From *Vox* alias *Phoné* to Voice
A Few Terminological Observations

*Albrecht Riethmüller, Berlin*

In order to bridge the gap between the concepts of sound and voice, New York-based author, editor, and musicologist Theodore Baker unsuccessfully attempted to introduce the concept of ‘phone’ into musical terminology in the final years of the nineteenth century. The English word ‘voice’ stems from Latin *vox*, which is the equivalent of *phoné* in ancient Greek. The article examines several historical problems of elemental acoustic concepts and terminology.

Already on record before 1300, the English term ‘voice’\(^1\) is derived from *vox*, the Latin equivalent of *phoné* in Greek. This is also true for the Italian noun *voce*, the French *voix*, and other similar words in modern European languages. One can therefore conclude that the conceptual and linguistic history of the terms *phoné* and *vox* spans nearly three millennia. One legendary merger of these two terms greets us when we reach for an old long-playing record by RCA Victor – the company that for decades was associated with the slogan “His Master’s Voice”, accompanied by a little white dog trying to grasp the emanations from the gramophone’s funnel.

1. Theodore Baker and Musical Terminology

Theodore Baker (1851–1934) was literary editor for the music publishing house G. Schirmer in his hometown of New York from 1891 on. He had traveled to Germany for musical studies and completed his Ph. D. at the Universi-

\(^1\) Written also voiz, voys, and woyce, etc. See entry “Voice” in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1933 and all subsequent editions).
ty of Leipzig in 1882. Most likely he was the first to write a dissertation on the music of North American Indians; indeed, it is said that he was the very first North American to have obtained a musicological doctorate at all. Later, Baker translated into English the German original of Ferruccio Busoni’s *Sketch of a New Aesthetics of Music* (Trieste 1907), which was published by G. Schirmer in 1911. This was around the time the former Busoni student Natalie Curtis introduced Busoni to a collection of American Indian melodies, which he then adapted in part for his *Indian Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra* (1913), *Indian Diary I* for piano, and *Indian Diary II* for orchestra (both 1915). Under the personal protection of President Theodore Roosevelt, Curtis collected poems and melodies in the southwestern states – indigenous songs that the government did not allow school children to learn – and published the results in *The Indian’s Book* in 1907. From these projects we know that Baker, Busoni, and Curtis, like others at the time, believed that the voice of the American Indian was the genuine voice of America. On the subject of voice, however, Baker had much more to say.

While Baker’s name is still remembered for his lexicographical efforts in connection with the biographies of musicians, it is nearly forgotten that he took the trouble to assemble a terminological dictionary (see 1895). Educated on both sides of the Atlantic, Baker understood the terminological discrepancies between the dominant languages – Italian, German, French, and English – and he knew that dealing with the problems went well beyond the mere explanation of traditional Italian terminology to the English reader and musician. No doubt as a result of his time spent abroad, Baker sensed that terms related to basic musical phenomena lacked common linguistic bridges between the various languages. Most music theorists of his day were active in a mono-linguistic sphere and were not particularly interested in the fact that their terminological constructions were valid only in their own language, if at all. The problem was – and is – not limited to a single term but affects an entire terminological ma-

---

2 A couple of decades later, music history grappled with an altogether different musical paradigm – with jazz, with the voice of Louis Armstrong, and ‘the inimitable Ellington sound’. One can easily overlook the fact that writers of earlier generations were oblivious to usages of words that in the meantime are most familiar to us. Musicians and theorists active during the First World War could not have guessed that expressions such as ‘the Greek sound’ or ‘the inimitable Ellington sound’ would gradually belong to the general understanding of the word sound. Both examples are taken from the entry “Sound” in the 1986 Supplementary Volume of the 1933 edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary* and refer to sources from 1967 and 1974 respectively.