

# Hearing Voices

BY DAN BERGGREN

*Say it slowly: voices  
V clears the way like a snowplow  
Letting vowel sounds arrive  
Before the plural ending of inclusion*

I've been thinking a lot about the title of this journal—and the fact that it's plural. When I worked for the American Forces Network Europe, it was called The Voice of Home, because its primary audience was American listeners stationed overseas. The Voice of America has people of all different nationalities tuning in its signal. The SUNY Fredonia station, which I advised, calls itself The Campus and Community Voice of Fredonia. Each of these radio examples is a voice serving a community with diverse programming. *New York Folklore* is dedicated to sharing our state's many voices of folklore, and with that in mind, this edition's column explores several ways of thinking about upstate voices.

## Jeder baum spricht

*Every tree speaks* is a phrase Ludwig van Beethoven used, demonstrating his musical connection with the sounds of nature. That's what comes to my mind first when thinking about voices of upstate New York. Some ignore the soundscape altogether, never allowing it to become foreground; others may think of it as being like a vinyl record's surface noise or a cassette tape's hiss—that is, a distraction from the intended message. But the sounds from our surroundings carry many stories: the rivers' roar in spring; the brooks' summer babble; the songs of chickadees, jays, and white-throated sparrows; the call of the loon; the chilling howl of coyotes; and the mysterious, ever-changing voices of the trees. My uncle, Van Wilson was a social studies teacher in the classroom and a hunter safety training instructor in the woods. He taught me how to truly listen for wildlife and to the trees around me; how to distinguish the sound of wind through the leaves of maple and poplar, or through the needles of white pine and spruce. These sounds are all part of the choir, while our friends' and families' voices become the intermittent

solos and duets. One April, a river roaring in the valley prompted an elderly neighbor to recall the days of his youth, being summoned by the sound of the Hudson to report for duty as a river driver.

## Vox Humana

Swimming in this ocean of sound are the voices that breathe life into a thought, get something off their chest, say what they're thinking, tell us a story we'll never forget. My parents died over 20 years ago, yet I can still hear their voices in my head whenever I want.

Dad's cousin Margaret gave me lessons on the pump organ in the photo. It came from Vermont.

My mother Dorothy Wilson Berggren used to tell me about walking a quarter-mile to her older cousin's house to practice on the 1880s Estey reed organ made in Brattleboro.

This legacy now sits in our living room—my daughter played it when she was a teenager, pumping its foot pedals, filling the organ's lungs with air. Now, our granddaughters bring it to life when they visit, and they all know about Cousin Margaret and the organ's Vermont origin. One of the “stops” that channels air through a particular brass reed is called *Vox Humana*, but I can also pull that imaginary stop in my memory and hear the *vox humana* of my mother telling this and other stories. It's also possible for me to hear the sound of my parents' voices via audio recordings. We have Thomas Edison to thank for that (and for my career of capturing voices and teaching others how to do so), but more importantly, I owe a huge debt of gratitude for Edison's passion. Part of his original list of uses for sound recording was: “The family record—a registry of sayings,

reminiscences, etc., by members of a family in their own voices...”

## Upstate Voices

I've found that upstate voices are fairly free of physical borders or definitions. As *North Country Public Radio* producer and morning show host Todd Moe says, “I'm not sure there are boundaries for these voices, certainly not in any political or geographic sense.” Perhaps, living in or near the Adirondack Park gives a certain perspective on life.

Melissa Hart, Digital Editor for *Adirondack Explorer*, points to “The rugged individualism that defines the people who call this place home...communities set among mountains, lakes, rivers, and forests.” More specifically, *Adirondack Mountain Club* Deputy Executive Director Julia Goren points to the voices “belonging to those who survive our harsh winters...the great proving ground.” Sharing those experiences with others becomes the next step. “Lives are constructed through the telling of stories,” says



Photo courtesy of the author.

Willsboro music educator Jennifer Moore. She continues, “The histories shared, the names remembered, and connections that locate each of us within a particular place and community.”

My friends Goren, Moe, Hart, and Moore find rural life and community to be at the core of upstate voices “associated with authenticity, vulnerability, and a certain kind of truth that can be recognized and felt and therefore, understood when heard” (Moore). All agree, however, there are upstate voices that we don’t hear. “Conspicuously absent... are the Native people who were here long before European settlers arrived” (Hart). “People we depend on, like farm workers or seasonal staff... and we don’t hear the voices of those who are incarcerated here. I also think it’s hard to hear the voices of the families that don’t need outside help—where they depend entirely upon relatives” (Goren). “Voice is a kind of barometer for the well-being of a community... I wish that the authentic voices of children were more appreciated, supported, and encouraged” (Moore).

I’ll let Todd Moe have the last word, with the suggestion that we all become better listeners to the voices of others. “The elderly, the young, migrant workers, people of color... I think it’s easy to listen to voices that we’re most comfortable with—those closest to our own social or generational connection.” Maybe it’s time for more courageous conversations. ▼

## Congratulations to Iryna Voloshyna

**Iryna Voloshyna, a 2019 graduate** intern at the Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library, following her graduation with a MA in Folklore from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and now a Folklore PhD student at Indiana University, was the recipient of the inaugural 2022 Presidential Award for exceptional meritorious service to recognize service to the discipline, at the opening ceremony of the American Folklore Society annual meeting, October 12–15 in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Originally from Ukraine, Iryna “initiated efforts to protect a wide variety of cultural heritage documentation when Ukraine was suddenly invaded by Putin’s forces from Russia. While she supported her colleagues in need of information and resources as they sought safety during the invasion and became a resource to journalists and scholars trying to understand what was happening in real time on social media apps, she also took action as her colleagues in Ukraine worried about their work: multimedia research collections documenting decades of traditions in communities across Ukraine were under threat in individual homes holding researchers’ hard drives and in digital collections housed in museums and other cultural institutions. This work involved lis-



Iryna Voloshyna. Photo by Proda Photography.

tening to the needs and advocating for support of colleagues in Ukraine, coordinating a team to amass appropriate resources, and relentless efforts to assist in the dissemination of information” (American Folklore Society, <https://americanfolkloresociety.org/iryna-voloshyna-presented-with-inaugural-presidential-award-for-meritorious-service/>). ▼

Dan Berggren’s roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the United States and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger and surveyor, was a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit [www.berggrenfolk.com](http://www.berggrenfolk.com) to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.



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