

ARTICLE

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What do healthy communities sound like? Community Music Therapy and ‘messyphonic musicking’

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Abstract

This article began as an oral presentation at the conference “RESONANZE: Sound Communities for Better Living,” (Verona, October 2025). It asks, as did the conference, whether music can contribute to the development of healthier communities – and, if so, what would such communities sound like? Traditionally, musicking communities have demonstrated distinct social, cultural and political characteristics through aspects of their musical texture, modes of composition, and performance: monophony, heterophony, polyphony, and homophony. This article experimentally asks what kind of ‘musicking texture’ might sometimes characterise the newer agenda of ‘health musicking’, and suggests the idea of ‘messyphonic musicking’. This is illustrated through examples from two major studies in Community Music Therapy – in mental health and later-life care settings.

Keywords

healthy communities,
Community Music Therapy,
‘messyphonic musicking’

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Note and listening guide: In this written text, I mostly preserve the spoken style of the original presentation, adding references only where other scholarly material is directly referred to. In the conference presentation, musical excerpts were played to illustrate the ideas discussed. In this text, suggestions are made for equivalents publicly available on YouTube. Because of research ethics restrictions the two examples from the research projects could not be included here.

Introduction: A musical experiment

The audience at the conference are given an instruction: “Turn to your neighbour and tell them what you had for breakfast. But both of you talk at the same time!”. What follows is a cacophony of noise in the large and beautiful Teatro Filarmonico – a buzz of energetic Italian (mostly) voices. But someone listening to this from the balcony would not be able to understand what anyone had for breakfast! The meaning of the individual words is drowned by the collective noise. After a minute I stop them and give a second instruction: “Now *sing* it!”.

I give them the choice of the three tones of a major triad to do this. Again, sound fills the hall, but this time there is something that you can hear beyond the individual people who sing the words – a musical togetherness created by the three tones combining but also remaining distinguishable. We still do not hear what anyone had for breakfast even now! But something else begins to emerge – a collective musical meaning, which for many is an experience of musical togetherness.

Music has a strange phenomenology! The way we experience it, the way it works when we make music together is different from how words work, or visual images, as this experiment demonstrated. The musicologist Zuckerkandl (1956, p.297) asks the strange question: “*Why do three tones form a triad rather than a triangle?*”. We heard just now how three tones come together to make a chord, but also remain individually identifiable – they do not collapse together, or separate out into three points in space like a triangle. Musical space and position is different, that is, from that of the usual ‘objects’ in our physical world. In ‘everyday space’ one thing blocks another. If I stand in front of X, you cannot see him properly. When we speak at the same time (as we did in the experiment) the meaning of the words turns into noise. But in music many tones can sound together and still make a particular kind of *musical* sense. Individuality and togetherness are not mutually exclusive in musicking.

Varieties of musical togetherness

Let us think a bit more about this strange phenomenon, ‘musical togetherness’ – which is the foundation of any ‘musical community’. What different kinds of musical togetherness are there? I want us to listen to some very different examples of this:

(i) *The audience listens to an excerpt of plainsong sung by a small group of monks in a Western monastery* ([YouTube link](#)). The monks sing a single line of music together – a musical form and texture called *monophonic*. The aim – both musical and spiritual – is for the singers to sublimate their musical individuality into a togetherness that sounds a unity.

Here is another possibility:

(ii) *The audience listens to an excerpt of Indian classical music with a singer and another musician playing a sarod, a stringed instrument* ([YouTube link](#)). This time the singer improvises an elaborate melodic line which is ‘shadowed’ and echoed by the other musician. We hear an elaborated duet based on a single musical line – which is called a *heterophonic* texture. The musicians are equals, but also subtly different in their musical voices.

(iii) *The audience listens to an excerpt of a group of five singers within a religious service within what seems like a private domestic setting* ([YouTube link](#)). In the late 16th Century the English Catholic composer William Byrd wrote settings of the Mass for small groups of singers to sing in private houses where the Mass was celebrated in secret (it was illegal for political reasons at that time¹). Each of the voices is equal, but threads its melody at different times within the space of the *polyphonic* musical texture. The musical togetherness of the voices is intimate and subtle, preserving individuality within togetherness.

¹ This article gives some useful background to McCleery (2020).

(iv) *The audience listens to an excerpt of Verdi's 'anvil chorus' from Il Trovatore* ([YouTube link](#)). Here, the texture is rich and multi-layered. There is a whole crowd of singers on the stage, and a whole orchestra too. Our ear is led by the melody on the top of the texture, with many other musical voices harmonizing and supporting this melody within its *homophonic* texture. A whole crowd of musicians are making rich musical sense together...

So here were four varieties of musical texture and togetherness. But they lead to some tricky questions: Is being 'musically together' in these different ways always a good thing? Can you tell whether a community is healthy or not by listening to its musicking? When communities are musically healthy do they sound the same?

For example, what about this...

(v) *The audience listens to an excerpt of the North Korean Military Choir* ([YouTube link](#)). We certainly witness a disciplined musical togetherness here! But is this a *healthy* musical togetherness? For whom? Perhaps the discipline required to achieve this level of musical precision and performance coordination is much valued in North Korean society and has some healthy consequences for the participants. Would I question in the same way the healthiness of a choir that values precision and disciplined togetherness in its performance if it took place within a Western democracy? Who gets to decide whether a society or community's music is 'good' or 'healthy'? We see with these questions how, as Wittgenstein (1969, p.83) stated in his 1916 Notebook, "Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same". If we ask "*Is this good music?*" (that is, do we like it) or "*Is this good musicking?*" (that is, do we think it does good in some way) we are necessarily linking aesthetic/ethical value judgements which are not abstract and universal but subjective and intersubjective, cultural, situational, and political (Ansdell & DeNora, 2026a; Cook, 2024). Asking the question "*What do healthy communities sound like?*" therefore involves finding a way to reflect on the relationships between musical togetherness, health and wellbeing that does full justice to the complexities of both the aesthetic *and* the ethical dimensions of musicking.

A useful concept to help us in this is Brynjulf Stige's idea of 'health musicking':

The performative notion of music as situated activity suggests that what music affords in relation to health and wellbeing grows out of the relationships established in each situation. [...] I have used the notion of *health musicking* to communicate the idea that relationships between music and health are performed in context. (Stige, 2016, p.545)

We can say then that the different 'ways of musical togetherness' that were demonstrated in the five musical excerpts we listened to earlier can be understood at different but interacting 'levels' of reality:

- *Structural*: how sounds are structured 'internally' – within a musical 'piece' and also in performance between participants. This involves aspects of musical and social organisation, alignment and 'texture' that can be partially represented quasi-objectively (through scores, transcriptions, structural analysis).

- *Phenomenological*: how we individually and collectively experience music and musicking subjectively and intersubjectively in the present moment through our minds and bodies as we listen or participate.
- *Ecological*: how people come together musically because of reasons that are historical, social, cultural, and political. Musicking (Small, 1998) is always *situated*. In any musical performance things are happening that are *more* than musical – but (paradoxically) these can often only happen *because* of music in the first place.

I want to turn to the tradition of Community Music Therapy now, as this approach thinks seriously about music and musicking as social, cultural, and political – linked closely to situations and communities; to ethics and aesthetic concerns. Music is seen as often helpful and healthy, but also sometimes as *not* helpful or healthy.

‘Messyphonics’ in Community Music Therapy – insights from two research projects

Community Music Therapy practice and theory has developed some basic principles and guidelines for broad practice (Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2004; Stige & Aarø, 2012):

- Music radiates, people connect (the ‘ripple effect’).
- Follow where people and music lead!
- Work bottom-up, not top-down.
- The aim is ‘good musicking’ –that is, musicking that does good– but also reflection on where music and musicking has the potential for harm.

I want to add to this list a core principle from my own tradition of Nordoff-Robbins music therapy: that the main job of the music therapist or community musician is to *invite* people into the space of music and musicking, and to help them stay and develop there. Musical togetherness and musical community are only possible if you can first step *into* music.

I am now going to take us through two examples of Community Music Therapy, projects both practical and research-based, that I have worked on over the years with the music sociologist Tia DeNora.

Project 1: The Chelsea Community Music Therapy Project

Tia DeNora and I spent ten years involved in and researching this unique musical and mental health recovery community, as reported in the book *Musical Pathways in Recovery: Community Music Therapy and Mental Wellbeing* (Ansdell & DeNora, 2016). I began as a music therapist in a mental health unit working to a medical model, and then followed some of my patients a small distance up the road to a very different organization called SMART², a charitably funded mental health project that helped people with severe mental illness upon leaving the hospital. This project was based on the social

² <https://www.smartlondon.org.uk>

'recovery model' of mental illness, not a medical model.³ The aim of SMART in following the recovery model was to support people in getting back into everyday life after their illness, developing their resources and confidence again. The ongoing social challenge of SMART was to create a genuine community from people who were often different in many ways – age, ethnicity, social class, or cultural preferences. My challenge as a music therapist working there was to align with the project's social and ethical values through musicking – that is, to develop a community of respect, acceptance, toleration, empathy, mutual care and support, appreciation, and creativity.

When I arrived at SMART, I found that this community seemed to have many musicians, but none of them were playing music together. I set up a Community Music Therapy group called 'Smart Music' in the café of this building – right in the middle of the space, not in a private 'therapy room'. Anyone could come along to this open group every week. In the first session, a violin and clarinet turned up, and singers... but there were also people just sitting in the café – talking, drinking coffee, listening.

[The audience listens to an audio excerpt of the very first song that was sang and played together on that first day of the group]

In this excerpt you hear many people stepping into the music in many ways (or not): different musical voices coming in and out of the texture, but also people talking and coughing, chairs scraping. Is this the sound of a healthy musical community?

Earlier I described different styles of musicking in relation to descriptors of different kinds of 'musical togetherness': monophonic, heterophonic, polyphonic, homophonic. I suggest adding another to this list (I invented it myself!): 'messy-phonic'. In that first song at 'Smart Music', we hear a degree of 'musical togetherness' – but this is not neat and tidy musicking, it is *messy*!

We often think of 'messiness' as 'not good' in music (or at least for those of us trained in the perfectionist ideal of the Western classical tradition!). But from our research at SMART we came to understand that 'messiness' is often a feature of what helps create a healthy and sound musical community. Especially in circumstances where the challenge is to use music to bridge musical difference and diversity, to include everyone, to allow a musical scene to unfold naturally. Messyphonic musicking helped enact SMART's ethical values: that anyone can be included and appreciated; that difference can be tolerated; that people's musical development can be supported by everyone there in many different ways.

What did we learn from our ten year study of SMART MUSIC about musical community in this challenging context that might help others doing similar work?

1. Find and work with a community that already exists, but needs music.
2. Find what musical resources are already there (even if they are not active).
3. Gather 'musical people' and 'musical things' together to help create musical community.
4. Make the musicking space open and inviting, but safe.
5. Tolerate and appreciate 'messyphonic' musicking.

³ The 'recovery model' is a varied and complex idea, but perhaps the simplest way of defining its aim is to help a person living with a severe mental illness to recover a meaningful life again in the community, as defined by the personal preferences and needs of that person whilst attempting to reduce unnecessary distress and to maximise wellness even if levels of illness remain. See Ansdell and DeNora (2016) for further discussion of this and references.

6. Allow repertoire and musical-social rituals to evolve naturally.
7. Appreciate that success depends on ongoing –medium to long-term– commitment to that musical community.
8. Reflect on how a healthy musical community is one where ‘good musicking’ happens for as many people as possible – where ethics and aesthetics reflect each other in some way.

Project 2: Care for Music

I turn now to a second, more recent research project that Tia DeNora and I were involved in – called *Care for Music* (2026). This research explored how music helped within late life and end of life care settings in the UK and Norway. The project aims were to examine closely, and in real time contexts, how people engage with music in scenes of care within later life and end of life settings, and to document practices and consequences of musical engagement. We report on this project in detail in the book *Caring for Music: Musical Life, Late Life* (Ansdell & DeNora 2026).

I will just talk about one of our research sites now – a care home in London that I will call ‘Hill House’. I worked there over a seven-year period as a music therapist and then researcher. At Hill House, we studied how it was possible to cultivate musical community in a place where there were similar challenges to SMART – but also some quite different ones. The elderly residents in Hill House often had problems with moving around, remembering things, or communicating with carers and with their families. The care workers often came from different places in the world and did not always share the residents’ culture, including their musical culture. Again the challenge for me as a music therapist was to find and develop sound musical community with and amongst this difference and diversity. Within the musicking, the challenge was how to find a way for everyone to participate musically given the many physical, cognitive and cultural challenges.

Again, thinking of ‘messyphonics’ helped. An example of this was when a resident sang an old song from the 1920s which we found was useful for bringing people together musically. Part of our research project was to look in micro-detail at the process of how music ‘works’ in care settings, so here is a detailed analysis of this song ‘working’.

First, let’s look at the song itself:

The image shows a musical score for a song, divided into two main sections: 'handle' and 'hook'.

'handle' section:

- Tempo: Moderately
- Chord: C
- Lyrics: Five foot two, Turned up nose.
- Label: a

'hook' section:

- Chord: E7
- Lyrics: eyes of blue, but oh! what those five foot could do.
- Label: b

'hook' section:

- Chord: A7
- Lyrics: Has an - y - bod - y seen my girl?
- Label: c

'hook' section:

- Chord: D7
- Lyrics: Has an - y - bod - y seen my girl?
- Label: d

The score is annotated with chord symbols (C, E7, A7, D7, G7, G9#5, C) and labels (a, b, c, d) for specific musical phrases. The 'hook' section is circled in blue.

Image 1: A musical handle and hook

The melody of the song has a ‘handle’ and a ‘hook’. That is: bits of the structure of the melody are easy to *grasp hold of*. And the residents *do* grasp and perform these elements of the song – in a particular ‘messyphonic’ way.

In a performance of this song one day in a group session in the sitting room of Hill House, you hear the music therapist play the piano and sing, with residents joining in. Our microanalysis of this song event took just the first 30 seconds and showed how much we can understand the musical-social process through this micro-detailed lens⁴:

Image 2: A musical ensemble gathers

In the first 13 seconds, several overlapping music events happen: the music therapist, Ed,⁵ plays the piano and Iris joins in on the following phrase, vocally with “la, la” and rhythmically by tapping on the arm of her chair. Then Lucy comes in on the melodic ‘hook’, singing three words on three notes. Finally in the piano vamp between phrases Bernice vocalises a melodic motif (“Ha, ha-ha”) that seems to be an affirmation of the action so far. All this in 13 seconds!

Then, in the following 16 seconds, we see more happening (see Image 3). This time (the second ‘run through’ of the song) Ed sings the words as well as playing the piano. On the second phrase Bernice vocalizes the rhythmic ‘handle’, and by the third phrase several different people around the room are participating musically by tapping or singing. The video of this moment shows that they are also *noticing* and appreciating each other’s contributions. At the fourth phrase – the melodic hook “*Has anybody seen my girl?*” – Lucy takes a brief solo, which is met by admiring eyes focusing on her. Bernice also joins in on the last three notes/words of the phrase (she cannot sing words because of her stroke, but vocalizes in her jargon), and Iris carries on tapping her chair to the end of the line.

⁴ A longer analysis of this excerpt can be found in Ansdell and DeNora (2026). We acknowledge the usual limitations of representing an oral event graphically.

⁵ As well as giving all participants pseudonyms, Gary and Tia also gave themselves different names (Ed and Olive) for the book and articles written on the Care for Music research project.

C E7 A7 D7 G7 G9#5 C [piano vamp]

Five foot two, eyes of blue, but oh! what those five foot could do. Has an - y - bod - y seen my girl?

Ed sings the verse this time

Bernice vocalizes the rhythmic 'handle'

Coordinated hands around the room tap & point

Lucy takes a solo on the hook

Admiring eyes turn to Lucy across the room

Bernice finishes off the phrase

Iris taps on chair

Image 3: A musical scene emerges and co-ordinates

If we think of this 29-second excerpt in terms of 'messyphonic' structure, texture, and performance, we see how the residents grasp onto aspects of the song –its handle and hook– and use these in communicative and interactive ways: they each find and perform 'bits and pieces' of the song in idiosyncratic ways, whilst Ed keeps the song going as a whole.

What I mean here by 'messyphonics' is a way of thinking of a structural/textual/performative way of musicking that is –like the other varieties such as monophony and polyphony– both musical and *social-interactive* at the same time. Messyphonics is a musical affordance structure for the kind of musical community where everyone and everything is welcome, but where advance planning or consistency of participation is seldom possible. Neatness, continuity, or perfection are not required or needed for the musicking to feel satisfying in that place at that time. Messyphonic musicking allows people to participate in an overall musical flow but also allows the voice and agency of individuals and their sometimes idiosyncratic contributions to find a space and place within an overall 'messy' musical togetherness. This idea links with how Thomas Turino (2008) describes the key features of *participatory* musicking in several non-Western or non-classical traditions⁶. For example, his use of the term 'feathering' for how in many cultures of participatory music you hear messy beginnings and endings of musical sequences – allowing people to easily enter or drop out of the event. By 'messyphonics' however, I also mean something more micro than this, as illustrated in the example above: as a way of thinking about musical organization and texture where people can grasp 'bits and pieces' of the ongoing music and can successfully participate 'for a short time' through their performance of such musical fragments.

The principle we see in this short example also worked on a larger scale in helping create a sound community in Hill House. From our involvement in Hill House and our micro-analysis of musical-social events there we learned:

⁶ See Chapter 2 of Turino's book *Participatory and Presentational Performance*, especially the sub-section 'Musical texture, timbre, tuning, and density' (p.44).

- How gathering music and gathering musical people together is one activity.
- The necessity of making the musicking space open and inviting, but safe.
- Uncovering unexpected (musical) capability.
- Promoting musical inclusion of *everyone* in the community.
- Recognising how expertise is often 'distributed' across the musical-social space.
- Appreciating the possibilities of messyphonic musicking.
- Understanding how caring for music is also caring for each other.

What do healthy communities sound like?

I want to come back finally to the question I posed in the title of this article. I suggest that 'healthy communities' often sound (and look):

- Together ... but sometimes in unusual ways (a messyphonic way).
- Messy *and* together; aligned *and* discrepant.
- Individual, characterful, often beautiful in their own way.
- Ethical – i.e. they exemplify their community's values through (musical) performance.
- They are creating a solution within a problem (if only whilst the music lasts).
- Not 'magic' – what happens is because of preparation, dedication, continuing work.

Here are some guidelines for thinking about how to help a sound community to happen and develop. These suggestions are not comprehensive, rather they come from my experience of the two long term projects I've described above, as well as from the experience of many colleagues doing similar work around the world:

- You cannot make a musical community directly (from nothing).
- Rather, you need to find/nurture/develop/support a 'real' one.
- Discover where musical community is potential, necessary, possible, useful.
- Tread carefully and lightly – listen and uncover what it could be.
- Nurture, support, develop... over days, weeks, months, years.
- Never impose anything top-down, but always work bottom-up.
- Follow where people and music lead you.
- Reflect on what 'good musicking' is – on the complex relationship between this idea and aspects of context and culture, politics and subjective and intersubjective judgements of value. How can musicking reflect and enact these values? What are the arenas and processes for the negotiation of these musical values?

Performing musical values?

I wrote in the previous section that healthy communities *often* sound and look in the particular ways I suggested above. The 'often' caveat was intentional, as I am certainly not suggesting that *all* healthy communities sound messy, or that all unhealthy communities sound neat and controlled. It depends on the situation.

This caveat brings the discussion back to the complex and tricky issue of the politics of musical values in relation to musical practices and their consequences; back, that is, to the link between musical aesthetics and ethics. We may hope that we can usually recognise a 'sound community' when we hear and see it; when we witness how the people musicking relate to each other and with what consequences. We recognize, that is, 'good musicking'⁷ – which, as Christopher Small (1998) suggested, involves the musical performance of values that we hold as ideal. But in stating this we return to the critical issue of *whose* values and performances of musical values count, and why. The fifth example in the opening section above – of the Korean military choir – was deliberately chosen to problematise any too-neat equation between a surface quality of musical togetherness and precision and the ascription 'healthy/unhealthy community'. The crucial difference between the music therapy group in Hill House and the Korean choir is perhaps that the former takes places within an 'open society', the latter a closed one. In an open society value judgements such as what is 'good music' or 'good musicking' or a 'healthy musical community' are open to question, debate, revision, and consensual agreement. Ethics and aesthetics, that is, are part of a democratic process. In closed societies this critical process is not usually possible. This is still a positioned argument of course – my own social and political position is implicated in how I frame this argument.

Perhaps we can only conclude here that the question(s) are more important than the answers. For the areas of music therapy and musical culture more widely, to ask the *question "What do healthy communities sounds like?"* and to debate this in relation to our musical values is surely a useful exercise.

Interdisciplinary work across musicology, sociology and applied fields like music therapy and community music is increasingly exploring how music helps with the crucial task of communicating better across personal, social, and political barriers. A recent book by the musicologist Nicholas Cook *Music, Encounter, Togetherness* (2024) outlines a 'relational musicology' partly inspired by music therapy. Cook concludes by stating: "... a better understanding of musical togetherness might help us to understand things that matter even more than music" (p.498).

What, we might say (as musicians at least!) could be more important than music? Perhaps the 'sound communities' we hope and pray for, along with the values that these communities sound out: acceptance, toleration, empathy, appreciation, mutual care, love. Music, and messyphonic musicking, is sometimes a path towards these.

Author information

Gary Ansdell is an experienced music therapist, trainer, researcher and author. He is currently an Associate of Nordoff and Robbins UK and Honorary Professor at Exeter University. His research centres on the tradition of Nordoff-Robbins music therapy and Community Music Therapy. He lives in Norwich, UK, where he works in a care home as a music therapist and is also a deputy singer in the Norwich cathedral choir. Gary is the author/co-author of seven books on music therapy/music and health and joint editor (with Tia DeNora) of the Routledge book series *Music and Change*. The book of the Care for Music project – *Caring for Music: Musical Life, Late Life* – will be published by Routledge in October 2026 in Open Access format.

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⁷ For more on the idea of 'good musicking' see Section 43, 'What is good musicking?' (p.168) in Ansdell and DeNora (2016), *Musical Pathways in Recovery*.

Author contributions

Gary Ansdell was the sole author of this paper and responsible for conceptualisation, methodology, visualisation, and writing (drafting, reviewing, and editing).

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Ελληνική περίληψη | Greek abstract

Πώς ηχούν οι υγιείς κοινότητες; Κοινωνική Μουσικοθεραπεία και «ακατάστατη φωνητική μουσικοτροπία»

Gary Ansdell

Μετάφραση: Μαρία Ραπτοπούλου

Περίληψη

Το παρόν άρθρο ξεκίνησε ως προφορική παρουσίαση στο συνέδριο “RESONANZE: Sound Communities for Better Living” («ΣΥΝΤΟΝΙΣΜΟΣ: Υγιείς κοινότητες για καλύτερη διαβίωση») (Βερόνα, Οκτώβριος 2025). Θέτει το ερώτημα, όπως και το συνέδριο, αν η μουσική μπορεί να συμβάλει στην ανάπτυξη πιο υγιών κοινοτήτων – και, αν ναι, πώς θα ηχούσαν τέτοιες κοινότητες; Παραδοσιακά, οι κοινότητες μουσικοτροπίας έχουν επιδείξει διακριτά κοινωνικά, πολιτισμικά και πολιτικά χαρακτηριστικά μέσω πτυχών της μουσικής τους υφής, των τρόπων σύνθεσης και της ερμηνείας: μονοφωνία, ετεροφωνία, πολυφωνία και ομοφωνία. Το άρθρο διερευνά πειραματικά τι είδους «μουσικοτροπική υφή» θα μπορούσε ενίοτε να χαρακτηρίζει τη

νεότερη ατζέντα της «μουσικοτροπίας υγείας» και προτείνει την ιδέα της «ακατάστατης φωνητικής μουσικοτροπίας» (messyphonic musicking). Αυτό απεικονίζεται μέσω παραδειγμάτων από δύο σημαντικές μελέτες στην Κοινωνική Μουσικοθεραπεία – στην ψυχική υγεία και σε πλαίσια φροντίδας για την τρίτη ηλικία αντίστοιχα.

Λέξεις κλειδιά

υγιείς κοινότητες, Κοινωνική Μουσικοθεραπεία, «ακατάστατη φωνητική μουσικοτροπία»