

# Ep #75: Why AI Won't Take My Job

Can't  
wait  
to hear  
you  
with  
Michèle Voillequé

**Full Episode Transcript**

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Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

For me, this podcast is my attempt to provide you with some encouragement and some information and skill-building exercises so that you can use your voice better in the world, however you might want to do that – whether that's singing or speaking.

And I don't see it as an opportunity for me to give you my latest “hot take” on whatever is happening in the world.

And yet, this week, there's something that I want to respond to that just, just threw me for a loop. A couple of days ago, I awoke to the news that a humanoid robot ran a half marathon faster than any human has run a half marathon, and I thought to myself, “Why, Lord, why? Why do we...? Why?”

In the same news cycle it was reported that two Kenyans won the Boston Marathon and that made me very happy. Go humans!

I mean, I can imagine from an engineering standpoint that it is quite a feat to create something that mimics the mechanics of the human body. As an intellectual exercise, I really get that.

We already have cars that go fast, and we developed a plane not by trying to get it to do what birds do, but to get it to do its own thing, right? The spaceship Artemis that just went to the moon and back, we weren't trying to model that off of a biological creature that we have here on earth.

Anyway, I don't know why we need humanoid robots running half marathons and it reminded me, often people will ask me, you know,

**Can't Wait to Hear You** – a podcast with Michèle Voillequé

# Ep #75: Why AI Won't Take My Job

what I do, and I say, I teach voice. And they say, how is that? And I, lately, my answer has been, well, it's great to be in a field that can't really be affected by AI.

So here's what I mean when I say that. The whole reason to sing something is to convey an emotion. AI doesn't do emotion. There's no emotion there, and I don't think AI can evaluate a singing voice nearly as effectively as another human, precisely for that reason.

Yes, there's a lot of technique and particular kinds of physical effort that go into making a compelling singing or speaking voice. Maybe an AI machine could evaluate that, but I, I also don't think so.

I know for sure the emotional content, the emotional impact – AI is not going to get goosebumps when something goes well. AI is not going to feel a tear rise in its eye. AI is not going to feel their heart beat faster because of how a particular speech or a particular piece of music hits them.

And I think, in the training of humans to accomplish those things, to create art that moves other people, we need to be taught by humans.

I find my greatest resource as a teacher is the fact that my voice, my throat, my lungs have not been my strongest body part in my life.

My asthma was misdiagnosed as chronic bronchitis and pneumonia for the first 10 years of my life, and so I was given lots of antibiotics that you know, didn't work. And then when I was 10, the pediatrician suggested that we go to see the allergist.

And sure enough, we discovered that I was allergic to every tree in Idaho except one. But more importantly, the cats who lived with us, and the dust, the dust mites, mold, whatever, all the things, and my life changed radically.

## Ep #75: Why AI Won't Take My Job

We changed the house. We pulled up the shag carpet. This was 1980, discovered beautiful hardwood floors underneath.

I got medicated and took allergy shots and antihistamines, but those first 20 years or so of my life, I needed inhalers. I had to go to the hospital sometimes because I couldn't breathe – there was a lot of airway trauma going on for me.

And to look at me as a younger person, you'd think I was probably the least likely to become a singer at all, let alone a singer who's paid to sing and who sings well enough to teach other people to sing. That was not obvious. If you had thought anything about my future life, you probably would've thought, “yeah, probably not gonna be a singer at all.”

But what I found as I persisted – “and yet she persisted” – that the struggles that I've had with my own body, with my own instrument are what make me a fantastic teacher, because I've been a lot of places with my voice and I've fixed a lot of things with my voice.

I've made all kinds of disappointing sounds. I've tried things all kinds of ways and over the years, I've figured out what works for me. And in the process of teaching other people, I've noticed the variety of solutions that work for them. And it's very easy for me to quickly put my finger on a problem or on a solution for a given student.

I can hear immediately what's going on, and I can intuit, based on my own physical experience, what might be going on inside that body and how to change that, how to help them adjust that so they make a better, easier, more durable sound, whatever they want.

Whether it's for the voice to sound more rich, for the voice to sound more full, not strained – whatever it is, I can help people get there because I have a body and I know my body well.

## Ep #75: Why AI Won't Take My Job

AI doesn't have a body. They don't know their body well, and I think there is a limit to the modeling, uh, the computer modeling that could be done, that could ever make an AI more valuable than me. I just, I don't believe it to be possible.

And I don't want you to waste your time and your soul's energy. I don't even know if it's possible to sing for ChatGPT and ask what it thinks, but I have a feeling that's probably coming. Don't do that. Please don't.

The main reason to sing a song rather than just to recite the lyrics, like a poem, is to convey emotion, to give somebody goosebumps, to make somebody else feel something, and we do that by elongating the vowels, and that's what carries the melody and that's what makes the song.

And that emotionality, the empathy required to pull that off is uniquely human. And I think at this time, on the planet Earth, our empathy is our greatest superpower. I think the more we can reach out with honest emotion and sincere desire to connect, I think that's what's gonna save us.

Part of the journey of being a singer for me has been learning how to pay exquisite attention to my emotions and how they affect my body.

I have shoulders that hold up the weight of the world. And they have been this way since I was in high school probably. And I think it's at the point where I think they might never let go.

Like there's always a degree of tension there that's like higher than normal, and then they can get really tense and then they can be a little bit more relaxed. But my shoulders just are doing a lot of work for no good reason, and I've just learned to notice that live with it.

It's no longer a problem, it's just, it's sort of a feature of me now. But I have learned to notice when they're worse than other times, and like what feelings contribute to that, what stress contributes to that, how that

## Ep #75: Why AI Won't Take My Job

happens. So that's sort of at a macro level of how I'm able to notice anxiety, stress, emotions in my body: one of the first places I look is my shoulders.

You might have your own favorite body part if it's not your shoulders. For lots of people, it's their stomach, it's their gut. It's either in how they are able to process food or just in how the muscles of the stomach feel, as a place for, their place for holding anxiety.

But at a micro level, what emotions feel like, like in this very moment, and how they affect my instrument. If I'm particularly happy, all of a sudden I'll feel, a rush in my chest. Like, I'll feel an ease in my breathing and maybe even a little more opening in my throat. And if I'm sad, I will feel suddenly a collapse – a collapse in my throat, a collapse in my chest, and, it's very subtle.

I think if you were looking at me, you might not see my body register it all the time. The movement, the change can feel very subtle.

And because I sing in church a lot and worship services are full of emotion, I get to practice nearly every week noticing an emotion and acknowledging it, maybe not being able to process it immediately, but at least noticing it, acknowledging it, and noticing the effect it's having on my vocal instrument, on my body so that I can sing well.

I still have to sing.

Sometimes when we're having particularly strong feeling we can bow out of stuff. Like, we don't have to raise our hand. We don't have to say anything. We don't have to sing the song. We can just, notice the emotion and not ask ourselves to perform.

Singing in a worship service as a worship leader, as a song leader, that isn't an option. My voice needs to work regardless of how I'm feeling.

## Ep #75: Why AI Won't Take My Job

And indeed, most of the time, higher than 95% of the time, it works.

Let me give you a specific example of what I'm talking about.

So it's my job to help the congregation sing the hymns. So I'm standing down front and I'm singing as an example, and the rest of the congregation sings along.

I'm singing into a microphone. They're not. It's important that what goes into the microphone, because it's gonna be amplified, it's important that, that be good, right? We agree. So that's the situation.

And there is a part of the worship service that is, a meditation followed by what we call a pastoral prayer.

So there's a book that people can write in, before the worship service starts, of joys and sorrows, things that they want lifted up in the worship service for the community to know. And it's not always possible to know in advance what's gonna be in the joys and sorrows, right?

Sometimes people arrive at church with fantastic news. Sometimes they arrive at church with really devastating news and it gets written in the book, and then it gets announced, you know, included as part of the pastoral prayer. And immediately following the pastoral prayer is a hymn.

In the church where I'm working, the congregation remains seated and sings, but the song leaders come up and sing into the microphones as usual, to support the congregation.

You know, the congregation may sing a lot and sometimes hardly at all. Like, that middle hymn, the hymn that follows the meditation, sometimes can feel more like we are singing to the congregation rather than we're all singing together. It really depends on the day and the

# Ep #75: Why AI Won't Take My Job

mood, the vibe of whatever's going on.

So you can imagine that when there is a death announced in the pastoral prayer and the musicians don't get to know about it ahead of time, maybe because the minister didn't know because it was just written in the book, right? We have, I have, about 30 seconds to respond to the news, to take in the news, and figure out how to sing anyway.

That's a skill that I've developed over years and years of working in the church and knowing that that's a possibility, knowing that we don't know what's gonna happen in the pastoral prayer.

We just have to be ready for anything and not steel – I don't steel myself against it, but I just know that this singing may be harder than I expected.

And it's harder maybe five or seven times a year. I feel like it's not harder, more than once a month, and I think it's a little less than that, but that's what I mean by learning to pay exquisite attention to my emotions and how they affect my body.

To hear some news, to have a physical reaction to it, an emotional reaction to it, and then to regroup and go on and use my voice in the best way possible anyway, even though this moment is hard, even though that news was really bad. Even though I'd much rather sit in the pew and weep with everybody else, but that's not my moment, that's not my job right now.

That's not what I'm there for.

I'm in the worship service to help other people find their voices and to comfort them when they need comforting.

Now if you're not a church musician and you don't have this kind of opportunity to practice every week, if you are a religious person who

**Can't Wait to Hear You** – a podcast with Michèle Voillequé

## Ep #75: Why AI Won't Take My Job

goes to services, you can practice just like I do, even though you're not getting up and singing in front of everybody else.

If you're in a worship service where you are feeling things and it's time to sing, you can take that as an opportunity to learn how those emotions impact your body and how to take a good, grounded breath and sing anyway away.

If you're not a religious person and you're not finding yourself in a worship service ever, what this can look like is noticing your own joys and sorrows throughout the day, and just take a breath and feel where they register in your body.

Do you feel your throat clench? Do you feel your jaw tighten? Do you feel your stomach clench? Do you feel your shoulders go up around your ears? Do you feel your butt clench? Do your feet try to grab the floor?

There are all kinds of ways we somaticize, we feel, we register emotions in our body.

Without the thought that you're going to sing it all you can start to become attuned to how your emotions take up residence in your body.

This might be easiest if you're watching television. If you're watching some kind of film, program, news, something, and you notice yourself have an emotional reaction.

Why I make this suggestion is because when we're watching television or whatever we call that now, when we're watching something on a screen, it's a confined space and time, right? You can, go to YouTube, for example, pull up the PBS NewsHour and start to watch the news.

It doesn't have to be today's news. It could be any news like there, all of the episodes are there. You can go back. Just pick a random day from

# Ep #75: Why AI Won't Take My Job

last month sometime, or three years ago and watch the news, and notice what emotions come up.

What do you feel in your body?

And if you want to skip the news itself, usually at the end, toward the end of the program, there is something about arts and culture or there's some kind of human interest story, and that's a great way to notice what it is to start to feel ready to cry, or to cry.

You can start to notice, “Oh, I'm having this emotion and now these changes are happening in my body.” And if you really do start crying, now singing is probably impossible. It's very difficult to sing and cry at the same time, they just work against each other.

If you're interested in this work, I would start there. I would start with intentionally watching something for entertainment, but with the intention of noticing your emotions, approach it in that kind of a scholarly, investigative way.

So it's not purely entertainment, but if you're bored by what you're watching, you're not going to, you're probably not going to feel anything.

That's how I would begin, and I think it's for a later episode to talk about how then to practice singing given that you're having an emotion now.

“Now what do I do? I'd really rather sit and cry, but I have to sing.” Pretending that that's your circumstance, that's your situation, your occasion to rise to – I'll talk about that in another episode.

Anyway, this all comes back – I think, I hope you can hear that making art, making music is a fundamentally human project. It's a fundamentally emotive project and connecting project.

# Ep #75: Why AI Won't Take My Job

We are singing or speaking because we're trying to reach someone else. We're trying to pull on someone else's heartstrings. We're trying to engage their mind, bring them into the conversation, bring them closer to us, and we are doing that with our human emotion.

And that is something that AI cannot touch.

I really hope this is helpful. Thank you so much for listening.

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