, but as a framework for and precursor to speech. Paradoxically, the same 'empty mark' that could signify pathology and infantilism, could also be wielded as a cure: temporary, educational, therapeutic silences led the way to health, maturity and citizenship (at least for some). The analysis of silence through a semiotic lens in which it appears as that 'empty mark' is therefore a particularly useful one, as it allows us to grapple with the ambiguity of the meaning and use of silence in nineteenth-century vocal education. As a framework for sound, it could be both a harbinger of speech *and* be outside its remit. Being able to move between both practices of silence depended on a number of social factors (children's and women's voices were generally considered 'inaudible' in the political arena, for example, speaking a language not recognized by one's audience reduced one to absolute silence, etc), but the intrinsic ambiguity of silence was recognized and mobilized in nineteenth century education. Visits to the 'borderland' of silence allowed for an education toward citizenship and could support some level of social mobility.

⁴³ Charles Rivail, *De l'art de la parole au barreau, discours prononcé à la séance solennelle des conférences, 1890*, (impr. de F. Allier père et fils, 1890), 16. "Et il est malheureusement à remarquer que notre éducation ne nous dispose pas du tout à parler en public. Le silence est recommandé à la jeunesse comme une sorte de pudeur. Dans les lycées, on annonce une leçon, on lit un devoir, et c'est tout. Il n'y a pas d'exercice d'improvisation. C'est un tort, car l'art de la parole s'apprend, et, pour être orateur, il faut toujours, plus ou moins, avoir mâché les cailloux de Démosthène".