# Embracing the Messiness: A PhD Journey to an Embodied Academic Voice

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## Abstract

To engage in academic work is to step into a space where transitions—between identities, ways of knowing, and academic expectations—are inevitable and necessary. This piece reflects my journey as a PhD candidate, singer, and educator, exploring the quest for an embodied academic voice. It examines how voice—both literal and metaphorical—shapes learning spaces and how performative and embodied knowledge contribute to inclusive academic environments and communities.

This work is a revised version of my PhD oral defense, completed in 2023. I share it to inspire other PhD candidates and scholars to explore alternative ways of creating knowledge where embodied ways of knowing are central. Drawing from new materialisms and feminist theory, I argue that academic voices are relational, porous, and in flux rather than static or singular. Through storytelling, I reflect on moments of struggle, discovery, and transformation, engaging in dialogues with both theory and personal experience to encourage holistic and inclusive learning spaces.

## The Messiness of Becoming

On May 1st, I have the first draft of my trial lecture[1] ready and begin memorizing it. As a soprano, meticulous preparation is second nature to me. At 7 a.m., I sit at my kitchen computer; the house is unusually quiet since my husband and our four children are in Trondheim, giving me a peaceful weekend to write. Despite it being Labor Day in Norway—a day my mother insists should be work-free—I find myself compelled to work.

After raising the Norwegian flag, I return to my computer to practice. The lecture, titled "New Materialisms, Agency, and the Practice of Music Education: Connections and/or Disconnections?" feels lifeless; the words I've written seem dull and uninspired. If not for our kittens, Illi and Undine Jorden, playfully racing up the stairs, I might be dozing off.


Suddenly, a lullaby comes to mind, prompting me to reflect:

> Does anyone remember a lullaby being sung to them? Or maybe you have sung lullabies yourself? What kind of feeling does a lullaby give you? What kind of memories come back to you when you sing, listen to, or think of a lullaby?

As a mother of four, I've sung countless lullabies, often the same ones my grandmother sang to me. These songs serve as a therapeutic way to release the day's tensions and ease into sleep. I recognize that lullabies vary across cultures, each offering unique methods to disconnect from daily life and connect to the promise of a new day. This realization brings me back to my lecture's theme.

Specifically, the word "possibilities" brings me out of the world of lullabies and back to the topic for my trial lecture.


## Why I Need New Materialisms

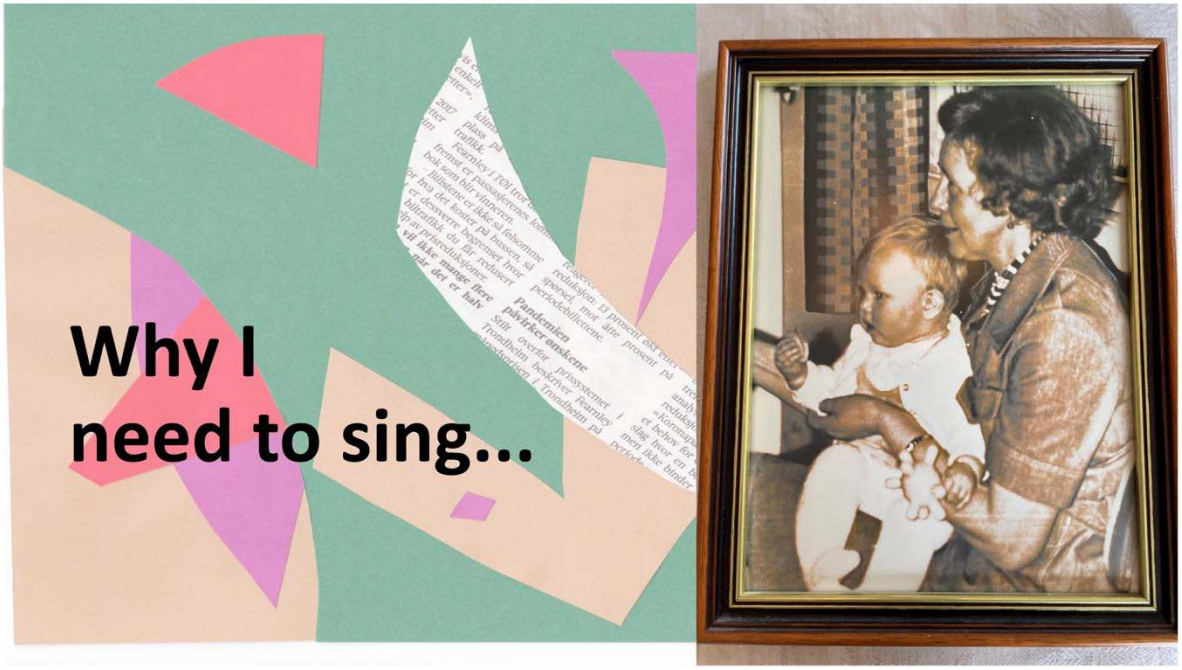
New materialism is a philosophical and theoretical field which is part of a larger movement of posthumanist theories that reject the idea that knowledge generation is bound only to verbal language (Barad, 2003, 2007; Lenz Taguchi, 2012). Under the umbrella term "new materialisms," matter (all kinds of matter) is considered not only as something that gets to be formed by the forces of language, culture, and politics, but as something that is formative by itself.

"YES!" I am speaking aloud at the kitchen table now. The kittens suddenly stop running on the stairs as they wonder what on earth I am talking about. I say to them, "Yes, this involves you too" and continue reading. Feminist new materialisms is a specific strand of new materialisms I lean on. This feminist new materialist approach to philosophy rests on a holistic vision of matter in opposition to dichotomous and dualistic ways of thought. The body of every voice, human and non-human (nodding towards the kittens again), is self-organized and relational in its very structure.

New materialist scholarship is a growing field, but there seems to be limited engagement with posthuman philosophies and new materialist theories in music education research (Asplund, 2022; Ferm Almqvist & Hentschel, 2022; Fjeldstad et al., 2024; Jenssen, 2023; Zimmerman Nilsson et al., 2022). *So far!* I think to myself.

A little overwhelmed by my own writing of new materialisms, I am starting to think that the topic of my trial lecture might not be a question of what new materialisms are, but more about what they might become: How might new materialisms unfold when playing with this idea in music education? What might they offer?

I move from the kitchen into the living room while I sing the lullaby and look at photos hanging on the wall. These photos have been there forever, but on this day, May 1, I start to talk with them.




## Why I Need to Sing

This is a photo of my grandma and I, from December 1977. I'm around 7 months old. I sit in my grandma's lap. She has black curly hair and a dress which was very modern for the 1970s.

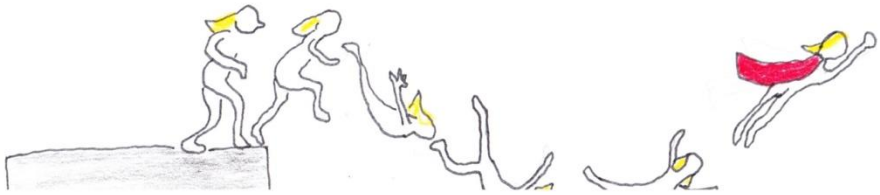
My grandma and I are listening and singing at a concert in the "community house" (*Abelvær grendehus*) on the small island where I grew up. A place with approximately 200 inhabitants, surrounded by dangerous seas and bad weather. I still remember the feeling of being a small girl walking in the storm: the smell of salty water, which I could taste on my lips, and the triggering feeling of almost not being able to breath because of the strong wind.

Although I can't remember the actual event that took place in this photo, my grandma told me about it. She often said, "You sang before you could talk." I can still remember the smell and sound of my grandma. Sitting on her lap, experiencing musical skin contact; listening to her dark alto voice, that so often sang and sang and made me sing with her. No wonder I sang before I could talk. The lyrics I quickly learned by heart. Then, the feeling of no longer sitting in her lap, but standing on the stage in the community house. Being a part of the school choir, playing in the school band, even being a soloist at the Christmas concert. How desperately nervous I was, but at the same time excited to perform together with my friends, family, and people of all ages in our community.

When I sing, I connect with my body. If I don't do that, my voice cracks—because the body is the support of the voice. Voice cracks are some of the most shameful things I can experience as a singer. Singing is material. Singing is powerful, yet vulnerable.

This is a photo of me joining one of my father's voice lessons. My father studied opera at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria. The cradle of western classical music. I am standing by a grand piano. Little did I know that standing by a grand piano, singing, would be part of my future career, as a soprano. Very early on I was steeped in the sociocultural context of classical singing. I loved it. The pretty costumes I would wear while acting as the princess or chamber maid. The beautiful music I was part of, singing in an ensemble. Still, I was nervous and had shaking knees when I stood on the stage at the community house.

Why I need to fall...

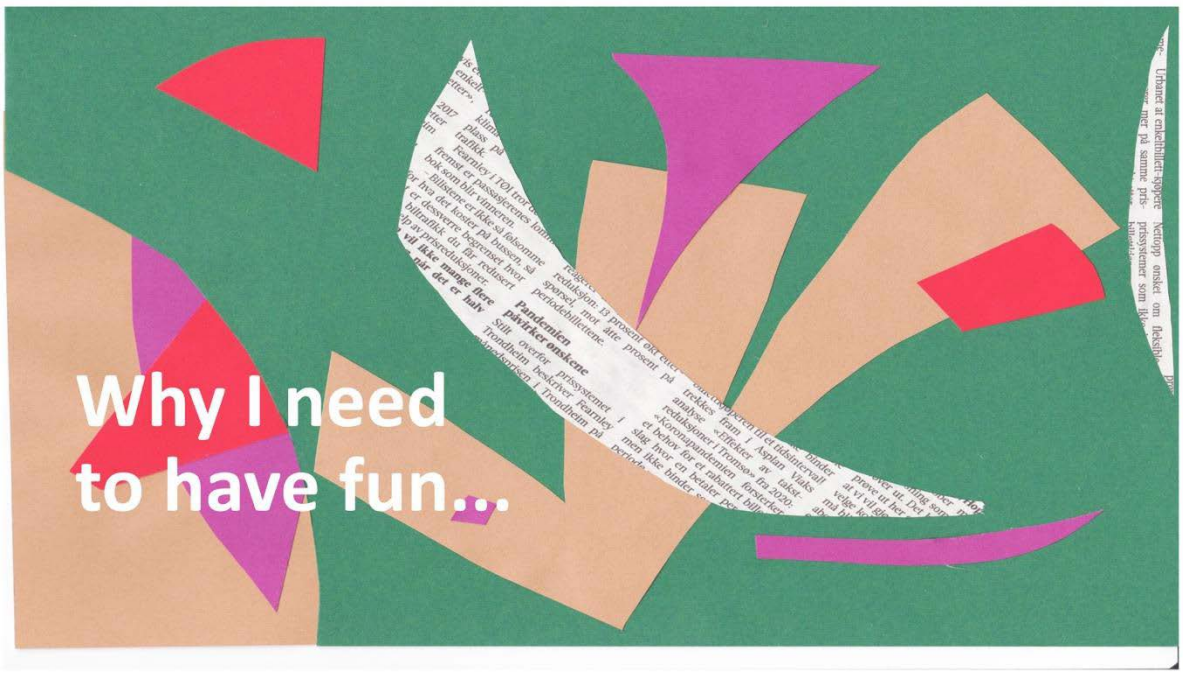


## Why I Need to Fall

As a first soprano, you are often put in risky positions. Many voice teachers say it's like an extreme sport. You need a huge amount of control—and at the same time, you need to let go. To connect to disconnect. It's tricky. A way of keeping a firmness, holding my voice with the body—at the same time as opening up and letting go. It's like singing high notes. It's not the high notes that matter, it's where that high note is grounded in the body. I find support in the diaphragm—the vulnerable space in our body. A space we like to hide when we are insecure. It's a space of emotions. So, in one way, my training as a singer helped me take risks as a researcher, because when you first go, you must do it fully. Or you will fail. And the truth is, of course, that even when you go for it fully, you might fail. And that failure needs to be redone. Fail again. Fail better.

Dance scholar Emilyn Claid (Claid & Allsopp, 2013; Claid, 2016) writes about falling. She says that western culture resists falling, striving towards verticality, linearity, and steadfast uprightness. Political and economic successes depend on rising, not falling. A binary of positive/negative flourishes between the two terms *falling* and *rising*. In the practice of falling we face fear, a "here-and-now uncertainty and a realization that a sense of self emerges in relationship with the environment and that letting go (falling out) of a fixed identity taps into a potential for unknown possibilities" (Claid & Allsopp, 2013, p. 1). I LOVE this way of thinking about falling. Claid seeks an alternative and affirmative way of holding difference.

Claid reminds me to let go of voice or bodies, educational systems, pedagogies, theories, or methodologies as fixed or static identities—and fall into the unknown. Because then, *possibilities might be seen, connected to and felt*. Falling is fearfully dangerous and can be devastating, painful. I have experienced falling to offer opportunities for change, opening for creative pathways. What would happen if music education practices would dare to fall and fail? What stories would emerge then?




## Why I Need to Have Fun

Our son, Emanuel, came home from school and asked, "Why does school have to be so boring? We just sit there while the teachers talk and talk. Why can't we have fun? I learn when I have fun." I was tempted to give him a grown-up answer about the necessity of hard work, but he made an excellent point. Reflecting on my PhD journey, I realized how much I enjoyed it because I had fun. Does that mean I didn't do a proper job?

Can a serious academic question like "New materialisms, agency, and the practice of music education: Connections and/or disconnections?" be approached with fun? For me, it starts with a song—a lullaby. It's how I engage my researcher body, how I teach, how I think. It's fun. Is that allowed in academia? This reminds me of Susan Stinson's (1997) article, "A Question of Fun."

Stinson asks why adults often consider fun to be childish and unimportant, something to engage in only after work is done. She wonders what the world might be like if more people focused on making work satisfying and pleasurable, rather than something to endure before leisure. What might school be like if we promoted learning for its intrinsic pleasure, as it seems to be for young children, rather than just to pass a test, get into university, or secure a job?

I had so much fun during my research. When I have fun, I'm engaged, connected; I feel alive. I think differently, focus better, take risks, open up, and dare to fall. I fail. I become honest, filled with humility. I listen and take time to breathe, to pause.

What if music education embraced this approach? Does having fun help answer serious questions? I believe it does. If this approach creates even a small change in how we approach music and education, then I'm happy. If not—well, at least I had fun.


## Why I Need Agency

I often turn to imagination when grappling with complex theories or personal challenges. Imagining conversations helps me explore concepts deeply. For instance, pondering "agency," I envision a dialogue with philosopher Rosi Braidotti.

### *Imagined Conversation*

**Runa**: Hi, Rosi. I need your insight. What is agency?

**Imagined Rosi**: That's a profound question. What do you think?

**Runa**: I believe agency is like voice: everyone should feel their voice matters and can choose to use it without fear of being marginalized or silenced.

**Imagined Rosi**: You're aiming high, Runa. Feminist theories might offer guidance. As Sara Ahmed notes, "Feminism needs to be everywhere because feminism is not everywhere" (2017, p. 4).

**Runa**: Do I need to be overtly activist to advocate for agency? My approach is more subtle.

**Imagined Rosi**: Subtle activism is valid. Recognizing how our lives are shaped involves analyzing power dynamics. Awareness of our bodies is a good starting point.

**Runa**: So, embracing new materialisms and focusing on the body can enhance agency.

**Imagined Rosi**: Exactly. Feminists think globally but act locally.

Reflecting on this, agency isn't something one possesses; rather, it emerges through relationships. Incorporating music into education can foster this relational agency. Perhaps advocating for music's place in education requires active efforts, even subtle forms of activism.

## Entanglements

I recall a cherished photograph of my mother, taken in Oslo on May 17, 1977, just days before my birth. In that image, we are physically and metaphorically entangled—she, a second-wave feminist, proudly wearing an outfit she chose over traditional maternity clothes, embodying a spirit of resistance that I admire and share. I wonder about the lullabies she sang to me before I was born, as lullabies vary across cultures and evolve over time, accompanying us through life's changes.

This reflection leads me to consider how falling and flying, connection and disconnection, might be more intertwined than they appear. Perhaps it's our perception that defines these experiences.

Embracing new materialisms, singing, vulnerability, joy, and agency evokes emotions that foster belonging, inclusion, and community.

I need all of these things, you need all of these things, music education needs all of these things. We need these things because they make us feel. And when we feel, something happens. We might feel belonging. We might feel included. We might feel community.

By engaging in these practices, we might open space for more inclusive, equitable, and transformative learning environments.

As I write at the kitchen table on May 1, a marching band passes by, accompanied by red flags and music. I spot my parents at the end of the parade and feel relieved that I remembered to raise the flag earlier. Impulsively, I leave my laptop, put on my shoes, coat, and scarf, and join the parade.

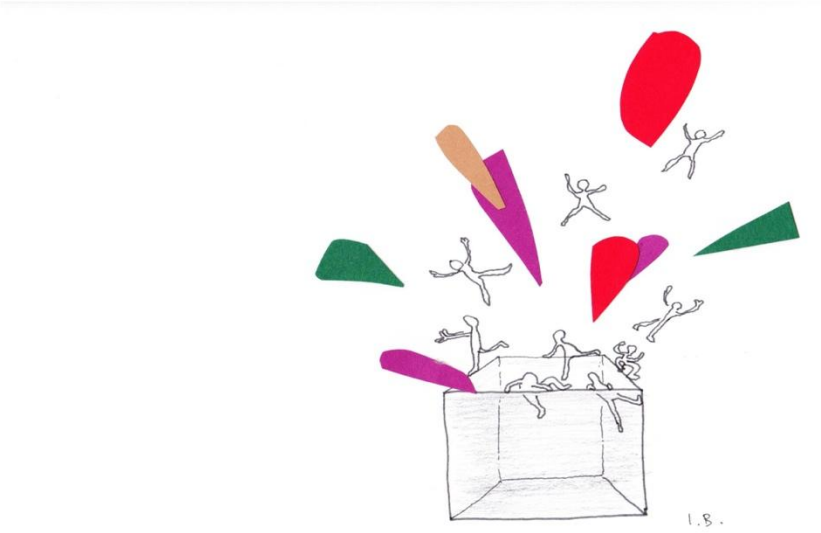
“What are you doing here? Aren’t you working? We didn’t want to disturb your preparations,” my mom says. “Oh, well, it’s Labor Day,” I reply, and she smiles proudly. “By the way,” I continue, “what slogan are we marching under?” My dad’s strong baritone voice responds, “Care, solidarity, community.”

Reflecting on this, I see my reflective note as a way to initiate or continue a dialogue rooted in care, fostering communities in solidarity. All of this is possible through voicing dialogues.

## The Transformative Power of Voicing Transitions

The transitions we navigate—whether in academia, artistic practice, or personal growth—are never isolated. They are entangled in the material, the relational, the messy interactions of experience. The breath, the sound waves, the shared space—all these shape learning. We are never alone in our transitions; we are always in dialogue with our environments, our histories, and our communities.

By voicing transitions, whether through song, storytelling, or embodied research, we create academic spaces where knowledge is felt, experienced, and lived. In doing so, we might foster a socially just and equitable education—one that values diverse ways of knowing, creating, and being in the world.



## Notes

1. In Norway, a trial lecture is an integral part of the public doctoral defense, serving as a preliminary assessment of the candidate's ability to communicate research knowledge effectively. Typically lasting 45 minutes, the trial lecture is scheduled on the same day as the doctoral defense, and the candidate receives a topic—usually unrelated to their specific PhD research—approximately ten days prior. The purpose is to evaluate the candidate's ability to critically analyze, synthesize, and present complex, research-based knowledge in an accessible manner. Approval of the trial lecture is mandatory for proceeding with the defense, which includes the thesis presentation and a formal discussion with external opponents. For more information, see the Universities Norway (UHR) guidelines (2018), *Veiledende retningslinjer for gradene philosopiae doctor (ph.d)* og *philosophiae doctor (ph.d.) i kunstnerisk utviklingsarbeid*. (https://www.uhr.no/_f/p1/i149decff-3943-4df6-a6ec-d54c20f9bd59/versjon-a-felles-veiledende-retningslinjer-for-phd-gradene.pdf)

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