

# The Creative Turn in Arts Scholarship

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## *Introduction*

Where does appreciation end and creative rewriting begin? Can one grasp and what is more elucidate the significance of a work of art, musical tradition, or theatrical genre without being creative oneself? These are vexed questions for arts scholars. Love for the object of one's scholarly interests makes one painfully aware of the unbridgeable distance between making art and researching it.

Or does it? Quizzed as to why he turned to a scholar (Judith Zeitlin) for the libretto of his new opera, Chinese composer Yao Chen protests that “scholars are creative.”<sup>1</sup> But how does their creativity express itself? Is it a case of simply wearing a different hat or, to use again Yao's words, “identity breaking”? Should we think of Yao's main example, Anton Webern, as that of a scholar-turned-composer or a scholar/composer with an identity crisis?

Creativity is variously described as both a trait and a phenomenon, a disposition, and a process. It is associated primarily to the artistic process,

1 See “*Ghost Village*, an Opera: A Conversation with Yao Chen and Judith Zeitlin” below.

yet it underpins the human experience in all its manifestations. It is a surprisingly recent term, yet it is applied retroactively to describe phenomena that stretch as far back as the dawn of the species. In this forum, we use the term “creative” prospectively to glimpse at something that has yet to reveal itself in full. Its central characters are scholars or art professionals with a scholarly background who live in a state of productive, if occasionally anxiety-inducing, tension as a result of having crossed professional and cultural boundaries. The texts that follow attempt to capture the basic outline of practices that defy easy categorization.

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Webern makes a fleeting yet crucial appearance in *Contemplating Music*, at the point where Joseph Kerman muses about

a magical moment in prewar Vienna when private composition students of Alexander von Zemlinsky, Schoenberg’s teacher, and of Schoenberg himself, were simultaneously members of Guido Adler’s musicological seminar at the university. Webern, Egon Wellesz, and less well-known figures such as Karl Weigl and Paul Pisk were all Adler PhDs. ...

There were other exceptional figures, outside of Vienna: for example Dent, a founding member and first president of the International Society for Contemporary Music in 1923, and the author of a book on Busoni. Charles Seeger was at the centre of the New York contemporary music scene of the 1920s and early 1930s. But by and large the response of musicologists to the first phase of modernism was retrenchment.<sup>2</sup>

The legacy of modernism shaped the second postwar period as well, only in even more pointed ways. Of that generation of “musicians,” of whom he was one, Kerman writes—in the present tense—that “whether students go into scholarship or composition is sometimes determined less by their supposed intellectual or creative proclivities, I think, than by their attitudes toward modernism.”<sup>3</sup>

Written forty years ago, Kerman’s vignettes evoke not a continuum but isolated moments from across an eighty-year period, divided by historical

2 Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 37–8.

3 Kerman, 29.

events (the two world wars) and marked by cultural and geographical differences (fin de siècle Vienna vs. interwar London, the New York scene vs. the Academy). In that time frame, the relationship between music scholarship and creative practice did not so much go through cycles but rather appears to have moved from prelapsarian bliss to disintegration. If Webern embodied an almost ideal fusion of research and creative practice, Seeger and Dent were at most Pygmalion figures already at one remove from composition itself. As to the postwar generation, as Kerman implies, one had to choose between one and the other, a situation that has remained prevalent to this day.

It was a missed opportunity, and the culprit was modernism in its pre-, interwar, and especially post-WWII incarnations. At a time when radio and recordings became readily available, interest in all kinds of music grew exponentially. Music became a kind of literature, accessible off a virtual shelf, constantly expanding along both the chronological and geographical axis. Yet the dogma of progress, penchant for mathematical models, and dominance of the avant-garde that pervaded the world of “serious music” made a career in composition unpalatable for many. The net result was a boon for music scholarship, which filled its ranks with talented young musicians who might have otherwise become composers as musicology also gained respectability and institutional presence within the academy.

It’s a compelling story. Missing from Kerman’s account, however, is the role of institutions. It isn’t so much that composers did not feel free to write in a wide range of styles and genres (one need only think of film music to realize that eclecticism was practiced broadly). It is rather that universities, foundations, and the press privileged one narrative at the expense of others. Tonal or otherwise traditional composers were marginalized. Film, theatre, and the dance hall were all shut out of the conversation as was, till recently, popular music. This applies to Kerman, too. His focus on sacred music of the Renaissance and the masterpieces of the common practice repertoire betrays the embrace of the very ideology that underpinned the avant-garde he so shunned as a critic and musicologist in the first place.<sup>4</sup> It would take a long time for the institutions to grasp the significance of the state that

4 In several publications, too many to list here, Richard Taruskin has made clear the link between modernism and the shaping of the Western Canon around the exalted figure of the composer, only to go on to write a monumental history that trades precisely in that very same canon.

Arthur Danto, with respect to the visual arts, termed “the end of art.” Danto’s playful appropriation of Hegel’s prophecy evokes a situation of absolute freedom for the creative artist, unbound by a single, grand narrative: “a wholesale case of living happily ever after.”<sup>5</sup>

The creation and ossification of career paths meant that the roles of creator and scholar became—and continue to be—mutually exclusive. That came hand in hand with the decline of amateurism and with it a chronic fear to cross boundaries. For all these yawning divides, Kerman lets it be understood that the choice to be a practitioner (or a scholar) was available as late as one’s early adulthood, perhaps even beyond. The porosity between scholarship, composition, and performance was and remains common in music departments, and followed from the relatively late acceptance of musicology as a legitimate discipline within the academy (or, which comes to the same thing, the benign neglect that cognate disciplines and university administrators exercised in respect of the latecomer).<sup>6</sup> Most professional musicologists are to this day amateur performers or composers. Some are extremely proficient musicians in their own right. But it is their scholarly work, not their music-making, that has shaped practice—if at all. Early music, a vastly expanding area of practice at the time of Kerman’s writing, and still a major slice of the concert world today, was to remain the remit of historically minded performers. Musicologists have played at most a supporting role in concert presentation or opera production. To the extent that their contribution is valued, it is because of their connoisseurship. One thinks of dramaturgs getting asked whether mashed potatoes existed in the eighteenth century, as if they were just Wikipedia incarnate.<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that the figure of the musicologically trained dramaturg, exemplified in Germany by Carl Dahlhaus, gets no more than a passing mention in Kerman’s account.<sup>8</sup> Yet this also reflects his (understandable) Anglo-American bias. While Dahlhaus may have been a pioneer, his experience was not unrepresentative—

5 Arthur C. Danto, “The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense,” *History and Theory* 37, no. 4 (1998): 128.

6 Nicholas Cook once compared music to geography, as geography departments routinely accommodate practitioners as well as scholars (seminar, The University of Hong Kong, March 2006).

7 Thanks to Carolyn Abbate for this priceless anecdote.

8 Before taking up a professorship in musicology at Technische Universität (Berlin), Carl Dahlhaus was dramaturg for the Deutschen Theater, Göttingen, between 1950 and 1958 and subsequently music critic for the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* (1960–1962).

to the contrary. On the European continent, musicologists have retained a measure of impact on actual music making through their role as advisors, consultants, and board members across a wide range of institutions and cultural spaces.

In the Anglo-American world, it is rather the case that composers have shaped scholarly discourse. Their presence within academia was a major factor, as is the respect they commanded in a composer-centered culture. One thinks of theorist/composers à la Milton Babbitt and, a generation later, Fred Lerdahl; critics such as Edward T. Cone, whose elegant writings soon eclipsed his output as a composer; and the archetype of the cult figure and great disrupter-in-charge, John Cage, who exemplified the “complicity of theory (of a sort) and avant-garde music (of a sort).”<sup>9</sup> These are individuals whose theoretical legacy has endured more than their music.<sup>10</sup> Had he applied his scathing pen to contemporary music the way he did to the art scene, Tom Wolfe might have coined for them the term, “The Notated Word.”<sup>11</sup>

The “end of art” has opened the world of contemporary art to countless individuals who did not excel in the traditional skills of life drawing, modelling, or carving. But it did not produce a convergence between artists and art historians. Not that such a convergence was in the cards anyway. Since at least Ruskin’s time, the divide between the figures of the artist, connoisseur, and collector, respectively, has never really been in question. His own dabbling in printmaking notwithstanding, Danto takes it for granted that he had to make a choice between being a philosopher and an artist. By the same token, the pursuit of scholarship over composition or performance was not a reversible choice; it was more akin to a crossroads. Scholarly engagement only strengthened the conviction that one’s choice had been irreversible. Diverging career paths and the requirements of professionalism—honing skills to perfection, building a network, cultivating a readership or audience—made it impossible to look back. Scholarship and creative practice have therefore come to be seen not merely as separate but incommensurable. The scholar and the creative artist are two different persons, even in the rare cases when they inhabit the same body. Nor need the

9 Kerman, *Contemplating Music*, 103.

10 For counterparts in the world of film, see Noël Burch’s *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) and Laura Mulvey’s series of essays on the male gaze in cinema. Both Burch and Mulvey started out as filmmakers, but they are now remembered primarily as theorists.

11 Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975).

two work symbiotically. Gillian Anderson's scholarship on synchronization may or may not follow from her work as a conductor of music for silent films. As she herself explains in these pages, the relationship between her practice and her scholarship is nuanced and impossible to reduce to one-to-one correspondences.<sup>12</sup>

In a similar vein, the jury's still out whether Danto's philosophy of art was affected by his practice as a print artist. Laurence Dreyfus's music scholarship and his viola playing have grown more separate, it seems to us, as his career developed. More controversially, it remains unclear whether Charles Rosen's writings on the Viennese classics or the romantics are shot through with his pianism. His writings on French literature and art, albeit less influential, display the same flair as his music scholarship; yet he was no French poet. Rosen himself would doubtless fiercely dispute our claim. But it was in the one area in which he was not professionally trained, as a writer on music, that he had his most lasting impact. His PhD was in French literature. And he considered himself first and foremost a pianist, though he suffered from stage fright and therefore had an aborted career.<sup>13</sup> As a musicologist, he was a prodigiously proficient amateur, but an amateur nevertheless. Edward Said reminded us that to be a member of a profession often entails an ineliminable attitude of "authoritarian conformity."<sup>14</sup> Amateurism can be called upon to play the role of the "return of the repressed," as hinted at by Judith Zeitlin in this forum, when she says that to test new waters as an amateur "gives me confidence to try things that I might not be able to try in my own field."<sup>15</sup> Whether specialization hinders the creative approach to artistic phenomena more than amateurism remains an open question, however. The dialectical relationship between professionalism and amateurism changes over time.

There is a deeper reason why Kerman insists that one's choice of career depended in large part from the attitude toward modernism. It is the redeeming feature of Kerman's relentless championing of criticism. For to claim that criticism provided an alternative to composition is to posit not merely a relation of exchange between theory and practice but a dialectical, indeed metamorphic one. It is to envision scholarship as an outlet for

12 Gillian B. Anderson, "The Perspective of a Conductor," below.

13 On this, see Simon Callow, "A Taste for the Difficult," *The New York Review of Books*, February 11, 2021.

14 See Edward Said, "Professionals and Amateurs," in *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 65–83.

15 See "Ghost Village, an Opera," below.

the creative impulse. If we may be allowed an act of creative misreading, we like to think of Kerman's stance as an important step in the direction of reinventing musical creativity apart from composition. Or better yet, to redefine composition the way, for example, Steven Feld does here, namely an intermedial space where one projects a voice to recompose the world through a montage of sound, text, and images.<sup>16</sup>

Institutions underpin the failed rapprochement lamented by Kerman. Institutions, and their crisis, also underpin the "creative turn" we're witnessing today and which this forum bears witness to. First, the introduction of "impact" as a factor in the review of academic performance is encouraging scholars to initiate collaborations with practitioners (whether the desired impact is achieved is less important, perhaps, than the opportunity to do creative work). Second, the anachronistic divisions still in place between areas of studies is forcing thinkers impatient with traditional disciplinary boundaries to venture beyond academia tout court and embrace the unself-consciously cross-disciplinary space of creative practice. Third, the aesthetics of remix is proving to be a propitious starting point for rethinking critical listening as a creative endeavor. Access to music from all epochs and regions of the world has given a chance to listeners not in possession of traditional musical skills to become musical creators in their own right. Using playback systems as instruments, DJs, producers, and curators have redefined the very notion of musicianship, creating a space where listening and making are bound up with one another. "We have no more beginnings," the opening line of George Steiner's *Grammars of Creation*,<sup>17</sup> itself a heady remix of much of the world's literature, need not sound like the lament it was meant to be.

The "creative turn" invoked here bears some relation to the "curatorial turn" touched on by Jelena Novak in the second issue of *Sound Stage Screen*.<sup>18</sup> It is, after all, our own graduate students who feel the pressing need to move beyond traditional scholarship and engage in curatorial projects (the parallel with or better, lagged response to art history is, once again, symptomatic). The crisis of modernism, moreover, has contributed to the demise of the idea of artistic autonomy and with it the emergence

16 "The Recomposing of the World: In conversation with Steven Feld on the occasion of the release of *La recherche comme composition* (2023)," below.

17 George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 1.

18 Jelena Novak, "The Curatorial Turn and Opera: On the Singing Deaths of Maria Callas. A Conversation with Marina Abramović and Marko Nikodijević," *Sound Stage Screen* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 195–209, <https://doi.org/10.54103/sss16640>.

of a new type of curator. No longer merely behind-the-scenes “experts,” curators have been advocating a more public role for the arts and are being tasked with creating solutions for the delivery of artistic content. As illustrated in the forum edited by Piersandra Di Matteo, “The Dramaturg, Today,” the role of the dramaturg too has been reconceived around a broader set of concerns.<sup>19</sup> Pressed by Di Matteo, Florian Malzacher has stated, not coincidentally, “we have to add ‘curatorial advisor’ to the list of roles a dramaturg might play.”<sup>20</sup>

“Applied musicology,” as exemplified by Philip Gossett’s work on opera, is at once a harbinger and a misunderstanding of the creative turn we have in mind. Gossett’s personal involvement in the attempt to perform operas based on critical editions has shaped the Italian operatic scene, with the Fondazione Rossini and the related Opera Festival in Pesaro at its center. Notwithstanding the sacrosanct need to acknowledge the mistakes that littered performing editions of even the best-known operas, fidelity criticism and the ideal of the “authentic” version no longer hold the central role in the debate on opera they once did. Establishing a philologically accurate text down to the (unwritten) ornamentations for the singers does not partake of the performative dimension of opera. Gossett himself stressed this: “Performances, by their very nature, cannot pretend to be philological: that is the purpose of editions.”<sup>21</sup> But if we wish to encourage and channel an attitude of “critical creativity” among scholars we cannot divorce knowledge from performance, and the latter from the creative process. Consider Rina Tanaka’s exemplary preamble to her interview with the *enfant terrible* of Japanese theatre, Yuichi Kinoshita: “we understand the term ‘creative scholarship’ here as a scholar’s application of their discipline or technical expertise, including not only scholarly knowledge but also perspectives or the way of being involved in the creative process, to prompt creative discussions in a healthy relationship.”<sup>22</sup>

What does it mean to say that there needs to be a “healthy relationship” between scholarly knowledge and the creative process? Isn’t the relation-

19 Piersandra Di Matteo, “The Dramaturg, Today: With Responses by Nedjma Hadj Benchelabi, Eva-Maria Bertschy, Antonio Cuenca Ruiz, André Lepecki, Florian Malzacher,” *Sound Stage Screen* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 193–242, <https://doi.org/10.13130/sss15387>.

20 Di Matteo, 221.

21 Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars: Performing Italian Opera* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 131.

22 Yuichi Kinoshita (Kinoshita Kabuki) in conversation with Rina Tanaka, “Creative Scholarship and the Modernization of *Kabuki* Theater,” below.



ship destabilizing, alienating, anxiety-inducing? Consider Michal Grover-Friedlander's understanding of her own practice as director as a kind of drifting: "I find myself outside my comfort zone, which is to theorize, interpret, conceptualize, argue, write about, have ideas for others to put into play."<sup>23</sup> Yet the condition of "being in the dark"—to cite the title of her essay—is a healthy one inasmuch as it shows that the roles we play in our professional lives are not predestined.

With Grover-Friedlander, we too cherish being "in the space of a performance when it is dark—before the audience occupies it, just before the performance starts and everything changes. This space holds within it the potential for everything that is about to take place."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Michal Grover-Friedlander, "Being in the Dark," below.

<sup>24</sup> Grover-Friedlander.

## The Recomposing of the World: In conversation with Steven Feld on the occasion of the release of *La recherche comme composition* (2023)<sup>1</sup>

GIORGIO BIANCOROSSO: *We're here tonight/this morning, on Zoom connecting Hong Kong, Milano and Santa Fe, as a result of, I think, serendipity to some extent, because Emilio and I have been thinking about this issue of SSS for about a year now, and we had no idea that your book and your companion videos will be coming out in September, more or less, at the time when we envisioned our issue would appear. So, this is really timely. We feel very fortunate that you can take part in this and that you can add your perspective to this discussion.*

STEVEN FELD: Thanks, it's great to be part of this, and I'm grateful to you for being among the very first academic colleagues to watch the videos and read the book.

EMILIO SALA: *I was really fascinated by La recherche comme composition. And my first question is: is this book conceived especially for the French world? The topics are typical of your work but they are presented in a new way, a new perspective permeated by a deep reflection on method—very close to the intellectual French milieu. A second question concerns the title: Research as Composition. Another possible title is Research as Recomposition. Did you consider that?*

SF: Let me first say, about the book as a uniquely French edition, that I have been in dialogue with French colleagues since 1974 when I was a student in ethnographic film and musical anthropology at the old Musée de l'Homme. So, I was very happy when Jonathan Larcher and Damien Mottier, directors of the visual anthropology and documentary cinema program at University of Paris-Nanterre, a program created by Jean Rouch in 1977, invited me to make some film-lectures. Part of the book's *raison d'être* is this long conversation with French colleagues about the presentation of anthropological ideas in the sonovisual form. The book experiments with the articulation of research ideas in an intermedial format, fusing the visual and sonic and at two levels: the physical book with text and images, and the performance videos where that text is voiced with images, graphics, and audio and video

<sup>1</sup> Steven Feld, *La recherche comme composition*, ed. Jonathan Larcher and Damien Mottier, trans. Magali de Ruyter (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2023).

clips. My connections to French anthropology, film, ethnomusicology, and sound studies are all in play here, going back fifty years to the time when I was inspired by the many innovative publications and publication formats that Jean Rouch, Gilbert Rouget, Hugo Zemp, and Bernard Lortat-Jacob were making with research in sound and film. On the social anthropology side of the story, Philippe Descola and I are the same age, and when I first went to Paris in 1974 he was already the most prominent student of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In the many years since, my thinking about nature-culture, about society and environment, has drawn on his insights. Working with him there at the Collège de France is Florence Brunois-Pasina, who coincidentally does her field research in Papua New Guinea in the Bosavi region in close proximity to where I work. The book unites many overlapping histories in French social, visual, and musical anthropology, with my two video-lectures placed between an introduction by Jonathan and Damien, and a postface by Florence. So yes, it is a uniquely French edition, and it is also unique because Magali de Ruyter, who expertly translated my English text, also performs my voice in French for the video soundtracks, underscoring my insistence to theorize voice as authorship. So, yes, a very French production. But perhaps in time it would be great to make an Italian edition too!

About composition and *recomposition*, this is a really critical and wonderful question; thank you Emilio! And here I'll start with Italian conversations. At the Conservatorio di Milano, in 2017, and again 2019, I made lectures, workshops, and concerts, including at the Acousmonium, under the title "Listening as Composition." The title really emerged in conversation with your University of Milano colleague Nicola Scaldaferrì, because we both have an early formation in electroacoustic composition and we both maintain strong interests in dialogue with composers and compositional practices. Through Nicola I met Giovanni Cospito, professor of electroacoustic music at the conservatory, who most generously organized the concert programs, and created possibilities for Nicola and I to talk about the importance of listening as a field of research, in all of its connections to contemporary composition. Here I tried to explain my idea of composition and research as a listening to histories of listening. This has been critical to me for many years, to shift the conversation from the musical object to listening practices, to biographies of listening, to listening as the foundational social experience of music and sound. So, I first had the idea to call the book *Listening as Composition*, but then I changed the title to *Research as Composition* to make the idea as open as possible across anthropology, music, and film.

The first lecture in the book, “Acoustemology,” is a summary of my listening to histories of listening and my concern with sound as a way of knowing, whether with New Guinea rainforest foragers or with urban African truck drivers, or with bell performances throughout villages and towns in Europe. It is all about listening and recording to do research that can be composed. But in the conclusion to the second lecture, “Hearing Heat,” I cite Philippe Descola’s little book, *The Ecology of Others*, indicating how he uses this term “recomposition.” And so the lecture ends on that idea, of recomposing as a way of imagining across boundaries, whether they are the received boundaries of society and nature, or of music and sound, or of heat and danger. In the end I join Descola’s future imaginary for anthropology, the idea of a recomposition to address the epistemological violence of reified categories of the natural and social world.

*GB: Steve, if I may follow up on that. Does this entail fluidly cutting across media, but also modes of scholarship and modes of composition? And if so, is it there an infrastructure for this flow to actually happen? Because it’s not easy to move from writing to filming, recording, playback, engineering, and then mix and start all over again. So how does this happen in practice? Obviously, your example as a multifaceted scholar, composer, and recordist is luminous in that respect. But I’m wondering whether you have a word of advice for those of us who are still struggling to actually make this happen?*

*SF: I really appreciate that. One way to address that fluidity and imagine an infrastructure is to insist that this book is not a book. It is a sonovisual project, an intellectual project that begins with voice, with speaking, with imaging a voice for lectures, for creating dialogue and being listened to. To insist on the importance of voice and vocality rather than a text-centric framework is to insist on performance, to insist on how intermediality starts by connecting a speaking voice to an image or a sound. And so the idea is to create a new kind of infrastructure—intermediality—to explore mediated relationships in composition. What brings intermedial relations into coherence, what connects all the media, is the voice. The voice is something both ephemeral and material. It is present in the image, but the voice also comes from outside the image to go inside it, as well as inside to come outside.*

When you look at the printed text, I want you to realize that you are literally looking at my voice. And as you look at my voice, you can look at the things that penetrate my voice: images, art, painting, graphics, music transcriptions, clips audio and visual. This is also an infrastructure to foreground time and temporality. The temporality of the moving and speak-

ing voice with other things, like pictures, making these guest appearances. Sometimes there's a picture and you look at it for a long time while listening to a voice. Sometimes the picture is there for a short time. Sometimes it's all about the juxtaposition of the voice and image and a sound or a sound clip. This new kind of intermedial infrastructure is about composing and recomposing the interplay of voice, text, image and sound. It's a way of composing *against* the idea that these other media are merely illustrations in service of a text. The intermediality itself is the message. This is why I love the way Descola poses the "comment recomposer" question, and I join it to ask how to understand this intermedial accumulation as the agency of a new voice, a new vocality.

ES: *On the matter of how to recompose, there is also an engaged and quite an activist nuance, I think. Yes, I think that is one of the things I like the most about the word.*

SF: Me too. Precisely as you suggest, recomposition involves care, concern, obligation, responsibility. How do we circulate something in the world and understand this circulation as an ethical response to the conditions of the world and the need to be engaged with those conditions? In a certain sense you could say that, if the first lecture is a summary of 45 years of my histories of listening to histories of listening, the second lecture is more about the way the last 10 years find me shifting into the modality of recompositional engagement. The idea of the ear flash, the acoustic flash, that I explore in "Hearing Heat" engages the premonition that we are improvising at the edge of danger. I'm not a politician and I'm not here to preach. But I want to signal that sounds and images all around announce the danger that we live with. Recomposition addresses the materiality of this alarm.

Parenthetically, these issues are recently amplified considerably for me with the release of Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*, a three-hour film about the life of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the so-called father of the atomic bomb. And where I am speaking to you from, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is just 100 kilometers south of Los Alamos, where the bomb was developed. To live in northern New Mexico is to live with nuclear history every day. The film recalls powerfully for me the meanings of going to Hiroshima to listen and to record, to listen to the time and place where the most profoundly evil line was crossed in the history of humanity. And it was announced in a revelation of sound and light. Imagining the flash, imagining the danger of history speeding by, is the gift that Benjamin gave us, and his flash is what gave birth to mine while listening to the cicadas and peace bell at Hiroshima.

Unfortunately, if Hiroshima was a profound ear flash for me, seeing *Oppenheimer* was Hollywood soundtrack banality at its worst: three hours of screeching microtonal violins, as if this could possibly evoke the subjective dimension of the atomic atrocity. It was truly a lost opportunity to really engage and teach people how to listen to this moment in history. And I think about that because here we are speaking on August 7, the day after Hiroshima day, the day before Nagasaki day. And just yesterday, my composition, *The Last Sound*, was played on more than 200 radio stations around the world to remember that day.

**GB:** *For the sake of our readers, I'd like to ask you if you could flesh this out a little bit, flesh out both what you did in the sound installation and also its connection to the Benjamin quote. I think it would help us also build a little context for what really was, for me at least, the most arresting epiphany on reading and watching your work.*

**SF:** I went to Hiroshima in 2005 for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, traveling there with my wonderful colleague Yamada Yoichi, who I've known since the 1980s as an ethnomusicologist working in Papua New Guinea. Through the generosity of the mayor of Hiroshima we were able to stand in the press area. This was in the very front of 40,000 people who gathered at the Peace Park for the ringing of the pagoda bell to mark, at 8.15am on August 6, the moment of the detonation above the city. It is an intense place, surrounded by memorial ruins that have not been reconstructed, but left as they were from the time of the detonation. You see history everywhere, almost like x-rays in the ground, you feel surrounded by so many melted and frozen shadows. For me, it is one of the most remarkable places on this earth, truly embodying the impossibility of living outside of history, the necessity of acknowledging atrocity.

Sitting immediately behind the press are the families of the survivors. And so the position from which I was able to listen and record was right there among people whose lives, whose families, had been profoundly marked by this disaster. And when the MC called for silence for the ringing of the bell, of course, there was no silence. There was the roar of cicadas, which are a huge, astoundingly loud presence in western Japan in late summer. And that's the moment when I had what I call an ear flash, to register that the cicadas were the first to hear the heat of the detonation. In that flash I realized that the sound of those cicadas was the last sound to be heard by 50,000 people before they perished.

In the following days I went to the park every morning and I wired trees

and recorded the cicadas every possible way I could. And then, from 815 samples, I compositionally created a texture of the cicadas. Then I took my recording of the cicadas and the pagoda bell and put it into that texture. Then in order to shape the patina of the relationship between the bell and the cicadas compositionally, I played and re-recorded the whole composition through two radio sets at the Peace Museum, one from Hiroshima and one from Nagasaki. I compressed and treated the frequency spectrum of the sounds of the bell to sound like something broadcast in Japan in 1945 on old radio sets with tube amplifiers.

I wanted also to work with the relationship between listening, recording, playback and re-playback, as haunted echoes of history. And, of course, the composition of the cicadas was very much inspired by Iannis Xenakis' approach to sonic density as fabric, with thorough physicality. So, the cicadas become a kind of acoustic fabric, a fabric of history, into which are burned, like burned bodies, the voice of the bell reverberating through radio sets.

*GB: Is this a mode of historiography or is this a work of art that bears witness to your imagination of a historical moment? I don't want to put a caption under it, but you mentioned history and the impossibility of not acknowledging history. So I'm wondering...*

SF: Yeah, that's a great question. And the only caption I can put under it is the one I did, *The Last Sound*, because that was the flash, that I was listening to a history of listening to the last sound experienced by the innocents who perished into the heat and light and noise of that explosion. Turning the listening into composition rejoins Benjamin's flash of time passing dangerously fast and to feel no option but to give it an amplified voice. I mean, you can call it witnessing, but for me, it goes back to Emilio's point about a kind of activist responsibility or a sense of obligation to give a voice to deep experience. I can't write a book like the one John Hersey wrote about Hiroshima, which remains as remarkable today as it was in pages of *The New Yorker* in the weeks after the bombing. But just feeling the flash I knew instantly just how I wanted to recompose this history of listening.

I'm not a particularly angry person. I don't compose things that are angry. I don't write things that are angry. I don't make angry music or angry movies. Certain kinds of documentary filmmakers can make angry movies and morally, you know, try to manipulate people's emotions or things like that. I have no interest in that as a way of making art. For me, making art has to come from the history of bodily experience. And here it was, the ear flash.

And from that specific story I want to move out now, to the fact that there



are some 3,300 species of cicadas in the world. And they are thermometric, which means that they have been announcing the climate of history for millennia. And human beings have profound histories of listening to these cicadas, like the ones I came to know in Papua New Guinea, or the ones that are announced in Japan by Ozu's *Tokyo Story* or my *The Last Sound*, or the ones that are announced in Greece from the time of the ancients. Thus, the topic is really temperature, what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls *The Climate of History* in his beautiful book title. So I'm trying to imagine an acoustemology of the climate of history.

**GB:** *Animals figure so prominently not only in this book but in all of your work. And there seems to be a dual impulse here too, both listening and recomposing. Could you say something about animals in your work? They appear so spontaneously, without fanfare, they're just there. But again their presence is so fundamental, both to the communities you have studied and to your own work and to your own poetics, it seems.*

**sf:** Well, we're all animals. As so in a sense, you could call my work an anthropology of life forms, and anthropology beyond the human, a human animal anthropology in sound. And to do that I am proposing a counter-listening, a counter-sounding. I went to music conservatory and you guys went to music conservatory, okay? In music conservatory, did they teach you bird call recognition in your ear training classes? Or did they teach you, like they taught me, to block out everything in the world except musical intervals? The non-human was ignored because we learned that what was of value was human invention, and then, a very limited subset of human invention. So, I'm asking the question: isn't that a kind of deep epistemological violence in the terms of Foucault? is "music" a uniquely human, presumably natural, and universally fixed category just because that was the ideological baggage imposed on us by going to conservatory?

When I went to Papua New Guinea, what I learned in music conservatory didn't help me at all. Because for the people who are living in the rainforest in New Guinea, the sounds of the birds are the voices of their ancestors. I thus instantly experienced an explosion: living, non-living, human, non-human, boom! And then, well, what are we listening to? I mean, are the birds saying, "Hi, it's Uncle Charlie?" What are they saying? Well, you know, they're announcing their presence, the way a car horn announces a presence, the way a bell announces the presence, the way in which myriad non-human and non-living materializations of sound announce a presence. And what is that presence? It is relational, a betweenness, of persons and



place, of presence and memory. In the rainforest, what you learn is that you are part of a listening community, that listening is what makes community. And the community of the living and the non-living, the community of the past and present, is always an acoustic community of memory, together as part of a continuum of listening, a history of listening. And you are part of this. *But* you are not the dominant part of it, you are just the perspectival center of it because your sounds and the sounds of all others are co-eval, living a relational equivalence. So, in the Papua New Guinea rainforest I learned that sound itself is the center of a relational ontology. And it was working in a world of the Papua New Guinea rainforest that obliterated for me these fixed categories like living, non-living, like human, animal. Because every sound is potentially both forecasting as well as reminding and implicating the way in which human beings are woven into the texture of an all-species world. So, yes, animals appear constantly in my work, and after the rainforest it was with bells, the relationships of animal bells and church bells and town bells and carnival bells and how the history of pastoral landscapes and humanity was shaped through ten centuries in European listening history. My idea, my concern, is always to start with listening, rather than to start with a preconceived category like music, or the human. If there's anything that I'm really passionate about, in these lectures and elsewhere, it's this idea of reimagining research through listening.

es: The Tuning of the World, *quoting the title of R. Murray Schafer's famous book, translates in a Feldian way into* Recomposing the World. *Wouldn't you agree?*

sf: Yes. It reminds me that a book of conversations with Philippe Descola has the title *The Composition of Worlds*. And in my case, the recomposition of worlds, or the idea of recomposing worlds, would be a very, very appropriate title. Murray could be quite a preacher and moralist in a lot of ways. For him the "tuning" of the world was about how the category of noise was a bad thing, how the world needed to be retuned to eliminate unnecessary noise. And that, you know, it was the job of the composer to reduce noise to create a better tuned world. So there were a lot of frequencies that Murray wanted to eliminate. I don't want to eliminate frequencies. For me, recomposition is more about a way to change the feeling of the figure and the ground. It is just like what we were talking about a second ago, about changing the focal point, you know, recomposing the relationship between birds and humans by listening to, and producing a soundtrack where they are equally present.

I have a story to tell about this. I had a deep fondness for Gilbert Rouget. He was really a remarkable presence in the history of ethnomusicology and music in France. The creation of the LP series at the Musée de l'Homme with the music label Le Chant du Monde was a very important thing. Because he knew my work and he knew me, Rouget asked me to make a presentation of my recordings when I came back from Papua New Guinea, to see if they might possibly be published in this record series. And so, I made the presentation and Rouget interrupts after 40 seconds, 50 seconds, of the first piece, and he puts his hands up and he says, "Steve, I'm sorry, we cannot present in the series of the Musée de l'Homme a woman singing with a baby crying." So I play other tracks. Same thing. "Steve, we're trying to elevate traditional musics so people will understand their beauty, their seriousness, like with a concert music. You have babies, birds, machetes, axes, rivers, children yelling, it's all too chaotic, even if the quality of the sound of your recordings is beautiful." And I said to him, "Well, this is the anthropology of sound. This is life in a rainforest. I can't sanitize it."

ES: *It's a great story.*

SF: I was really disappointed, because they were making such beautiful LPs, and it would have been my first choice to be in their series. But I will remember this story all of my days, because it speaks to the history of curating musical difference based on certain aesthetic categories and principles. Anyway, it was a good lesson for me, because it helped me to understand why I was not an ethnomusicologist and why I needed to insist on the anthropology of sound as the basis of my research. So it was a deep lesson in how ethnomusicology wanted to tune the world to its ideological purposes, not unlike the way Murray Schafer wanted to tune the world to his compositional ideals.

GB: *In doing that, in withdrawing from ethnomusicology and calling yourself an anthropologist of sound, aren't you legitimizing the field? Shouldn't you be fighting in their same turf? Aren't we, by pulling out of the conversation, aren't we legitimizing their sole focus on this platonic or ideal thing that they call music? I'm wondering how you feel about this.*

SF: Well, I feel that ethnomusicology died four consecutive deaths in the fifty years that I have been around the field and practice. The first death was in the 1970s, when the opportunity to truly merge theoretically with anthropology was there and was refused. The second death was in the 1980s,

when the opportunity to truly merge theoretically with popular music and cultural studies was there and was refused. The third death was in the 1990s and early 2000s, when the opportunity to truly merge theoretically with globalization and mediatization theory was there and refused. And the fourth death has been in the last fifteen years, when the opportunity to truly merge theoretically with sound studies (not to mention acoustemology) was there and was refused. So what is left? A field that borrows remnants and shoddily applies the theories of others, with a mean lag time of 10 years. It's a colossal disciplinary disappointment to me, even if there are specific researchers whose work I admire and respect.

ES: *Even if Alan P. Merriam and his The Anthropology of Music were marginalized within the US, it was not so in Italy.*

GB: *In Italy, at least in Rome, the historical musicology curriculum mandated that we read Merriam. And Emilio is a great example as his work clearly gestures toward anthropology. But if I might add, film music has also been a wasted opportunity, as any interaction between music, film, and media studies has failed to give rise to a genuinely new space where new ideas and professional profiles could emerge. But I want to go back to Schafer for a second and also to the Kaluli, Steve, because my guess is that in a Schaferian vein the Kaluli would represent some kind of prelapsarian, innocent, "before the fall" world, even if this is hardly so in your work. But if their world is not prelapsarian, then what is it? What is its value for us?*

SF: I had this argument in public with Murray. Unfortunately, it's never been published. There was a live dialogue, and it was recorded. I think it was 1983 or 1984. Anyway, what happened was, we were on stage together, and the question was posed to him first: What is the value of Steve's work in rainforest Papua New Guinea to your program of studying the soundscape? And Murray basically said, well, it's very valuable to have a study of a "truly primitive" soundscape, and what he followed with was all the primal, exotizing, primitivizing language to the maximum. And I was horrified that he was talking about this as if the Kaluli world was some pristine earlier stage of humanity.

I just said that the real value of the sound environment, of listening to the sound environment and analyzing and recording the sound environment of the rainforest, is that it's a profound corrective to Western and especially avant-garde music history. It's a profound corrective to the history of how we imagine avant-gardism in sound. I talked about all of the rainforest

forms of sound and music making and how they cut across every typology of musical invention and are also replete with techniques and concepts typically imagined to be the unique invention of Western avant-gardes.

And Murray responded, like, well, that's all very interesting but of course Steve is just being very defensive, because he wants his primitives to be modern and avant-garde. And then, you know, he went into his whole thing with noise and how these Kaluli people live in a world where there's no noise. And I said, hey, wait a minute. That's complete rubbish. The sound pressure levels are not all that different from downtown Milano or Hong Kong. It's just that the sources of those sounds and the diversity of them and the way they are spread across the acoustic spectrum are really quite different. I said, you know, this kind of approach to noise pollution you're talking about doesn't make any sense at all in a place like the rainforest. I said, human beings had to evolve in relation to noise. The pristine quiet environment rap is empirically wrong and probably pernicious too.

I was reminded of this years later, in 2017, when I recomposed the soundtrack to *Voices of the Rainforest* in 7.1 cinema surround at Skywalker Sound. The engineers there were totally amazed at the density of the spectrum on my recordings. They were saying things like "this is really full-spectrum sound. It's not like we have to pump it up. Do you realize this?" And I just smiled and thought, yeah, this is what I have been saying for fifty years. And this is exactly what Murray didn't want to hear, he just couldn't fit this in his evolutionist mindset. I mean he wanted to assign the rainforest to the evolutionary place of the pristine, quiet environment. Empirically and intellectually, that was just wrong.

ES: *Your historiographic paradigm is completely different, and maybe the "ear flash" is a very exemplary moment because of Benjamin, the Benjamin quote buried in it, and the shift from a visual point of view to a sonic one, and because there is a kind of short circuit of all the temporalities—the past, the present, and the future. This is a very productive reflection from an historiographical point of view, too. It is interesting because of your need to go even beyond the long durée, into a kind of deep time, and referring to nature as "the memory of the world" bridges the great divide between history and anthropology. I think this is another crucial point in your late work, and maybe in all of your work.*

SF: I love your invocation of the term "short circuit." As an electrical metaphor, a metaphor of how things move, circulate, flow, the short circuit is not linear or circular. It's not a normal circuit that works in terms of typical

dynamics to seek stability and continuity and linearity. The short circuit invokes an intellectual implosion of the categories of listening, of the histories of listening, of the possibilities of listening to histories of listening, and recombining them. Like the flash, the short circuit comes to us through electricity, through our confusion when something interrupts the system profoundly. I am speaking about interruptions of the categories, interruptions of history, places of rupture and surprise and even what Freud called the uncanny. To short circuit linearity places us in the center of the wheel where we must follow the spokes to places that don't follow linear sequences. I mean, I follow it to Greece, to Papua New Guinea, to Japan, follow it to the most ancient and most contemporary moments.

So now, after Hiroshima, a short circuit, and we follow the cicadas to Fukushima, where Japanese scientists instantly understood the profound relationship between nuclear and genetic disaster. When will the cicadas return? And with what genetic modifications, deficits, and interruptions? We thus have a short circuit, where nuclear history is cicada history. The history of species is the history of our own potential future, or lack of it. This is precisely why I love how you invoke the power of the short circuit. Like the ear flash of Hiroshima, Fukushima short-circuited another moment in the genetic, biological history of cicadas and their relationship to human history. From that short circuit, you know, we need to go in the direction of genetics. We need to go in the direction of sound. We need to go in the direction of population ecology. We need to go in the direction of eco-disaster. The potential is there for fifty Ph.D. dissertations to be written about nuclear interruptions and the biology and genetics of cicada-human co-habitation. That work surely speaks to the responsibility to recompose worlds. As you say, not to tune the world, but to recompose it.

## The Perspective of a Conductor (Music Librarian, Archivist, Musicologist, Biologist)

Gillian B. Anderson

I have been asked to contribute to this issue on creativity and scholarship because it is thought that my activity as an orchestral conductor is what makes me insist that there was widespread live synchronization of music to “mute” films (contrary to frequent assertions that synchronized sound only began with the talking picture).<sup>1</sup> While my conducting surely has affected my perspective, the reason for my conviction is more nuanced. I believe it is rooted in the fact that I am a very literal-minded music librarian/archivist/musicologist with a bachelor’s degree in biology and a former physicist husband. The conducting merely confirms and amplifies what I have already learned about synchronization.

When I am conducting a score, I experience all the changes in dynamics, harmony, and orchestration—physically. Crescendos and decrescendos, for example, are experienced as changes in intensity of volume which I feel and then my body language expresses physically. This together with the tempo of my baton telegraphs instruction and expressivity to the orchestra.

The process becomes more complex when the music provides the only sound for a moving picture. The image too has many changes (angles of vision, colors, situations, moods, dramaturgy) that creates its own varying intensities. From my position, I am keenly aware of the interreaction of one set of changes and intensities with the other, the music with the image. I direct traffic, but the resulting sound washes over me as I keep up with the changing images. I experience both worlds intensely at the same time and instantly see how or whether the two worlds fit with one another. As a result, I have come to believe that often the image has been given credit for an effect that is really the result of the interaction between image and

1 See Gillian B. Anderson, “The Synchrony Era,” *Music and the Moving Image* 16, no. 2 (2023): 4–35, <https://doi.org/10.5406/19407610.16.2.02>; “The Score for *Way Down East*: A Harbinger of the Future,” in *Critica della musica per film. Un film, un regista, un compositore*, ed. Roberto Calabretto, Quaderni di musica per film 2 (Venice: Fondazione Levi, 2021), 2–212; “Synchronized Music: The Influence of Pantomime on Moving Pictures,” *Music and the Moving Image* 8, no. 3 (2015): 3–39, <https://doi.org/10.5406/musimoviimag.8.3.0003>; “The Presentation of Silent Films, or, Music as Anaesthesia,” *Journal of Musicology* 5, no. 2 (1987): 257–95, <https://doi.org/10.2307/763853>; “No Music Until Cue: The Reconstruction of D. W. Griffith’s *Intolerance*,” *Griffithiana* 38/39 (1990): 141–69.

sound together. The right music will integrate seamlessly with the images, whether it is original or preexisting.

However, this integration or coordination results from following the cues marked frequently in the scores. (By the word *cue* I refer to the written verbal references to film intertitles or actions that the composers or compilers put over the music for a scene. They were used to alert the musicians to the necessity of a change of music for an impending entrance or change of scene.) If my being a conductor has anything to do with my insistence on the existence of live synchronized sound in the “silent” film era, it is the result in my performances while observing these cues with one score after another. The music has fit the moving picture only when the music is brought into close proximity with the images via a synchronization that uses the cues as guideposts.

The music librarian/archivist/musicologist side came into play long before the performances when, in preparation for their microfilming (in 1978), I made a page by page examination of every “mute” film score at the Library of Congress and the Museum of Modern Art. All the scores (mostly for feature films) had detailed cues to intertitles, actions or characters printed over and throughout the music itself. The cue sheets that were to be filmed consisted just of cues to the film with durations, titles and composers of the pre-existing music that went with every cue. Literal minded me, I assumed the cues were there because the music was supposed to be performed in synch with the moving images. Otherwise, why would all these composer/compiler have gone to the trouble of timing the filmed scenes and noting these scenes with cues every ten to forty or fifty measures of music?

The Music Division of the Library of Congress thought that a bibliography with these microfilm scores and cue sheets would be useful to anyone interested in writing about or performing “mute” film music, so in 1988 it published *Music for Silent Films (1892–1929): A Guide* with my introductory, illustrated essay, which provided the context within which these musical artifacts could be understood. In my introduction I included a long quote from conductor Hugo Riesenfeld. It was a description of the process of synchronization that he used at his New York cinemas in the 1920s. It reinforced my conviction that the music was synchronized to the film.

It was only after this point that I became engaged as a conductor. I decided to try to realize one of the scores with a film. I chose the most famous, the Pouget/Alix original score for Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). That was my first performance of an entirely original score with a “mute” film. (Subsequently I realized that such a score was the exception. Most



were either made up of a combination of original and preexisting pieces, or were entirely a compilation of preexisting numbers.) I had a stopwatch and a windup (read also wind down) metronome and trying to figure out how to arrive on time at each new cue was difficult. It required a lot of practice.

Conductors in the teens and twenties had the advantage of a vast knowledge of the standard repertory as well as stop watches, so they knew approximately how fast the tempo indications, *moderato*, *allegro*, etc. went. (They also had rehearsal pianists and large teams of music copyists, and orchestral librarians to help them.) However, they (like me) had to spend a lot of time rehearsing to get the synchronization into their muscle memory. Eventually, my physicist husband gave me a simple algebraic formula with which to figure out the exact metronome speed I would need to make a rehearsal number last the required duration. (Number of musical beats times 60 divided by the duration of a scene in seconds equals the metronome marking or the number of beats per second that will enable a given piece of music to cover a chosen scene.) Subsequently, the algebra together with a digital metronome, a videotape, and a videotape player allowed me to play the movie over and over again, adding extra cues to my scores so that I could master the correct speeds more quickly. This simple formula theoretically would have been available at the beginning of the twentieth century, but I have never come across any evidence that algebra was used by conductors or composers during the “silent” film era nor have I ever seen extra cues marked in a score. I had a videotape and videotape player with which to practice. Back in the teens and twenties conductors and composer/com-pilers had to practice to a clock with a second hand. Practicing to repeated screenings of a 35 mm film would have been completely out of the question. Conductors would get the music into their muscle memory and polish the synchronization with a full technical rehearsal with film and orchestra.

As a conductor in preparation for a performance, I am expected to examine closely every score and to determine what the composers wanted. Theoretically, anyone should be able to make such an examination, but the role of conductor carries an added responsibility for bringing into reality the sound of the music as conceived by its creators—or at least that is what a very literally minded me thinks. In the case of music written to accompany a film, I not only had to learn the film but also to understand what relationship the composers wanted the accompaniment to have to it.

When I examined the over fifty accompaniments for mute films that I eventually conducted, one feature was salient. The music was closely cued to the films. Clearly the composers wanted the music they had assembled



to follow closely the motion pictures. When a cue appeared on the screen, they wanted the music under the cue in the score to start. It made no sense for the composers to have gone to all the trouble of timing the scenes and choosing the right music, sprinkling written cues to the film frequently throughout a one and one half to three and one half hour score if the cues and music were to be performed willy-nilly. So, I attempted to realize the scores, cued as indicated, to the films. I was very literal minded, a characteristic that has nothing whatever to do with me as a conductor. Others have looked at the same artifacts and have concluded that the cues were merely vague indications.

Over time several things became obvious to me as noted above. When performed as cued, the music often caught the timing of the movements within the frames, what Sergio Miceli and Ennio Morricone refer to as implicit synchronization.<sup>2</sup> The music thus performed became one with the image, the music apparently disappearing, but the sound was as important to the effect of the film as was the image. This was completely contrary to the accepted industry and scholarly standard that claimed that the image was more important than anything. In the scores I performed the music played a structural role, defining the beginning and ending of scenes, establishing the mood, performing a pointing function, emphasizing certain actions or body movements or rhythms within a scene. Most strikingly the music seemed to function in relationship to the image much as it does in today's recorded sound films. It used some of the same dramatic formulas and conventions. It was the synchronization that brought the sound and image closely together and facilitated the development of these conventions or the application to film of the conventions already developed for other kinds of dramatic music. (In fact, when one thinks about it, it is highly unlikely that film music developed in a vacuum, independent from all other kinds of music making.)

Because of this experience, I understood the entire trajectory of the history of film music in a different way. My experience conducting the scores in a synchronized way confirmed what I had observed in the scores and learned from early twentieth century articles and manuals on movie music. Synchronized sound, at least for feature films, had been practiced and became an ideal fourteen or fifteen years before the introduction of recorded sound film. The sound was an equal partner with the moving pictures.

<sup>2</sup> Ennio Morricone and Sergio Miceli, *Composing for the Cinema: The Theory and Praxis of Music in Film*, trans. Gillian B. Anderson (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 76–77.

Neither one was more important than the other. As Erwin Panofsky noted, the motion picture was like a medieval cathedral.<sup>3</sup> Every artisan was important because without any one the cathedral could not have been completed. This analogy also holds for “silent” pictures. “Mute” motion pictures accompanied by synchronized scores utilized the audience’s ability to navigate the world with both their eyes and ears. No recorded sound process can replicate the energy in the room when a live orchestra plays in synch with a moving picture, as evidenced by the increasing popularity of the live performance of the original orchestral scores for contemporary blockbuster movies. What goes around, comes around.

I am very grateful that Emilio Sala and Giorgio Biancorosso asked me to participate in this issue of SSS because it has given me the opportunity to reflect on my role as orchestral conductor among my other activities. As a result, I have begun to connect the work that I did at the beginning of my career on colonial American music with film music. Is it possible that the impulse to reuse preexisting music for dramatic works in the “mute cinema” is connected to Francis Hopkinson’s *America Independent or The Temple of Minerva* (America’s first attempt at grand opera) and even ballad opera?<sup>4</sup> I don’t know, but this reflection on my role as a conductor has put me in a “connecting” mood.

Boston, May 2023

3 Erwin Panofsky, “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures,” in *Film: An Anthology*, ed. Daniel Talbot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959): 29.

4 Gillian B. Anderson, “*The Temple of Minerva* and Francis Hopkinson: A Reappraisal of America’s First Poet-Composer,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 120, no. 3 (June 15, 1976): 166–77.

## Creative Scholarship and the Modernization of Kabuki Theater Yuichi Kinoshita (Kinoshita Kabuki) in conversation with Rina Tanaka<sup>1</sup>

*“[T]he titles I’ve used so far—  
leader, text director/playwright, and supervisor—  
no longer cover the range of my work.”  
—Yuichi Kinoshita*

Creative scholarship in the performing arts has been a hot topic, but it is always difficult to discuss. More or less everyone who has been, or is, studying and working in this field is inevitably confronted with the challenges how to make use of academic knowledge in their creation or how to bring their artistic experiences into academia. There are various roles in creative scholarship. Some individuals are involved as artists; some as dramaturgs, curators, or advisors whose expertise is sought; some as lecturers or researchers; and others as directors, producers, supervisors, or even administrators. The requirements for an individual’s creative and scholarly skills can vary wildly, depending on the occasion, with whom, and for what purpose they care carrying out their work.

However, the diverse work and tasks that require creative scholarship have not been fully recognized, because it tends to be omitted from the scope of existing jobs. Many theater groups and organizations work as institutions that create and run productions within systematic specialization. Meanwhile, those who work outside of this ecosystem never have their names in the credits of the production. This can include individuals who connect and coordinate relevant people before a production begins, suggest new artists and plays that can innovate an institution’s repertoire, or give small but crucial pieces of advice based on their creative scholarship. I understand the term “creative scholarship” here as a scholar’s application of their discipline or technical expertise, including not only scholarly knowledge but also perspectives or the way of being involved in the creative process, to prompt creative discussions in a healthy relationship.<sup>2</sup> Even

<sup>1</sup> This interview was held at the Kyoto Sangyo University’s Machiya Manabi Terrace Nishijin on March 22, 2023, conducted in Japanese and translated into English by Rina Tanaka. The introduction is by Rina Tanaka.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion about a definition of creative scholarship, see also: Serena Miller, “The Tenure and Promotion Standards Used to Evaluate Creative Scholarship in the Media and Communication Fields,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* 77, no. 4 (2022):

if these individuals do not mind that they are not credited by name in the playbill, and not showing in the credits is one practical way to avoid bringing academic authority into the power structure of production, these are no reasons to underestimate the influence their creative scholarship can exert in the field of performing arts. But how should we refer to these individuals? This has become my question too, ever since I have taken work as mentioned above. I have been at a loss several times when people have asked me what my title is. A good neighbor for the artist? A supporter? A facilitator?

To try and address this issue, the SSS editors and I designed an interview with Yuichi Kinoshita 木ノ下裕一 because his unique position—as a kabuki scholar who graduated from Kyoto University of Art and Design, the leader of his theater company (Kinoshita Kabuki) since 2006, and a dramaturg who creates works with a director—can give us important clues about the nature of creative scholarship in the performing arts today. Kinoshita has worked with other Kinoshita Kabuki members, guest directors, and performers to adapt pre-modern classical kabuki into contemporary Japanese theater. He also introduces classical performing arts on the radio, gives lectures, and has received numerous awards, including the Agency for Cultural Affairs New Artist Award (2016) and the Kyoto City Arts and Culture Special Encouragement Grant (2017). Starting in April 2024, he will be working as the artistic director of the Matsumoto Performing Arts Centre.

What sounds good in words, however, is meaningless if it does not work during the actual creative process. During the interview, I focused on the very specific process of creation itself, what Kinoshita was doing, in which position(s), and how people recognize him. I then proceeded to talk about his theory of practice in relation to his Ph.D. thesis about Takechi Kabuki: Takechi Tetsuji's modernization of kabuki in postwar Japan.

RINA TANAKA (RT): *Your work in Kinoshita Kabuki's productions was often mentioned as that of a dramaturg, especially with reference to your networking role in bringing artists from contemporary Japanese theater to create new theater adaptations of kabuki plays.<sup>3</sup> However, in terms of the power*

376–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776958221113153>; Sara Armstrong and Theresa Braunschneider, "Receive, Reorganize, Return: Theatre as Creative Scholarship," *To Improve the Academy* 35, no. 2 (2016): 229–48, <https://doi.org/10.1002/tia2.20040>.

<sup>3</sup> Kazumi Narabe, "Artist Interview: Yuichi Kinoshita, Kinoshita Kabuki," *The Japan Foundation, Performing Arts Network Japan*, May 19, 2014, <https://performingarts.jpf.go.jp/>

*structure, your position as the founder and leader of Kinoshita Kabuki would inevitably move beyond the scope of the dramaturg's role. What were you actually doing in each production, and what were your responsibilities, from the beginning to the end of the creation?*

YUICHI KINOSHITA (YK): First, Kinoshita Kabuki comprises a group of four, including Seki Ayumi 関 亜弓 as the performer and writer (who is currently on maternity leave),<sup>4</sup> Inagaki Takatoshi 稲垣貴俊 as the writer and editor, Hongo Mai 本郷麻衣 as the production coordinator, and me as the leader. We don't have any performers as permanent members, although some performers have worked with us in many productions.

A production begins with the selection of the play in one of the following two ways: I choose a play for a specific director who I would like to collaborate with, or I choose a play first and then look for a suitable director for that play.

RT: *Who decides the budget for each production?*

YK: For each production, Mai develops a plan of which theater to rent and which grant to apply for. Basically, a production launched at our own expense is unprofitable. Therefore, we need to obtain a grant or build partnerships with *kokyō hōru* 公共ホール, or public halls. Initially, writing grant applications was my job, but soon after Mai joined our team, we began to work together on that task. She transcribes what I verbally explain about the purpose of the production, writes it up in the application format, and then, I revise it. We also have in-depth discussions to answer grant-related questions such as “how do you give your profits back to the community?” Mai comes up with different ideas that I cannot. It's a collective process that involve combining our individual interests and directions to create a blueprint for the production.

Recently, we had a production that ran through partnerships with public halls. *Sakurahime Azuma no Bunsho* 桜姫東文章 (The Scarlet Princess of Edo, 2023) was a touring production that visited five cities in Japan.<sup>5</sup> Kinosh-

art\_interview/1405/1.html; Kyoko Iwaki, *Nihon Engeki Genzaichi* (Tokyo: Film Art, 2018); Nobuko Tanaka, “Transforming the Traditional World of Kabuki with Kinoshita-Kabuki,” *The Japan Times*, March 12, 2019.

4 In this article, the Japanese names are written in their original order, in which the individual's family name is followed by their given name, except for those of the interviewer and interviewee.

5 *Sakurahime Azuma no Bunsho* was performed in Owl Spot (Tokyo), Toyohashi Arts Theater PLAT (Aichi), Rohm Theater Kyoto (Kyoto), Ryutopia Niigata City Performing

ita Kabuki only covered the cost of the performances held in Tokyo. The remaining performances in the other four cities were all funded by the public halls. The same was true for the next two productions, *Sesshu Gappo ga Tsuji* 撰州合邦辻 (Gappo and His Daughter Tsuji, 2023) and *Kanjincho* 勧進帳 (The Subscription List, 2023).<sup>6</sup> Public halls ensure us to run the production financially and in other ways, but it is not the only reason why I prefer the public halls.

I think Kinoshita Kabuki has a public nature. Our group is not just there to create a theater production and have audiences watch it. We also provide lectures, publications, and opportunities to interact with audiences, so that they can gain a new perspective on Japanese classics or a deeper interest in that field. I don't wish to sound too cocky, but we want to create a movement. It is not only those who are new to kabuki, there are all kinds of people sitting in the auditorium. For example, for our latest production, *Sakurahime*, there were people who had been coming to see Kinoshita Kabuki for a long time. There were also fans of the director, Okada Toshiki 岡田利規. Some loved the recent kabuki version of *Sakurahime* (2021, Kabuki-za), starring Kataoka Nizaemon XV 十五代目片岡仁左衛門 (1944–present) and Bandō Tamasaburō V 五代目坂東玉三郎 (1950–present) and wanted to see a different version of the same play. Some came to the theater because they have heard about Kinoshita Kabuki from a kabuki actor. At one public hall in the country, we had other type of audience members, who wanted to see whatever the hall offered, or who mistakenly thought our production was Ji-Kabuki 地歌舞伎, the special style of kabuki performed by amateur local actors. It is not necessary for every audience member to find our production interesting, but I, as a creator, stand by the principle of having “hooks” that can appeal to everyone. Kinoshita Kabuki interweaves between classics and contemporary theater, for a variety of audiences. To this extent, our work is similar to that of public halls. It is important for

Arts Center (Niigata), and Kurume City Plaza: Kurume-za (Fukuoka). See the review in this same issue of *Sound Stage Screen*, 135–41.

<sup>6</sup> *Sesshu Gappo ga Tsuji* (Itoi Version) was performed from May to July 2023 in five cities: Kanagawa Arts Theater (Kanagawa), Kitakami City Cultural Exchange Center Sakura Hall (Iwate), Toyohashi Arts Theater PLAT (Aichi), Kitakyushu Performing Arts Center (Fukuoka), and Biwako Hall Center for the Performing Arts Shiga (Shiga). *Kanjincho* is planned to be performed in seven venues: Tokyo Metropolitan Theater (Tokyo), NAHA Cultural Arts Theater NAHArt (Okinawa), Ueda Performing Arts and Cultural Center Santomyuze (Nagano), Okayama Performing Arts Theater Harenowa (Okayama), Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media (YCAM, Yamaguchi), Art Tower Mito ACM Theater (Ibaraki), and Kyoto Art Theater Shunjuza (Kyoto).

Kinoshita Kabuki that our working process is public. This is why I am very interested in the role of public halls and don't feel very stressed when working at public halls.

RT: *I think the environmental factors, from the grant system to partnerships with public halls, are tightly connected to the Japanese theater landscape. There are more than 2,600 public halls for the performing arts all over Japan.<sup>7</sup> More than half of them have been operated by designated administrators, including for-profit or non-profit organizations, companies, and citizens' groups, since the 2003 revision of the Local Autonomy Law. It's a matter of local politics too.*

*After you decide the blueprint for your next production, there is a long process of script editing. First, you edit the original play written in the old form of Japanese language.<sup>8</sup> Second, the director re-edits the script that you edited (and often translates it into the current form of Japanese language). After that, the director modifies the script with the performers during the rehearsals for the performance. In the process, you work primarily as hotetsu 補綴, who examines all existing versions of the play and its staging, and with a deep understanding of the revision and performance history, carries out an initial edit of the original text for the new production.*

YK: I used to be the only one who was credited as *hotetsu*, but not anymore. Since we staged *Sakurahime*, Takatoshi has been also credited as another text director in Kinoshita Kabuki.

RT: *During Kinoshita Kabuki's rehearsals, there are different two creation methods. The one is script reading. The other is "complete imitation training": the performers go through special training to completely imitate the spoken lines and movements in the style of traditional kabuki performance. What is the ratio of the two methods in rehearsals?*

YK: We used to focus on the complete imitation training during the first half of the two- or three-month-long rehearsal period. As we continued doing the imitation training for each production and became better at conducting it, we have shortened the training period to one or two weeks for

7 The Japan Foundation for Regional Art-Activities (JAFRA), "Report on the 2019 Survey of Public Theaters and Halls in the Country," May 2020.

8 Kabuki's scripts are basically written in the 17<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Japanese language. That language system is different from modern Japanese language in grammar, vocabulary, rhyme, and intonation.



our latest productions. Depending on the production, one rehearsal day is split into two parts: the complete imitation training and the script reading.

I, the performers, and the director participate in the imitation training. Usually, I lead the training and leave the director walking around wherever he/she wants to go in the rehearsal room. For example, one director selected music to play behind each scene while he observed the training. Another director composed songs before and after the training. Sugihara Kunio 杉原邦生, who has collaborated with us on several productions, co-conducts the imitation training.

RT: *Kinoshita Kabuki's complete imitation training is a process for understanding a kabuki play, not only by reading the text written in the script but also by combining it with a physical reading of the information that dwells in the handed-down "kata 型," or traditional acting style of kabuki.<sup>9</sup> That is "not a form of body movement but a form of thinking process,"<sup>10</sup> as you mentioned in comparison with Ku Na'uka Theater Company ク・ナウカ (since 1990) and Suzuki Tadashi 鈴木忠志 (1939–present), both of whom established their unique forms of body movement inspired by kabuki and relying heavily on the creativity and charisma of the individual artists. Their approach was very successful, but they had trouble continuing into the second and third generations because it was dependent on their founders. On that point, I wonder if in the future it will be possible to handle Kinoshita Kabuki's complete imitation training without you.*

YK: Perhaps, although it is possible nobody else may will use the complete imitation training as a method. But the performers still remember what I told them in the rehearsals, and this changed their ways of comprehending kabuki. Let's think about the situation where I explain to the performers how meaningful the slight eye movement in kabuki is. They remember this detail after the production, and the next time they watch a kabuki performance, they realize what I meant. I call this the "form of thinking process." By continuing to work on this, I hope that as many performers and directors as possible who can read kabuki in this way will increase in the future. In fact, one director revised the stage script after observing the imitation training. As is often the case with kabuki plays, some lines have little mean-

9 Takayuki Hioki, "Reading and Translation: An Essay on Kinoshita Kabuki," in *Shogeki-jo Engeki towa Nani ka* (Thinking of the Little Theater Drama and its Era), ed. Goto Ryuki (Tokyo: Hitsuji Shobō, 2022), 118–139.

10 Iwaki, *Nihon Engeki Genzaichi*, 116.



ing in the text but actually function as key words for a scene when it is performed. Therefore, it is important to listen to the performer's actual voice rather than read the literal meaning of the words; in other words, to pay attention to how the performer utters the lines and in what kind of emotions. At first, that director first cut many lines, but he reinstated some of them during rehearsals because he noticed their necessity in the performance.

RT: *The imitation training is generally for performers and directors who are not familiar with kabuki's dramaturgy and performance style. It sounds like a seminar in a university. It reminds me of the article in the fourth volume of The Kinoshita Kabuki Library series, in which three directors talked about the rehearsals for Yoshitsune Sembonzakura 義経千本桜 (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees, 2012 and 2016). It was remarkable that they called you "sensei 先生," a Japanese title of honor for people who teach something and for specialists in the specific field. Does every director refer to you in this way?*

YK: No, it depends on the relationship between me and each director. The directors who I worked with in my mid-twenties, called me *sensei*. However, I guess my position in a rehearsal is still that of *sensei*. On the first day of rehearsal, the members of the production company introduce themselves and listen to my keynote speech. I explain what the play is about, why I chose this director for this production, and what the goal is for this production with this company. Sometimes, we watch a video of the kabuki play too. It's a kind of decree at the beginning of the production, and the performers, directors, and all staff members must attend. If someone is absent, they must watch the video recording later.

The term "seminar" aptly describes what our rehearsals look like. We call it "complete" imitation, but there is no single solution for a perfect imitation of what the kabuki actors previously did on the stage. It's a process for me to share with the performers how I interpret this particular kabuki play and how the kabuki actors performed it.

RT: *It is interesting to hear how your position in the production shifts during the creative process. I think everyone involved in the production must know you are the one who makes the final decisions about the production. In fact, in another interview, you referred to yourself as the "person who assumes the ultimate responsibility for the production."<sup>11</sup> What did you mean by the "ultimate responsibility"?*

11 Kazumi Narabe, "The Strategy of Yuichi Kinoshita, Taking Kabuki into the Future,"

YK: Well...I am still wondering about that. Yes, I have sometimes said in interviews, “I am the one who makes the final decision (whether) to cancel the performance at the last moment.” I certainly thought so in the past. If we were completely stuck at the creation and not want to accept the finished production as ours, I am the only one who could call off the performance. I thought there was a “final cancel button” in my hand. It is true that such a button exists, but I realized that I could not push it. If I canceled a production, which was carried out in partnership with public halls, and maybe our company paid part of the costs too, we would incur debts of tens of millions of Japanese yen (JPY). For sure. Moreover, how could we explain this cancellation to the artists and their agencies? How would it affect all of Kinoshita Kabuki’s subsequent activities? There is no way I could push the button. It’s a button made of paper. Ultimately, I understood that the ultimate authority is just for show, it is not something to be used.

RT: *How about the power structure in Kinoshita Kabuki’s productions? What is your position there?*

YK: In Japan, for a typical theater production organized by a director, power and responsibility are often concentrated in the director’s hands. Kinoshita Kabuki, however, is not such a top-down organization, because it has another head, Kinoshita, in addition to the director. The two leaders have different leadership roles. The performers go to the director to ask questions about the direction, while they come to me to ask different questions, such as “What is the meaning of these lines?” “How were they written in the original play?” or “How are these scenes performed in kabuki today?” Overall, it is not necessarily a bad thing when the members of production company have two contacts: the director and me. In cases where a director doesn’t get along with a particular performer, I can talk directly with that performer. If the performers are dissatisfied with how a director conducts the rehearsals, instead of the director having to deal with the company members, I can go backstage and ask them, “How are things actually going right now?”

RT: *It is often the case with Japanese theater productions that a dramaturg is introduced to cut into the power relationships between the autocratic play-*

interview with Yuichi Kinoshita (Kinoshita Kabuki), Performing Arts Network Japan, The Japan Foundation, May 19, 2014, [https://performingarts.jpf.go.jp/E/art\\_interview/1405/1.html](https://performingarts.jpf.go.jp/E/art_interview/1405/1.html).

*wright/director and the performers. However, a common type of dramaturg, who work with the playwright/director in tandem, rather supports and enhances his/her supreme authority in the end. I think Kinoshita Kabuki has been working on changing such a strongly single-leader system in the creative process too, especially through your presence in the structure of the organization.*

YK: True. The director and I are in the most confrontational relationship in Kinoshita Kabuki's productions. We collide in many ways. It is challenging to maintain that kind of relationships with a director. It is very tiring. Probably for the director too, especially one who wants to achieve their vision.

RT: *Doesn't the director anticipate that there will be considerable discussions with you during rehearsals, when they receive a proposal for a new production with Kinoshita Kabuki? Do you explain in advance, "I am going to vigorously chip into conversations between you and the other company members"?*

YK: Yes, I do always explain that. However, a new director sometimes misunderstands me as *their* dramaturg, who translates what they say into plain and comprehensible language for the company members. I am not that type of dramaturg, because I have my own ideas and thoughts that are not always the same as the director's and I am willing to discuss these with them.

No production can go well without a trusting relationship between the director and myself, but these relationships are very delicate. There is always the matter of how much time we can spare to carefully deal with our individual thoughts. Based on the premise that "I like your work very much," I need to convince a director of how I feel differently about the work than they do, by presenting my opinions not in my context but in the director's context. I will also ask the director to what extent they can accept something different from what they envision. We must both use muscles that we don't normally use. I believe that between us, the director and I can come up with a single solution based on our mutual but independent relationship.

During rehearsals, the director and I don't always have the same opinion. Of course not. Therefore, when I give a comment to the performers, I choose what I say carefully, considering "Even if I give this comment, it won't threaten the director's core ideas." The director listens to my comment too, so that we can openly discuss any points of difference between us; this can be done in front of the performers if the director so wishes. I can't speak a single word without having a trusting relationship with a director and

shared basic values between us. The rehearsals are based on such delicate and fragile relationships. I work with a director while maintaining a delicate sense of balance, trust with the performers, and the director's understanding of my attitude. If anybody crosses a line, it becomes stressful for all, but it especially affects the performers caught between the director and me.

RT: *In the first volume of Sound Stage Screen, we featured a discussion about the dramaturg today, arguing that the new dramaturg goes beyond its traditional assumption of being an intellectual guarantor of a creation within disciplined knowledge.<sup>12</sup> We can find similar discussions in Japan, too.<sup>13</sup> If we understand the dramaturg as a “fulcrum of collaborative practices”<sup>14</sup> or a “careful articulator of improbable encounters and as a cartographer of that improbability,”<sup>15</sup> what you are doing in a production covers the dramaturg's work, especially by facilitating collaborative work under independent leaderships and creating interactions between kabuki and contemporary theater. Did you discover your theory of practice as part of your work for your Ph.D. thesis about Takechi Kabuki Kabuki 武智歌舞伎? I remember it dealt with Takechi Kabuki's creative approach in the third chapter.*

YK: Well, I got to know Takechi Kabuki after I founded Kinoshita Kabuki in 2006. That's the reason why, for my Ph.D. thesis, I was strongly drawn to how to connect Takechi Kabuki with Kinoshita Kabuki. Nevertheless, there were already connections between the two. Takechi Tetsuji 武智鉄二 (1912–1988) worked to modernize kabuki by interweaving this classic performing art form with Western theater. However, there was a problem. At that time, kabuki maintained its own logic for the creative process, with no “director” as is found in Western theater. Directors, who were occasionally invited to direct kabuki plays, got along with the kabuki actors by carefully avoiding any interference with their traditional practices, so the director was more like a figurehead. Productions directed by Kubota Mantarō 久保田万太郎 (1889–1963), Mishima Yukio 三島由紀夫 (1925–1970), and probably early Gunji Masakatsu 郡司正勝 (1913–1998) succeeded in that way. As a result, the young kabuki actors who performed in Takechi Kabuki's

12 See Di Matteo, “The Dramaturg, Today.”

13 Yoshiji Yokoyama, Nanako Nakajima, Sebastian Kawanami-Breu, and Mariko Miyagawa, “Roundtable: On Potentialities of Dramaturgs,” *REPRE Newsletter* 42 (2021), <https://www.repre.org/repre/vol42/special/discussion>.

14 Martina Ruhsam, “Dramaturgy of and as Collaboration,” *Maska: The Performing Arts Journal* 25, no. 131–132 (2010): 35.

15 Di Matteo, “The Dramaturg, Today,” 206.

productions had no idea what director Takechi said to them. Therefore, Bandō Mitsugorō VIII 八代目坂東三津五郎 (1906–1975) took on the role of dramaturg, interpreting Takechi’s words into language that the kabuki actors were then able to understand based on their ordinary approach to kabuki practices, during rehearsals. It’s like a tandem leadership, with both Takechi and Mitsugorō. Furthermore, Takechi let the kabuki actors learn kyōmai 京舞 (Kyoto-style traditional dance) from Yachiyo Inoue IV 四代目井上八千代 (1905–2004) and gidayū 義太夫 (the music of traditional Japanese puppet theater) from Takemoto Tsunatayū VIII 八代目竹本綱太夫 (1904–1969). They were fulcrum for the creative process of Takechi Kabuki. I wrote in my Ph.D. thesis how Takechi Kabuki’s creative method is very beneficial for my creation—and maybe for the others—today.

RT: *Your role in Kinoshita Kabuki’s creation sounds similar to that of Bandō Mitsugorō in Takechi Kabuki, although you interpret the kabuki language into contemporary theater language for contemporary theater performers. In terms of the creative process, what Kinoshita Kabuki and Takechi Kabuki have in common is the crucial role of the interpreter, who bridges the gap between artists in heterogeneous fields for the purpose of creation.*

*I was wondering about your position in the creative process outside of Kinoshita Kabuki. Recently, you worked on Kirare no Yosa 切られの与三 (Scarface Yosa, 2018) with Cocoon Kabuki and Kimetsu no Yaiba 鬼滅の刃 (Damon Slayer, 2022) with the noh actor Nomura Mansai 野村萬斎.<sup>16</sup>*

YK: I was involved in those productions as a playwright for the stage adaptations, not as a dramaturg. What I learned from that experience is that people who are in the classical Japanese performing arts, such as noh, kyogen, and kabuki, asked me to break down kabuki’s concept and noh-kyogen’s structure—something like “home” that they have stood on for generations. Nevertheless, I rather want to protect their home. I want to draw out of the full strength of the noh-kyogen or kabuki format and make audiences think, “Wow, is this really a classic?” While they want to tear down their home and build another one, I love them and want to renovate it so that more different people can come in. Every time things didn’t go well in the

<sup>16</sup> *Kirare no Yosa* (Scarface Yosa), based on the 1853 kabuki play *Yo wa Nasake Ukina no Yokogushi* 与話情浮名横櫛, was the sixteenth production of the Cocoon Kabuki, the series of productions since 1994 creating classic kabuki plays with a contemporary theater direction by Kishida Kazuyoshi at the Shibuya Bunkamura Theater Cocoon. *Noh Kyogen Kimetsu no Yaiba* 能狂言 鬼滅の刃 (Damon Slayer) was a stage adaptation from Gotoge Koyoharu’s manga with the same title.

creative process, this kind of mismatch emerged between their purpose and my purpose. I wonder why noh-kyogen and kabuki actors sometimes tend to underestimate what they have done. Sometimes they say, “People won’t understand our performance if we don’t translate it into the modern Japanese language,” or “People won’t think our work is innovative if we don’t pander to them.” It is a pity that they are throwing away their own potential.

RT: *To be honest, I am always dubious about a person who says, “We want an outsider to shake things up.” If they really wanted to break their home down, they wouldn’t ask someone else, at least not someone like you who loves the classics. When an artist or group of artists collaborates with others from a different field, the creative environment, including that of the individual from a different field, essentially changes. It affects the individual too; both the host artist and the “stranger” are forced to change how they have previously engaged in the creative process. However, contemporary Japanese theater often pushes forward with a collaborative production involving strict specialization and mutual non-interference. This reduces the risk of a flop but hinders novel interactions that may revitalize the creation.*

*Since the in-depth interviews you gave five or ten years ago, I think things have changed a lot, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic of the past three years. I wonder if many people may not want to ask you about these changes because many theater producers and theatergoers would rather go back to the times before the pandemic. This is my understanding, except for some artists such as Milo Rau, who actively called for action to change conventional bourgeois theater and open it up to people during the pandemic situation. Since we have become able to come together at the theater again, I feel that we did not use this pandemic situation to change but rather hustled ourselves too hard to get back to normal. The director/dramaturg Kyle Yamada 山田カイル has also pointed this out in the first volume of *Sekiban to Orimono* 石板と織物 (Scripture and Textile, 2022).<sup>17</sup>*

YK: There is no way we can go back to the days before the COVID-19 pandemic. No way. We shouldn’t go back. Are we going to go back to that painful period, again? To painfulness in many ways?

After all, many people were inconvenienced in 2020. But even before the

<sup>17</sup> Kyle Yamada, “Konakatta ‘Gikyoku no Jidai’ no tame no Jobun” (Introduction for ‘the Times of Drama’ that might have occurred but didn’t), *Sekiban to Orimono*, 1 (2022), <https://allergentheatre.wixsite.com/scripture-textile/post/来なかった「戯曲の時代」のための序文-山田カイル>.

pandemic, that inconvenience was daily life for people who had disabilities, for caregivers, and for people with various immune system disorders. Now we say, “It’s horrible!” because we all experienced that situation. That means we, including myself, had ignored those people. I suppose some groups learned from the experience during the pandemic, how necessary it is to open the theater to those people. Therefore, it would be meaningless if we don’t start theater up once again, including the problems we became aware of during the pandemic, rather than just going back to the way things were. I wrote on the same topic in *Lost in Pandemic* (2022).<sup>18</sup>

Regarding that, I have two things to share with you. First, it was highly important for me to organize an online course, “Connecting Classics/Present つながる古典／現代,” in 2020 to 2021.<sup>19</sup> That had as big an impact on me as rakugo had on me when I was nine years old. It truly brought home to me that I wanted to devote attention to the five topics we dealt with in the course: gender, disease, disability, war, and discrimination. Certainly, I know it is very difficult to cover all of these issues, and I am ashamed to say what I can do is limited.

Currently, I am stepping up to improve accessibility for disabled audiences. In each venue where we performed *Sakurahime*, we provided live audio description and subtitling. Although we only introduced these two accessibility measures at the theaters, I learned a lot from this experience. I realized that those services are not exclusively for people who are deaf or hard of hearing (HOH), and who are blind or partially sighted, but are greatly beneficial for the artists. The process of preparing audio description and subtitling led us to fruitful discussions that may not otherwise have occurred during the creative process, I dare to say, with only able-bodied people. This approach can support a more open environment for creativity and a more intense production.

Furthermore, the process of creating audio descriptions and subtitling is quite similar to that of opening up the classics to people who are not familiar with them. Recently, I had an opportunity to give a kabuki lecture to people who are deaf or HOH. While preparing my lecture, I was thinking

18 Tomoki Goto, ed., *Lost in Pandemic: Theatre Adrift, Expression’s New Horizon*, catalog of the exhibition at The Tsubouchi Memorial Theater Museum, Waseda University (Tokyo: Shun’yodo Shoten, 2021).

19 The online course offered five classes on Zoom with each guest from October 2021 to February 2022. All classes were organized by Hioki Takayuki and Kinoshita Yuichi with technical support by the Bungaku Report. <https://bungaku-report.com/tunagarukoten.html> (accessed December 1, 2023).



deeply about how to explain differences in the sounds of noh's four instruments, fue 笛 (flute), ōtsuzumi 大鼓 (hip drum), kotsuzumi 小鼓 (shoulder-drum), and taiko 太鼓 (stick-drum). It led me to think further about the type of role each instrument has in a noh play, or which metaphor or expression I should use in the lecture, for example, "it is a staccato popping sound as if the flower were blooming." We can use these expressions in other lectures and for kabuki beginners.

RT: *I wonder if it is pretty difficult for each artist and theater group to offer audio description. It is probably more reasonable that theaters in Japan should take on that responsibility, as in Germany, where some public theaters now routinely offer audio description with their performances.*<sup>20</sup>

YK: That's right. Audio description and subtitling are far from cost effective. When we provided them, less than ten audience members with hearing or sight disabilities came to the theater. This was because the relevant information did not reach enough of those people who need these services. Even if there is just one person with such a disability who wishes to see our production, I should be offering that. However, it is often the case that artists get rid of accessibility practices, because they tend to think of those as have nothing to do with the production.

To introduce these services to the production, I checked the audio description many times and worked intensively together with the audio describer, right up until the premiere. She was very pleased with this approach. She said that previously her work had felt isolated because no one had given her any comments or suggestions about her audio description. Certainly, it is quite difficult for a director to not only check what the performers and technical crews are doing in a dress rehearsal but also to check the audio description. In a sense, the director's ultimate goal is to bring the production to a stage performance. On the other hand, my task incorporates designing how to enable the performance to reach the audience. I can

<sup>20</sup> As of August 2023, there are a dozen German theaters that regularly offer audio description. Although there are no legal regulations for equal accessibility for disabled people in Germany, and audio description has so far been heavily dependent on funding and the commitment of individual theaters, Schauspiel Leipzig, Musiktheater im Revier, and Theater Bielefeld are among the pioneers that regularly offer live audio transcription. Other new projects include the Berliner Spielplan Audiodeskription (since 2019, as a project of the non-profit organization Förderband e. V. Kulturinitiative Berlin) and that of the Muenchner Kammerspiele (since 2020).



move around freely during the rehearsal and step back from the discussions between the director and performers to check the audio description.

*RT: As you mentioned, your work is to provide a bridge between the performance and the audience by supporting audio description and subtitles, giving lectures and talks before and after a performance, doing public relations, and merchandising—but I think it was probably a special case when I first met you selling merchandise at the Tokyo Metropolitan Theater. I wonder whether it is appropriate to regard your work as dramaturgical, because what you do in the production is very versatile and inclusive.*

*YK: You encountered me in a rare case, when I jumped in to help out on the sales counter because there were not enough merchandising crews on that day. Be that as it may, I am usually in the foyer after a performance ends, except for some unusual occasions, including when the infection prevention measures against COVID-19 were in place.*

Regarding how to open a theater, there is another thing I would like to mention. Before the pandemic, around 2019 or early 2020, Kinoshita Kabuki intentionally increased the number of talks we gave to explain the purpose and interpretation of our productions. To attract larger audiences, we thought we needed to attract their attention, not to the style of each guest director but to Kinoshita Kabuki's way of creation and its leader, Kinoshita Yuichi. On the one hand, this resulted in positive effects on the audience. Some people became more interested in the classics, some people were able to compare Kinoshita Kabuki productions with kabuki performances. On the other hand, some other audiences expected us to provide an official "dogmatic," correct interpretation of each production, no matter what their own interpretation of it was. I thought something was wrong with this. That's why we decided to have no talks after the performances of *Sakurahime*.

However, my current thinking around this is: we should dare to hold lectures and talk events for our productions. After all, I saw many audience members at the theater who left with glum looks on their faces, saying, "I didn't understand what happened on stage at all... Is it due to the production, my poor sensitivity, or poor understanding?" I felt...how can I say...unbearably sorry for them. While the economy in Japan was cooling down, tickets became more expensive and had greater weight with the audience than they had been five years ago. Accordingly, I should not let the audience, who paid 7,000 JPY for a ticket—or 5,000 JPY at each tour venue—go home with such faces. I think we have to promote lectures and talks not to demonstrate how amazing our production is but to open discussions with the audience with

an introduction like this, “We created it in this way with this purpose, but of course, there may be other interpretations, so what do you think?”

RT: *I think it often happens that creators explain too much and as a result discourage the audience from forming their own interpretations. Nowadays, it is definitely difficult to muse on a question all by oneself. People assume that there must be an answer to a question. If someone else gives an answer, you can take a “free ride,” rather than daring to state your own idea. Theater used to be a place where there could be more than one interpretation, but that’s not true anymore.*

YK: In the end, the problem is that some members of the audience wish to obtain the “correct” answer. A theater group that intensifies the homogeneity of its followers, who always approve of its work, will go wrong. There should be a mechanism for the audience to criticize Kinoshita Kabuki. The next question is how to put this into practice.<sup>21</sup>

RT: *I think what you are doing during the creative process includes the dramaturg’s work, but it is also close to the role of artistic director. Kinoshita Kabuki doesn’t have its own permanent theater, so you may be an artistic director without the theater.*

21 Kinoshita mentioned the absence of criticism among Kinoshita Kabuki’s audiences, but I’d like to specify that this topic has long been discussed in Japan, not only regarding theater but the other art forms, too, mainly from two perspectives. First, a transnational perspective, considering the fundamental lack of criticism among Asian countries after modernization; and second, another perspective focusing on a structural problem of contemporary Japanese theater industry. Theater criticism survived in Japan as a form of advertisement, an intra-community language in fandom, or a letter of recommendation in applicant documents for public subsidy. On the history of Japanese criticism system, see also: Yuichiro Kurihara and Yoshio Otani, *Nippon no Ongaku Hihyō: 150-nen 100-satsu* (Music Criticism in Japan in 150 Years and 100 Books) (Tokyo: Rittor-sha, 2021); Tadashi Uchino, “Engeki Hihyō no Sho-Mondai (1)” (Problems of Theater Criticism 1), *Engeki-jin* 7 (2001): 43–52; Uchino, *J Engeki no Basho: Toransu-Nashonaru na Mobiriti e* (Location of J Theatre: Towards Transnational Mobilities) (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 2016). Regarding the influence of strong fandom on theater practice, it is notable that ardent audiences voluntarily surveil any writings about their favorite subjects, including anyone’s posts in social media, to (re-)affirm a common recognition that has been approved in each community. Against the background, it becomes harder to open critical-creative discussions from nonconventional perspectives, especially dealing with an unprecedented collaborative production that emerges from the interaction between different communities and contexts, in the way as I discussed in the review “Kinoshita Kabuki *Sakurahime Azuma no Bunsho* (The Scarlet Princess)” in this same issue of the journal SSS.

*The important thing is that you have multiple specialties. While you utilize your expertise to carry out text direction and conduct the complete imitation training, you keep yourself mobile as if in the middle of a spider's web, rather than sitting at the top of the company. This is another important technique to create and maintain a creative network.*

YK: Hmm, what am I creating in the production? One thing I can say for sure is that I provide a sense of assurance to the directors, performers, and audiences. To the directors, who are going to dive into the unfamiliar world of kabuki, I always say, "Don't worry, as long as you keep these points in mind, you can easily parry any criticisms." To the performers, who may be anxious about playing the roles that have historically been performed by legendary kabuki actors, I patiently explain, "Your role has been interpreted in this way and that way, but compared with those interpretations, your interpretation is innovative in this and that points." To the staff, I say, "I think the plan you have proposed is good in this respect." To the audience, I say "It's okay, no matter how you feel and interpret our production from your seat."

RT: *Speaking about the audience, we should not forget that a theater has a seating capacity, and therefore, there are some people who will never be able to come to the theater. The theater is for all who can and can't come.*

YK: Indeed. It's up to the theater to be aware of absence.

RT: *What should we call someone like you, who is involved in the creative process in such a mobile and multifaceted way? In your case, you bring the perspective of kabuki expert into the creation, while maintaining the responsibilities of the leader of the theater company as if you were an artistic director. I thought it might be the role of producer too, but on second thought, this word sounds too commercial and misleading. I think we have to pay attention to what is left out when we use these existing terms, otherwise, we will still have the same questions. Maybe it's better to come up with a new title for this role.*

YK: Do you think so, too? I've been thinking that the titles I've used so far—leader, text director/playwright, and supervisor—no longer cover the range of my work. Please let me know if you come up with something!

**Yuichi Kinoshita**, born in 1985 in Wakayama City, heard Kamigata Rakugo when he was in third grade of elementary school, inspiring him to start teaching himself Rakugo and leading to his interests in classical theater as well as the contemporary stage. In 2006, he established the company Kinoshita Kabuki, which stages updates on classic Japanese plays that Kinoshita himself directs, revises, and supervises. Its revival of *Sanmin Kichisa* in 2015 was nominated for a Yomiuri Theater Award for the first half of 2015. His 2016 staging of *Kanjincho* earned him the Agency for Cultural Affairs New Artist Award. He was a recipient of a Kyoto City Arts and Culture Special Encouragement Grant in 2017. He is a junior fellow of the Saison Foundation. He works prolifically as a writer and educator about traditional performing arts.

**Rina Tanaka** is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Cultural Studies, Kyoto Sangyo University and was a visiting fellow at the Department of Music Sociology at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. Her contribution to popular musical theater in German and East Asian countries appears in *The Routledge Companion to Musical Theatre* (co-authored, 2022), *Milestones in Musical Theater* (2023), and others. She is a critic for various contemporary performances in Japan. As an advisor/facilitator, she worked for a few theaters and projects, including the intra-Asian art project TERASIA (2020–24), Tokyo Festival (2021), and PARA Theater (from 2022 onwards), mostly uncredited.

## Creating *Ghost Village*

### A Conversation with Yao Chen and Judith Zeitlin

GIORGIO BIANCOROSSO: *Maybe I can start by asking you just a brief intro to the opera—*

YAO CHEN (YC): The opera is called *Ghost Village*. It is based on a ghost tale by the Chinese writer Pu Songling (1640-1715). Judith is the librettist, and I am the composer. If we talk about the literal dimension of the opera, Judith definitely has much more to share. As a composer, from the musical perspective, I can share my thoughts about creating musical actualities. In this opera, I am particularly interested in what I can do musically for representing the human world, the ghost world, and in between, i.e. how one transits from one into the other. The in-betweenness, between the human and the ghostly, between the real and the not real, between the past and the future, all these transitory qualities are very fun to think about.

GB: *Is it a full-length opera?*

YC: It is.

GB: *Is it a Western opera or hybrid form?*

YC: The libretto is in English, and it's written for a Western orchestra. I'm working with acts, scenes, and arias. I would say it's not something very unique in terms of its structure and form. I care more about the sound-making that can very much evoke emotions. I also want to create some sophisticated relationships between the voices and the orchestra. At the same time, I am very open for adventurous staging and imaginative production.

GB: *What is the cast?*

YC: We have a lyric tenor, a soprano, and a dramatic bass baritone, and bass. These are the four major figures.

GB: *The vocal writing moves between speech-like and aria-like passages or is there a different mode of vocal writing altogether?*

YC: There will be mostly singing, but I will definitely incorporate *Sprechstimme* a lot. I have also been thinking about inviting a Chinese Kun Opera

singer to perform in the last act. Anyway, I have not planned out everything yet, because I have only finished one scene at the moment. There is a huge space for trying different vocal possibilities.

*GB: Judith, how did you come up with the idea of writing a libretto for an opera?*

JUDITH ZEITLIN (JZ): Let me reply indirectly. I'm going to Florence for this conference in June 2023, and I'm writing a brand new paper on something I don't know anything about. It's an art history conference at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, and it's called "Vessels Beyond Containment." My paper is called "Reality and transformation: magical vessels in Chinese literature." This project is representative of my tendency to reach out to other disciplines but at the same time remain anchored in my core field, Chinese literature.

*GB: Well, that's fantastic and very pertinent to our discussion, Judith, in that it connects to your interest in writing a libretto for an opera based on an early Qing tale. There's a centrifugal component to your scholarship, it seems. You enjoy connecting to colleagues and via colleagues, connecting to other disciplines such as art history, musicology, film.*

JZ: Medicine is another one.

*GB: Was this always the case?*

JZ: No, I had a very traditional, make it a really old-fashioned graduate training at Harvard, where we were still disciples of our professors and it was very literary in orientation. And I think a lot about this, how I later branched out into so many other areas. In fact, I have always been interested in theater and music, so this was an original love of mine, but I sort of put them aside when I did the tunnel vision of being a graduate student. Then I was also very inspired by my husband, art historian Wu Hung, certainly in terms of art history and visual culture but also because he was doing contemporary art curating and I wanted to be involved in the arts firsthand myself. I seem to be fearless in going so far out of my comfort zone or maybe I just feel liberated when I'm a total amateur. You know, because somehow being an amateur gives me confidence to try things that I might not be able to try in my own field. I also love collaboration and have tried to be involved in collaborative projects whenever I could, though this is not always encouraged in the humanities.

*GB: Do you see curating as one step away from scholarly work? And perhaps writing a libretto, as in this case, as two steps away from the core of your professional identity, or is there a creative component in your scholarly and curatorial work to begin with?*

*JZ: I'm not so sure. My original field is the Chinese classical tale, mainly "tales of the strange." What I discovered in my scholarship is that I really love telling stories, and so that goes along with the idea of writing a libretto although I think it was Yao Chen who really pushed me to lean into storytelling. Originally, I had a much more inert idea of the libretto as just being poetry. But Yao Chen was very firm. "No, you have to write this as a story, and we have to write a detailed synopsis first." Another person who was very important as a coach at the early stages was vocalist, composer, and director Majel Connery (<https://www.majelconnery.com/bio>). She did her PhD at University of Chicago in Music and had her own experimental opera troupe, an opera company called Opera Cabal, which she later dissolved to become a pop singer and to pursue many other creative projects.*

*GB: As a music historian, I'm very intrigued by the moment, a crossroads perhaps or a threshold in music history, a moment at which sometime in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century or the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the West, the figure of the performer and the figure of the composer sort of split. And I'm thinking about what you just said, how your interest in storytelling is rubbing off onto your own writing and how your scholarly writing is becoming more isomorphic with the subject matter you treat. But once upon a time, I think about Horace, Dante, Goethe, Proust, Baudelaire I think about the most canonical writers and poets, they all wore two hats. They were critics, they were sometimes theoreticians, as well as creative writers whereas nowadays you are either one or the other. So, I'm wondering about whether we are paying the price of this break too in the literary field.*

*JZ: Well, I do think that in the US at least the space for the public intellectual, someone who's dealing with the public and not just with their smaller area, is relatively narrow. My vision of Europe is that there's more space for that even as the academy itself is much smaller. In China for various things, I know that my husband now has this big readership, certainly beyond just academics. But at the same time, he had really, for a very long time, really appreciated, as somebody who came of age in the Cultural Revolution where intellectuals were persecuted that you didn't have to be a public figure in the US, that you could just do your own scholarship, and you didn't*



have to be involved in politics, that was okay. I used to joke “oh well nobody would persecute intellectuals in the US because they’re too unimportant.”

GB: *Right.*

JZ: But that’s no longer true. Things have become so politicized now in US universities in ways I would never have dreamed. I mean with the kind of bookbanning and the culture and political wars going on in campuses now. The university is no longer an ivory tower, a space apart from politics. Or, you know, it always had politics of the “small p” variety (various kinds of infighting over small stakes) in the US. But now it seems like politics of the “big P” variety is also playing an ever growing role.

GB: *Yao Chen, was it you who asked Judith then to work on this opera? I’m interested in the personal trajectory and in the negotiations, the back and forth over the plot and characters.*

YC: Yes, I initiated the project and asked her if she would be interested in writing a libretto based on a *Liaozhai* story by Pu Songling. I know that Judith is a *Liaozhai* scholar and she has lots of stories in her brain. I believe she must have her own perspective, and really have her original insights about these stories. I’m sure from the scholarly perspective these stories convey many layers of meanings, something very thought-provoking. I remember the time when we were sitting together at dinner, I asked her if she had ever thought about writing an opera together with me. She said she would think about it, and mentioned she did have some interesting story in her mind. So, step by step, we gradually moved to where we are now.

GB: *Was yours a serious question or were you just improvising when you asked her to do an opera together?*

YC: It was actually a pretty serious and sincere call. Before I asked her, we had already known each other for quite some time. If I remember well, I think she got to know what I do as a composer at a painting-inspired music & dance concert I curated in 2011 in the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago. The concert project got so much support from Judith’s husband, Prof. Wu Hung. Judith was among the audience that day, and she later approached me and asked me if I would be interested in composing a musical piece to help people re-imagine the sound of a rare Ming-dynasty pipa in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I agreed, and in 2014–15 we together created the theater work *Pipa Plays Opera: Three*

*Scenes from the Romance of Western Chamber*. Therefore, we had established a rather solid creative connection and mutual appreciation before the *Ghost Village* opera.

GB: *Was it Judith who suggested the idea of recreating the sound of the Ming-era pipa?*

YC: Yes. She was doing research on that pipa during that time, and she wanted to discover the sound of the pipa.

GB: *So, we don't know what the pipa sounded like? Are you then saying that today's pipas are not a good representation of what the pipa sounded like then?*

JZ: Yes, I am. It's shocking how few Ming pipa are extant. That was what I discovered. There's this very beautiful instrument that I've been obsessed with for years in the Metropolitan Museum. The entire back of the instrument is covered with ivory lozenges with different kinds of meaningful images on them. The front has an ivory string holder with a scene from a Chinese opera on it. And it also has some other pieces of decoration that I love. I was really fascinated by this instrument and started to work on it. There are a lot of extant, very decorated stringed instruments—guqin, zithers—from the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> century and you can see them in different museums. And so I assumed that there would be other extant pipas, too. But for various reasons, that is not the case. Among extant instrument it is almost one of a kind. So, because I was curating this exhibition and the pipa was in it, and because we were also doing a festival of Chinese arts and culture at the university to go with it, I ended up commissioning Yao Chen to write a piece inspired by this pipa. It was this perfect opportunity. Actually, Yao Chen, you forgot that really turned me on to your music, was a concert of a piece you wrote for guzheng and double bass at the Smart. I just loved the music. I loved the way he took this Chinese instrument and then did this duet with a double bass. It felt so fresh.

GB: *What I'm hearing here is that of course it takes two personalities, two people like you to do something like this. But also, there was a space that enabled this, the museum, which one cannot take for granted. One has to thank also that particular space, both the literal and the metaphorical one. This is something that interests us because we're wondering why this doesn't happen more often. And I'm touched, Yao Chen—and this probably also echoes what Judith was saying about how seriously professors or scholars are actu-*

*ally taken in China—that you turned to a scholar rather than a card-carrying creative writer, for that would be counterintuitive in certain quarters, wouldn't it? I think it speaks to a certain knowledge, and respect and understanding of what we scholars actually do, which is as nice as it is rare.*

YC: When doing things with other people, I think it is good to think outside the box. Judith is definitely not a typical “scholar-scholar” in my eyes. I think her mind flies around, very free. I see the artist side of her. I think it would be interesting to see how a literature scholar could write an opera libretto, and her identity might help reveal something very special from the tale. Further than that, we work together purely because of mutual interests, we are not under any opera house commission, no pressure at all.

GB: *But why does the opera need this kind of scholarly infrastructure?*

YC: I'm not a writer or literature scholar, but I believe that a musical work heavily pertaining to literature, like an opera, has to be examined and reconstructed and justified by some scholar's point of view before it is set to music and goes to the stage. There are certain profound things in the tale that need to be highlighted and spelled out, especially when we deal with a story written hundreds of years ago. And Judith is definitely up to this task.

GB: *It's a bit like research. Hollywood studios have a research department to make sure that the film is verisimilar... Or is there more that you want that you need from Judith's well of knowledge, so to speak, about this genre?*

YC: It just seemed very natural for me. She has this literature background, and she has worked together with me. There is chemistry. I guess maybe we were also thinking that this is not really a traditional project, and we can try something new. There's no boundary, not a commission, and no production team. We are very free; we can do something very experimental from the very beginning.

GB: *This is fascinating because it's almost like saying that the collaboration itself is the artwork, in a sense.*

YC: Yes, I think your description about our collaboration is very vivid. For quite a long time, we had not really thought about the production. We only thought about how we would collaborate, how we can put our ideas into one pot. Gradually, when we moved on, we finally got some funding. I came to be more serious about how to produce this opera little by little. For Ju-

dith, she used to say, “I’ll give you the libretto and then you do whatever you want with it.” To write a libretto was quite enough for her then. But now she also started to think about how to realize the opera rather than just putting words on paper.

*GB: I see, so in a sense the roles transcend the traditional division of labor that one sees in more standard opera, more conventional types of collaborations. Is the libretto finished?*

JZ: There is a draft of the libretto.

YC: Mostly finished.

*GB: How did you proceed, Judith? I’m interested in the writing process.*

JZ: I have a slightly different memory of how we decided to write the opera together. We had worked a lot on the *Pipa Plays Opera* piece. And I was thinking about what I would do next in terms of our artistic collaboration. For the pipa project I mainly played the role of the patron. I commissioned the work. It was my idea. Yao Chen said, “Oh, you’re my muse!” Because it was my idea. I came to him. “Why don’t you write something about this instrument?”—and the idea appealed to him, and the instrument appealed to him. But then he took it and did things with it that I never ever imagined. That was very, very exciting to be involved with. But should we take this project further? And then I realized, no, I want to be a more equal partner, a creative partner, not just a patron or scholarly resource. And fortuitously we had the infrastructure at the University of Chicago that encouraged faculty/artist collaboration called the Gray Center for Art and Inquiry which had funding at the time from the Mellon Foundation. I worked with the then associate director Leslie Buxbaum Danzig. The Gray Center had given us some seed money for a mini workshop on the *Pipa Plays Opera* project and she encouraged to think bigger for my next collaboration with Yao Chen. We then applied to the Gray Center for a grant to write the libretto together and brought Yao Chen to campus for six months. We co-taught a course together and we had the space to meet regularly. And that is when I generated the synopsis. I really feel Yao Chen is almost a co-creator of the libretto in many ways. Certainly, of what you would call “the book” in a musical. We talked a lot about how to develop the story. It wasn’t like I went off to my corner and wrote this libretto and gave it to him. It was from the start very collaborative. And we worked out some ideas in the classroom together, too.

GB: *How does the classroom enter into this?*

JZ: Well, part of our Mellon grant required that we design and co-teach a course together. So, we taught a course on “The fantastic and operatic adaptation.” We looked at European opera and Chinese opera, and our students wrote creative final projects. I don’t think anyone ended up writing an academic paper though that was an option. We had PhD students, MA students, and undergraduates from all different departments. Most of them actually ended up writing libretti. And we had two students who paired up: a composer who wrote the music, and a poet who wrote the libretto. And our student libretto work was great, didn’t you think so, Yao Chen?

YC: Yes. It was really fun. It was a truly undefinable and fun class.

GB: *Suppose you are at Juilliard, an art school, or The Actors Studio: does anyone teach you production there? Artists learn their craft individually: acting, playing an instrument, composing, painting, carving, etc. But does anyone teach you how to put it together? Or is this something that you do only as a grown-up artist once you start working as a professional in the field? Because what you did there is basically mentoring the students in the art of collaboration.*

YC: The production of opera is totally not in the school curriculum, especially not in the composition curriculum. One could learn these things later if lucky enough. In general, unless you get a commission from an opera house, you don’t really have access to witness or participate how an opera is gradually being put on stage. For most of us, there’s a gap between the score and the actual opera. In this Gray Center course, we mostly worked with students on how an opera is conceived, composed, and formed, and what are the important issues we need to pay attention to. Of course, I’m more familiar with the music writing, with the matter of the musical materials and design. Judith has literature perspectives. We also invited some composers, opera scholars, and opera directors to come to our class to share their thoughts, such as composer Shulamit Ran, musicologist Martha Feldman, and director/singer Majel Connery.

GB: *Judith, were you surprised by any of Yao Chen’s requests? Did you catch yourself doing something that you wouldn’t imagine be doing?*

JZ: As I said, I hadn’t really realized how much storytelling was going to be involved in it. And the other side of it is I do feel it’s affected my scholarship

because the genre of the Classical tale is very succinct and has many gaps. That's part of the aesthetic, but I had to make up much more than I expected. I couldn't just adapt it; adaptation was not so simple...

*GB: So there's a kind of philological dimension to this?*

JZ: Not philological. Just as an example, plot-wise, there are too many holes. The hero doesn't even have a name in the story. He's just a scholar who for no reason that is ever explained comes to this particular place and things happen to him. Just as things happen in fairy tales without any real explanation. Often you the reader can fill in the gaps because you've read a lot of other fairy tales. That's what I had to do, fill in from my knowledge and intuition of other Chinese tales and literary sources.

*GB: Why do you feel you have to fill in the gaps?*

JZ: Yao Chen, you can answer that. I felt the pressure.

YC: Yeah, we had many discussions about that. Maybe I had more push on that part. I was thinking that the opera should have some sort of tight narrative logic. A logic that would engage a third party, an audience to follow the events we are presenting on stage. When you read the original tale, you finish reading within like 20 minutes. But when you're watching it as an opera, it will take at least 90 minutes. You need to thread some plots together in order to make these 90 minutes enchanting. Of course, by creating more dramatic details, Judith had to generate enough lyrics for singing.

*GB: This is so fascinating because it is the first time that I hear that the operatic adaptation actually adds to the source-text rather than subtracting from it. Of course, you're starting from a short story, I suppose. But still, it strikes me as a very unique process in the context of opera production.*

YC: It is a very unique and personal way of making an opera, very unheard of. The story is filmy, so how can you come out with a rich meaty texture? That's a big task for her. You know, she never thought about it before. So, I basically pushed, pushed, and pushed. Please give me dramatic moments, give me some reasons, give me some climax, give me some meanings!

*GB: Is this a case, then, of almost changing the genre of the text? Because the text is not dramatic. The text is more like a parable, perhaps?*

JZ: No, it's very dramatic. It has a fantastic ending, for instance. A very

abrupt, devastating ending. This is one reason I thought this particular tale would make such a great opera. The last act is set in a mass graveyard. The male protagonist, who's been married to a ghost in the underworld, has promised her to rebury her bones in his family graveyard so she won't be alone. It's a very typical request in Chinese ghost stories. But it turns out she hasn't told him how to find her remains. He can't find them in the mass graveyard because there are too many graves. It's just an incredibly chilling moment. He keeps going back, but keeps failing. Then one evening he sees her walking amid the graves. He runs toward her, but she doesn't recognize him; she just gives him a look of hatred, and disappears. Silence. That is so powerful. Every time I tell this part of the story, it really gives me this chill. The ending is virtually unique within the corpus of Pu Songling's tales. But silence also creates a problem for us, as we are in a very different genre and you need to have sound. And Yao Chen has devised a musical solution to reflect this utter breakdown in communication between man and ghost.

*GB: The musical representation of silence is a feature of opera...*

*And so how would you define, as the official librettist, the poet in this project, how would you define the nature of the transformation? What has the source-text become in the process of turning it into a libretto: is it a longer, fleshed out version in the same genre, a springboard for musical composition—a transitional object?*

*JZ: Certain things are more explicit. It's not true that it's only fleshed out. The storyline had to be fleshed out, but certain things had to be gotten rid of because we were writing it for a modern audience. Plus, my libretto is in English, so we are writing it presumably for a Western audience who won't understand or accept certain things easily. Some fairy tales like things, like ghosts, or ghost sex, all of that, I think we felt the audience could get, but certain other things were too far-fetched and historically/culturally specific. [laughs] Certain things that I loved about the story and that I'd done historical research on, well, there's just no way to explain them in the opera. So those had to go. I had to get kill some of my darlings. And on the other hand, every draft I gave to Yao Chen it was "cut, cut, cut." So, while it is true that certain plot aspects had to be fleshed out and developed, the text itself had to be cut.*

*GB: It's fascinating because it's a process both of expansion and contraction at the same time. Were these things that you added or made more explicit always at his prompting?*



*Did some of them occur to you spontaneously?*

YC: Maybe you could tell Giorgio about how we gave those people, those protagonists, new identities—like “the painter,” for example.

JZ: Right, there is so little detail in the tale, it’s so sparse. In that sense, it is very plot driven rather than character driven. But it’s already operatic in the sense that the characters are all role types. Part of this is that Pu Songling himself is influenced by Chinese drama and thinks about his characters as role types. Because his characters already fit certain kinds of types, even by Western opera standards, they all fit nicely into an operatic framework. On the other hand, we also had to deal with “Here’s this unnamed person who comes to this place and we know nothing about him.” How are you going to make him a protagonist of an opera? So yeah, Yao Chen is right, we decided to create new identities. I drew a lot on other ghost stories. As he said, I know so many of them: I could handle that part. I could draw on paintings from the period, given my interest in Chinese art, too. So, we decided to make the guy a painter. I don’t know if this is going to work in the final version of the opera, but there’s a whole revelation scene that’s done through painting.

GB: *Reminds me a bit of fan fiction, think of prequels or sequels, where fans basically augment or fill out what the original, their object of love, hasn’t given them. You want to complete it and you want to make it more interesting or less lacking. Yao Chen, how did you feel as Judith was responding to your requests? Having worked with creative writers or creative types as distinct from a scholar/writer like Judith, did you feel that it was different this time, because she is also a scholar, or was this immaterial? Was this not just an issue?*

YC: We questioned each other a lot. We try to understand what we want in the opera, and how we can put it into the text and into the music. But we both agree that in opera the music is very important; in this regard, the story cannot be too complicated or lengthy. The story should be relatively simple but textured and emotionally charged. We also make sure to create enough good dramatic moments. I guess communication between us is the most time-consuming but rewarding part of the process.

GB: *Yao Chen, how is the music written? Is this a relatively straightforward process in which the text comes first in the creative process and then you write the music? Were there musical ideas or gestures or sonic ideas that actually even pre-existed the writing of the text?*

YC: Yeah, of course, the text comes first, and then music. But there have been always some preexisting sounds haunting for a long time in my mind which I want to realize in this opera. While we're working with the text, I often share my "mute" sound ideas with her. For example, at the beginning, we thought about the music style for the first act, which takes place in the earthly world which is full of earthly suffering and social injustice, so ugly and so horrifying. So, I think about creating ghostly string sounds to represent that. But in the second act, which takes place in the underworld, there is a wedding going on attended by lots of beautiful people. I perceive some truth-revealing energy in every corner there. So, we decided to set the second act within the sounds of euphoria, speaking for unreality, eeriness, alienation, and uncanniness. There is also some idea about how to treat the chorus.

GB: *Is the chorus a new addition to the source-text?*

YC: There is no chorus in the tale, but we thought the chorus is very important for our opera. The chorus people can be seen as ghosts, village people, and also commentators. They can help to build up the objective perspective of the opera.

JZ: For me, there always had to be a ghost chorus. That was like the first thing in my imagination and why I wanted us to turn this historical ghost story into an opera. The story begins with a short narrative about a Qing government crackdown on a local rebellion in the 1660s, which resulted in many innocent people being killed. This short narrative is very evocative. There were so many victims, the city ran out of coffin wood, and their blood turned to emerald beneath the earth, which is a Chinese allusion for martyrdom. That is the initial set up. The story proper begins about a dozen years later when a scholar, this unnamed man, comes to the provincial capital where these people are buried and sets things into motion. So how do you do that narration in an opera? We decided to put it into the ghosts' mouths themselves as a chorus. There are gaps in the logic, in the story. The story takes place in the provincial capital, but there were two counties that had the most victims in the crackdown. So, when the scholar comes to the provincial capital he makes a libation to their spirits. He remembers his dead friends and that sets into motion the whole plot. When he gets back to his room at the inn, the ghost of a former friend just shows up. It's very loose; it's too fast. We had to fill something in, to make it more causally dense. So, now the ghosts deliberately lure him from the very beginning. They are also

now the narrators. It's not just "this happened to them," but "this happened to us," which is so much more powerful. I don't even remember now whose idea was whose anymore. So that's another sign of this collaboration.

*GB: Judith, I have a technical question about the source-text. In Western literary terms, would the original be a short story or novella or a tale?*

*JZ: A tale, a tale. It's not a fable, though.*

*GB: Talking about tales, this project seems to be a good tale, an uplifting story about the university acting as a middleperson in the forging of a new and very productive collaboration. What are your feelings about the role of the university, which is not normally seen as an incubator of creative projects let alone new protocols of art making?*

*JZ: I think this has been very visionary on the part of the University of Chicago. Part of it is playing leapfrog because we were very far behind in the arts. It's such a cerebral place, it took a while for the university to get around to understanding how important the arts were. But University of Chicago also has a long history of valuing interdisciplinary research. So, when they started to set up new kinds of structure for the arts, they set them up with the desire to cross different kinds of boundaries. You know in many schools that are famous for having great conservatories or performance studies such as Northwestern or Yale, the professional schools are separate from the liberal arts mission of a college or university. Here at the University of Chicago it's much more intertwined. We were very lucky in having the Gray Center, which was explicitly set up to experiment with a new model of faculty-artist collaboration. They offered us a space and funding without pressure to immediately put something on or have results. They were also really interested in the process of creation and fostering creation rather than a final product. But that program was funded from the Mellon Foundation and now that funding has ended. The Gray Center is still there, but I don't know if it will be able to keep the same program of fostering faculty-artist collaboration going. I know the current director is working hard to raise money for this.*

*GB: So, you're left with the hardware only at this moment?*

*JZ: Well, the hardware is there, but there is more. There is still some funding, and the Gray Center publishes a journal too, so I'm hopeful that the program will get back on its feet.*

GB: *What will it take to get another big grant?*

JZ: Well, I'm not the director of the Center so that's not my concern, strictly speaking. I do feel that in the field of music, there's more interface with artists, but certainly not so much in my own field of East Asian Studies. When I've talked to colleagues about this program that we had at the Gray Center, they were very envious. Because the idea was to make you think of doing things you might not have thought about doing. And we, for better or for worse, we have this unbelievable, creative knowledge in us as scholars, but that doesn't always get an outlet.

GB: *That's the thing about scholars working on the arts: sometimes we are like the very subjects that we investigate, and that tension remains unresolved. It is wonderful that the University of Chicago had the infrastructure to do interdisciplinary studies. But what can we call this collaboration of yours, a cross-practice experiment? Because it's more than just interdisciplinary. I ask because Emilio Sala and I are struggling with the title of the new Forum for our journal. We thought about creative scholarship or creative musicology, but we're not entirely happy with it. What is it that you're doing? For there is no doubt that something new is emerging, and maybe that is why we don't know what to call it.*

YC: *Identity breaking*—I would say.

GB: *Yeah, that is a great expression.*

YC: I don't think it has to do with the issue of creativity. I mean, I totally believe that our scholars are creative. We have to get rid of this stereotypical way of understanding scholars. I think of Anton Webern: he was a musicologist, too. He did a PhD dissertation in musicology. Then he became a composer. So why not? Maybe Judith in the future will continue to work in this mode, as a creative writer. Second, the curse that the scholars are not creative. It's a bad curse, isn't?

JZ: One conversation I had with Yao Chen that was really interesting to me was, why did it matter to him even to have the story or why did it matter to have the words? And he said, "Well, I need them." He needed the substance to think about the music. He needed the inspiration of the words and the story and their emotional baggage to write the music. That was also revelation to me about the way composers might work.

GB: *In a sense, you are thrilled to be looking at the workshop of a creative artist from so up close while being creative yourself.*

JZ: I venerate him as a creative person who really is inventing, pulling these sounds out of thin air. I mean, how do you do that? I have an enormous respect, and it's been fun to watch the process up close. So that's certainly part of it. There are certain things I feel very strongly about in the project, though, in the story, in certain places I'm willing to change, certain places I really don't want to have to change because I think they're the core or integral to it. But I also have felt that my respect for him as a creative artist has made it easier for me because I feel like, well, he's the boss. He's the composer. Now that we're trying to think about how to realize it, you know, he's the person with the practical know-how, too.

GB: *And he gets first billing, right? Doesn't he?*

JZ: Yeah, and I'm very happy with that. It makes me feel more secure to try something completely new. I have a friend, Patricia Barber, she's a songwriter, jazz vocalist, and pianist, and when she heard I was doing this, she's like, "Do you know how hard that is?" So, I just sort of bravely ran out into the headlights because I knew that Yao Chen was there to really spearhead the project.

GB: *I was told there will be a workshop in December. What is Judith's role in the workshop going to be?*

YC: I guess she's basically going to observe the workshop and then to look at how it works for her in terms of the diction and emotional expressivity of the text. It will be the first time she can hear her words to be sung, which would be an exciting experience. It will help her understand what she has achieved as a librettist so far.

GB: *A musical setting is a reading of the poem in a way, isn't it? And it can be overwhelming for the writer to hear the text she's written set to music. What is the place of this particular project in your own career, in your artistic trajectory? It seems to be a very personal project, and it's not a commission.*

YC: Yeah, very personal. It's my first attempt at writing an opera, but with such a unique path. Well, I guess every composer's opera writing path is in some way unique and personal.

GB: *Are you worried about getting it actually produced and performed? Is that a source of anxiety at this stage or not yet?*

YC: I am sure that to produce an opera is very, very, very tough work. This opera project still seems very unrealistic to me today and I have no idea how it will continue. I assume there would be a long way to go. But the good thing is that there's no deadline push, there's no actual performance date. I'm just taking my time to absorb ideas and to put things into the score. Except that I have no idea what size of the orchestra I should write for. Therefore, when you have no clue who will be producing the piece, who will perform the piece, writing might become a waste in some sense. My composing is much like armchair research. I just put all these notes on this score and sing to myself. But who knows maybe there will be a chance for me to get a commission some day for realizing this opera.

GB: *What about the Central Conservatory in Beijing?*

YC: Well, this story might appear sensitive politically due to its historical context.

GB: *It's a fairly transparent allegory.*

YC: Yeah, as the plot contains references to rebellions.

GB: *By the way, I wanted to ask about ghost stories. Rebellions aside, ghost stories themselves were banned for a long time in China, also in the Republican period. What is the situation like now? What is the climate now for ghostly or supernatural stories?*

YC: It's not like we can't produce these ghost or supernatural operas, but what if some people feel this is an allegory? That's the issue. I talked about this with Judith. I said, do you think if we can cover up the more sensitive parts of the opera story and then have it produced as something in the fantasy genre? Like a fantastic take, a kind of fairytale...she said no.

The historical context is of the essence to the opera. The oppression by the Qing government and its repercussions are unavoidable in the storytelling. There is also the issue that some may frown upon a Chinese story told in English in the form of a Western opera.

GB: *But a ghost story would be fine today, wouldn't it?*

YC: Ghost stories in general exists in many art forms, but they never appear mainstream, not a prevailing genre. The mandate of the theater and opera

houses in China now is to produce something positive, heroic, patriotic, didactic, maybe more like *opera seria*. The current climate isn't conducive enough toward diversity in the arts.

GB: *Which also makes it very personal for you, I suppose, because you are doing this on your own in your office, in your own private space.*

YC: Yeah, mostly spinning and tossing around in my head, on my score sheets and in conversation with Judith, remotely.



## Being in the Dark

Michal Grover-Friedlander

1. In my book *Staging Voice*,<sup>1</sup> I outline principles drawn from my practice that I call modes of staging voice. I did not aim there to provide an exhaustive list, as many additional principles might be added to those sketched in the book. Indeed, the mark of a significant staging might very well be that it discovers a new mode. Anthony Minghella's staging of *Madama Butterfly* (MET 2006), for instance, exhibited a mode that I would name *staging an absent voice*. Here the role of the silent child was delineated by a Bunraku puppet.<sup>2</sup> The inanimate doll emphasized the absence of voice, which Minghella transformed into a lifeless thing, unable to speak.
2. I don't quite view myself as a director, since I don't work with action, motivation, psychology, blocking, and so on. I also don't view myself as a choreographer, in part because my body has not been trained, my movements specific and constrained. I am neither performer nor musician, nor am I a dramaturg, though I am sympathetic to André Lepecki's understanding of the role of the dramaturg (see below). I am not even sure about the notion of staging *voices*, notwithstanding the manifesto-like rhetoric in my recent book *Staging Voice*.
3. "The work of the dramaturg," writes Lepecki, "must contain a certain degree of errancy, a purposeful deviation and deviancy from the 'proper' paths of theatrical or choreographic semiotic behavior. It must allow and conjure a certain degree of wild thinking, of unjustifiable leaps of logic. Strong intuitions and the work of chance must remain available in the repertoire of the dramaturg, so that the work does not fall under the domain of 'clear reason,' of 'dramaturgical sense.' I prefer to think of the dramaturg as a careful articulator of improbable encounters and as a cartographer of that improbability. If any work of art results from an interactivity of matters, then the dramaturg must operate as a catalyst and as a particle accelerator of those matters provoking unexpected collisions..."<sup>3</sup>

1 Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Staging Voice* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

2 The video of the production is available online: *Madame Butterfly* | *The Metropolitan Opera*, PBS LearningMedia, <https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/madama-butterfly-opera/madama-butterfly-opera/> (accessed December 1, 2023).

3 Di Matteo, "The Dramaturg, Today," 206.

4. I find Lepecki's views on the dramaturg to be complementary to Carolyn Abbate's on opera: "I say to my students that opera involves too-much-ness, overload, and that the musical sound is not always conforming, or explaining, or corresponding, or misdirecting, or covering up—it's not behaving in the ways that Western academic traditions tend to respect. I tell them that the lived experience of opera frees them, for a brief time, from institutional prescriptions that they remain analytical. That opera's sounds offer an aperture to wonder, maybe bewilderment, possibly aggravation, which they are allowed to experience as human subjects. And I tell them that they are not obliged to say a single word about that."<sup>4</sup>
5. I am driven by music. My approach is musical. I work through musical issues. One such issue relates to the musicality of movement: how movement is imbued with musicality (but what might that mean?). This includes silence as well: "Silence operates as an intensifier of attention; it gives density to the objects. Silence also places the performers at the level of the objects they manipulate...."<sup>5</sup> How does silence bear on objects? Relate to performers? What would the movements of silence be? Would they be non-movement? Is silence analogous in certain ways to stillness? Can movement be imperceptible? And how are we to listen to silent movements? Can singing be related to (non)movement, and can it be the impetus for movement? Are movement and song ever truly aligned? And what happens at thresholds—the nearly unheard, virtually unnoticed, almost totally still, barely present?
6. I began taking voice lessons so that I could better understand the mechanisms of singing and comprehend some of the possibilities for movement available to a singer.
7. I am a musicologist and I direct contemporary opera and music theater. I enrolled in a choreography program once I recognized that "choreographing" rather than "staging" is what I am probably doing. I am drawn to contemporary dance, which like music can dispense with lan-

4 Carolyn Abbate, "Wagnerian Biochemistries," (paper delivered at the 5th Transnational Opera Studies Conference, Lisbon, July 6, 2023).

5 André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 52.

guage. A central preoccupation of mine is how I work through my relationship with music—as someone who moves. How do I relate to music via my body—my voice, my singing, my rhythm, my beat, my gesture, my moves. This is a shift. I find myself outside my comfort zone, which is to theorize, interpret, conceptualize, argue, write about, have ideas for others to put into play. Ever more consistently I moved away from staging already existing works—say, Brecht and Weill’s *Der Jasager*—and towards creating from scratch. To do so feels like a new way to dwell in the world. I might be wishing for this to be so.

8. While studying choreography over the past four years, I became aware of what I enjoy the most: a sensation of a beat underneath complex rhythms. What moves me most is singing.
9. I “ended up” a performer in my choreographies. The typical trajectory went backwards—I ended in a place one usually begins at. (My stage fright never interfered with my work in staging productions but now, as a performer, what do I do?)
10. Directing started by chance. My brother-in-law had just embarked on a career as conductor. Two European festivals had engaged him. A few months before the performances were scheduled to begin, he was informed that the venues include a pit for the orchestra. This news meant that the opera he was to conduct, which had been planned as a non-staged performance, was now going to be staged. We were sitting in a café at a family gathering when the word came. A wild idea was thrown out: I, a scholar of opera, would stage the production. The risk my brother-in-law was taking is more evident to me now than it had been at the time: he was putting himself on the line with someone who certainly was filled with enthusiasm but had zero experience staging operas. This happened roughly 20 years ago. Since then, I have staged productions in fringe festivals, at Tel Aviv University, and even with the Israel Philharmonic; I have staged performances in various countries and founded the ensemble Ta Opera Zuta.
11. Directing was not at all the product of chance. I don’t like, or let me say rather that I get really upset and even feel rage towards many performances, especially those that do not account for the phenomenon

of singing. Alternative performances bubble up in my head, conjuring entire scenes and images envisioning what I would do instead.

12. During the process I wait for something to *work*. I don't need to justify this the way an idea in an academic paper must be justified, though in the end it is no less firmly grounded in its relation to how the piece works on the whole and the underlying sense of the piece's emotive power.
13. "Don't all good performances and artworks in general implicate the attenders because of something that makes them memorable?" asks Bojana Cvejić. "A discriminating answer would be that there are performances which are remembered as good examples: ideal images that help us consolidate ourselves in a worldview. And there are those other performances that continue to trouble us, as they unground the knowledge of our worldview: our expectations of what the human body is, looks like, what it desires, how it can move and communicate, the time it lives and shares with others, the time of our perception and memory."<sup>6</sup>
14. My initial stages in a directing project are similar to research, in that I try to understand the work. Here is an example from my research into Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*. I began with the plot of *Gianni Schicchi*, which is based on a story from Dante's *Inferno*. In Dante, Gianni Schicchi impersonates the voice of the dead Buoso Donati in order to change the latter's will at the request of the deceased's relatives. Gianni, being a trickster, outsmarts the relatives by dictating the terms of the will in his own favor. The final moments of the opera are an apologia recited by Gianni Schicchi from hell. Gianni's appearance from the realm of the dead became crucial to my interpretation of the opera. My reading hinged on the discrepancy between Gianni's selfhood in the opera (i.e., Gianni alive) and Gianni's emergence from hell in the epilogue (i.e., as a spirit of the dead). I argued that the voice given to the dead Gianni Schicchi at the end of the opera in fact permeates the opera as a whole. Puccini's opera undermines the presupposition that hell is kept separate from the world of the living, confined to the opera's epilogue. Gi-

6 Bojana Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in European Contemporary Dance and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 224.

anni's afterlife in hell reflects back from the epilogue to the whole opera and refashions the character's operatic self as one that is simultaneously living and dead. *Gianni Schicchi* is about a dead man (Buoso Donati) being overtaken by a voice of the living man who dubs him (Gianni Schicchi)—about how the dead are threatened by the living. It also reveals an aspect of the world of the living (Gianni of the opera) as itself permeated by death (Gianni of the epilogue). The troubling assumption, supported by the music, is that Gianni is in fact dead throughout the opera, not just when he is speaking from hell in the epilogue. I think it is apparent how this interpretative mode of research may yield a potential staging of the opera.

15. I've moved more and more away from opera, in the sense of a given Text I am interpreting, and increasingly seek to create something in between a musical and a dance performance. I do not start with a notion of what the project is *about*. I experiment with a singing voice and with movement. I figure out what might be going on, what it might be about, what it can mean—but not in advance.
16. If I were interviewing myself, I would ask about listening: what I listen to, what I listen for? Do I listen for precious moments? Do I choreograph my listening?<sup>7</sup>
17. If I were interviewing myself, I would ask a question that would direct the answer towards revealing my infatuation with the countertenor voice, and specifically two individual voices: Andreas Scholl's and Doron Schleifer's. Nothing moves me more than these voices. In *Staging Voice*, I try to understand my repeated casting of countertenors in my stagings. Is it the voice's vulnerability? Its liminality? Rarity?
18. I remember an experienced director's distinct advice to maintain a safe distance from the performers. I assume it worked for that director but for me it was a terrible suggestion. Early on I realized I could work only through affection, consideration, and sensitivity. Tension and friction bring me to a halt. In my experience, there is always a meltdown towards the end of the process when stakes are highest. I now expect this

<sup>7</sup> Michal Grover-Friedlander, "Listening to Choreography," *Choreographic Practices* 14, no. 1 (2023): 9–25, [https://doi.org/10.1386/chor\\_00055\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/chor_00055_1).

and can handle it. Mostly because I choose my artistic partners with meticulous care.

19. My stylistic vocabulary: slow; imagistic; still; meditative; absorptive; postponement of movement; signification not immediately decipherable; opaque; deliberation; vulnerability; fragility; hyper-aesthetic; minimalistic; not choreography nor music concert nor staged performance; awareness of the passage of time, of age and its decline; minute details; nuanced; human body shape obscured, questioning subjectivity and agency; isolation of body parts, specifically the hair, the hand, and the neck; unfamiliar environment; angst; lyricism; strangeness.
20. My style is inspired by *butoh* aesthetics in its “resonating in meditative slowness and appreciation of odd or antiquated moments.”<sup>8</sup> In *butoh*, “instead of movement and meaning coinciding, the minuteness of many of the gestures and the length of time over which they are executed ... suggest that, in work of this type, ‘meaning’ and ‘opportunities for reading’ exist at least as much in the ‘spaces between’ actions as in the actions themselves.”<sup>9</sup>
21. I like to be in the space of a performance when it is dark—before the audience occupies it, just before the performance starts and everything changes. This space holds within it the potential for everything that is about to take place.

8 Sondra Fraleigh, “Get Messed Up: Intentionality, *Butoh*, and Freedom in Plasma,” *Performance Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (2019): 380, <https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2019.42224>.

9 Judith Hamera, “Silence That Reflects: *Butoh*, *Ma*, and a Crosscultural Gaze,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1990): 57.

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