

# The Telegraph

Exploring the endless  
possibilities of the human  
voice – review



Just whistle: Marcus Coates, Dawn Chorus (2007)

By Mark Hudson, art critic

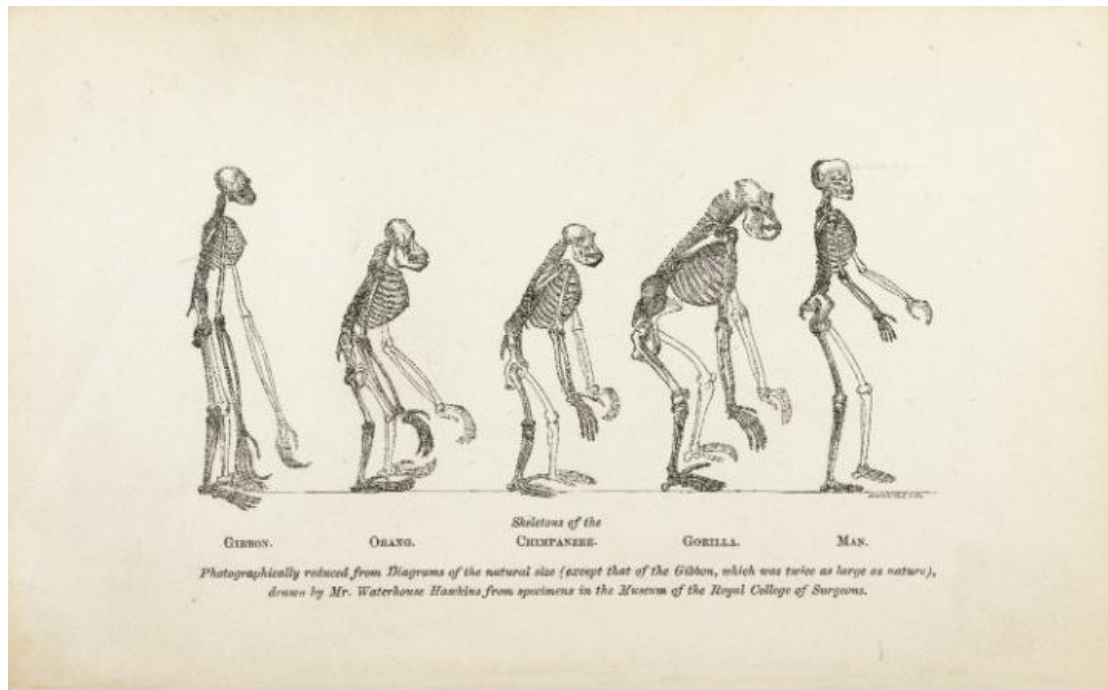
13 APRIL 2016 • 5:38PM

Nowhere typifies the current rapprochement between art and science better than the Wellcome Collection. Here, artefacts from this institution's vast holdings of medically related objects are offset by contemporary art in exhibitions on subjects as diverse as sexology and paranoia – they're generally popular with the public, though without imparting much in the way of hard fact, let alone conclusions.

The first thing you hear on entering this new show – on the mind-bending capacities of the human voice – is birdsong. But it is birdsong produced not by birds, but by citizens of Bristol, seen in everyday locations in a video work by artist Marcus Coates: calmly ensconced in their sitting rooms, a doctor's waiting room or even in their beds, they expertly mimick the sounds of the dawn chorus. The film, however, is speeded up to the rate of actual bird song so these avian impersonators seem in a state of strange bodily agitation.

# The Telegraph

This Is a Voice attempts to look beyond our instinctive association of the voice with language and communication, focusing on “the meaning and emotions created through prosody – the patterns of rhythm, stress and intonation”. Which seems a highfalutin way of saying it’s less what we say than how we say it, with an emphasis on involuntary sounds: sighs, grunts, guffaws and howls.



Not so different: Frontispiece to Huxley 'Evidence as to man's place...'  
CREDIT: WELLCOME LIBRARY, LONDON

An eclectic array of vocal sounds – pygmy chants, avant garde extemporisation, gestalt speech therapy, operatic warm-ups – float out us from speakers and booths. Woody Allen is heard in six languages simultaneously, while Billie Whitelaw’s disembodied mouth intones the text of Samuel Beckett’s play Not I beside film from 1928 of Helen Keller, the deaf-blind girl who was able to take and pass a degree by feeling vibrations in her teachers’ faces.

Exhibits from the Wellcome Collection, from “voice disguisers” used in secret Nigerian rituals to an extraordinary 19th-century “obstetrics atlas”, struggle for attention beside

# The Telegraph

large-scale installations such as Katarina Zdjelar's film *The Perfect Sound*, in which a young man repeats guttural monosyllables designed to remove all traces of his Birmingham accent. Emma Smith's *5HZ (Language School)*, in which we are invited to learn a new language based on the sounds most conducive to social interaction, is marred by the artist's teeth-grating infant-teacher delivery; it may be deliberate, but I didn't hang around long enough in her makeshift language laboratory to find out.

Imogen Stidworthy's elaborately conceived video-piece *Castrato* isolates the elements that were synthesised to produce the approximation of an angelic castrato voice in the film *Farinelli*. A female soprano, a young male treble and a male counter-tenor are shown on separate screens, using distancing devices that have become commonplace in experimental film-making: stop-start sequences, randomly synchronised sound and fragmentary shots of the performers' bodies. Like a number of the contemporary works here, it feels more like a starting point for a piece than a work in its own right.

This is an exhibition that hangs intriguingly between art, music, science and what you might call the phenomenology of noise. While the extensive wall and gallery guide texts try to turn it into an illustrated essay, it works best as a tapestry of artfully interwoven vocal textures and possibilities. You're left with the sense of the human voice as a largely untapped resource with possibilities that most of us barely touch on in the course of our daily lives.

Until July 31; admission free. Details: [wellcomecollection.org](http://wellcomecollection.org)