

Emergence: Examining Gender in Music through Contemporary Opera*

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Introduction

I am a composer some might call successful; I have had many commissions in different areas of music over a long career. Yet, despite this, I have often had the impression I was operating at the margins of the industry. While this is no doubt partly due to my inclination towards experimental compositional practice, I believe it is also in some measure due to my female gender.

It is no secret that composers who are cisgender, white men dominate the music industry at all levels. To summarize briefly the findings contained in the recent literature: the *Living Music* report, an audit of Australia's state-funded, major performing arts organizations, found that in 2020 no gender diverse composers' works were programmed and just 4% of works programmed were written by female composers.¹ At the global level, research conducted by *Donne, Women in Music*, reveals that of the repertoire performed by 111 orchestras across 30 countries in the 2023–24 season, 92.5% was written by men, with 89.3% by white men. Just 7.5% was written by women, of which, 5.8% were white women, and 1.6% were women of color. Less than 0.1% was by “non-binary composers”—no race specified.² This is to say nothing of gender deficits in music production, screen composition, song writing, and other fields of music creation, in which women are

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1 Ciaran Frame, *Living Music Report* (2020), <https://livingmusic.report/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Living-Music-Report-2020.pdf>.

2 Donne, Women in Music, *Equality & Diversity in Concert Halls 2023–2024* (2024), <https://donne-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/DonneReport2024.pdf>.

consistently represented as disproportionate minorities.³ And, while prominent Australian artists such as Tash Sultana and G-Flip are now breaking the binary, statistical data on gender diverse music creator representation remain almost entirely lacking.⁴

So, what does it mean to be part of a music industry that has, for centuries, ignored your perspective, undermined your talent and confidence, objectified your body, and systematically erased composers like you from the canon? These are questions that are global and touch many, not only for reasons of gender, but also race, culture, geography, age, and ability, and are questions for international music industries to consider.

To take steps towards an answer and to build on extant research focusing solely on women in music, I recently led a study of over 200 female and gender diverse music creators in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, resulting in the *Women and Minority Genders in Music* report.⁵ Coauthored with Dr. Barrie Shannon, who is gender diverse, our report revealed that feeling marginalized and alienated in the music industry are common experiences for women and gender diverse folk, and that sexist tropes, attitudes, expectations, and a Boys' Club culture dominate mainstream music industry spaces. I will relate some of the report's findings to the topics covered in

3 See Vick Bain, *Counting the Music Industry: The Gender Gap* (2019), <https://www.uk-music.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Counting-the-Music-Industry-full-report-2019.pdf>; Benoît Gauthier and Lisa Freeman, *Gender in the Canadian Screen Composing Industry* (Gatineau, Québec: Circum Network Inc., 2018), <https://screencomposers.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/SCGC-Gender-Study-20180621final.pdf>; Catherine Strong and Fabian Cannizzo, *Australian Women Screen Composers: Career Barriers and Pathways* (Melbourne: RMIT, 2017); Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, *Inclusion in the Recording Studio? Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Artists, Songwriters & Producers across 700 Popular Songs from 2012–2018* (Los Angeles: USC Annenberg, 2019); Stacy L. Smith et al., *Inequality in 1,100 popular films: examining portrayals of gender, race/ethnicity, LGBT & disability from 2007 to 2017* (Los Angeles: USC Annenberg, 2018); Stacy L. Smith et al., *Inclusion in the Recording Studio? Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Artists, Songwriters & Producers across 800 Popular Songs from 2012–2019* (Los Angeles: USC Annenberg, 2020); Felicity Wilcox, ed., *Women's Music for the Screen: Diverse Narratives in Sound* (New York: Routledge, 2022); Felicity Wilcox, "Troubleshooting Gender in the Australian Screen Music Industry: An Insider Perspective," in *A Century of Composition by Women: Music Against the Odds*, eds. Linda Kouvaras, Maria Grenfell, and Natalie Williams (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 247–62.

4 See Felicity Wilcox and Barrie Shannon, *Women and Minority Genders in Music: Understanding the Matrix of Barriers for Female and Gender Diverse Music Creators* (Sydney: University of Technology Sydney, 2023).

5 See Wilcox and Shannon, *Women and Minority Genders in Music*.

this paper, to illustrate how women and gender diverse music creators must find alternate pathways around obstacles resulting from industry structures that fail us.

My analysis and discussion going forward considers such questions from an intersectional feminist perspective; that is using, “a framework of analysis that explains the ways in which structural inequalities are compounded by individual characteristics [... and the ways they] can combine to produce unique outcomes for people who find themselves at the ‘intersections’ of various forms of marginalization.”⁶ Although the term *intersectionality* was coined by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989,⁷ revered, queer, African American poet, essayist and activist, Audre Lorde earlier laid out the importance of what would become known as an intersectional approach to feminism in uniting the marginalized:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference ... know that survival is ... learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths.⁸

To suggest ways we can collectively—as makers and audiences—contribute to a more inclusive model in opera, I will start by discussing the status quo regarding gender in opera, present a few touchpoints on recent developments in contemporary music theater, make a brief detour into a discussion of acoustic ecology, and finish by referencing theories of feminist listening. To begin, I will ask the reader to consider three questions put by British soprano, curator, and essayist Juliet Fraser: “What have we inherited? What are we building? What do we want our legacy to be?”⁹ Let us first consider what we have inherited in opera.

6 Wilcox and Shannon, v.

7 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989), 139–67.

8 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

9 Juliet Fraser, “Deconstructing the Diva: In Praise of Trailblazers, Killjoys and Hags” (paper presented at the Fourth International Conference on Women’s Work in Music, Bangor University, 2023).

Opera and gender

Operatic narratives traditionally portray women as victims of murder and/or sexual violence,¹⁰ leading to some commentators labelling opera as a misogynistic artform,¹¹ whose canonic narratives are dominated by patriarchal control of women and gender diverse people's bodies, sexuality and power.¹² Carolyn Abbate argues that the "voices" or identities represented in operas also encompass the physical voices heard within them, or that musical narration "may speak both with and *across* the text" (her emphasis).¹³ Thus, she suggests that even though problematic narratives of gendered violence proliferate in 19th century opera, at the same time it has been a powerful vehicle for the evolution of female expression through its contribution to an "unconquerable" female identity, "undone by plot yet triumphant in voice."¹⁴ Opera has also been the subject of much queer theory; gay male perspectives consider opera through the lens of homoerotic desire, the phenomenon of the castrati, and operatic cross-dressing,¹⁵ with lesbian perspectives also exploring the radical strategies found within opera for women's personal and sexual self-expression¹⁶ and arguing that, despite its preponderance of tragic female leads, "opera has an intriguing history of challenging misogyny and heterosexism."¹⁷

Through its platforming of the voice's sonorous texture, opera has long afforded agency and status to its female and gender diverse interpreters

10 See Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

11 See, for example, Charlotte Higgins, "Is Opera the Most Misogynistic Artform?" *The Guardian*, February 26, 2016; Sally Blackwood et al., "Opera and the Doing of Women," *Arts Hub*, May 13, 2019, <https://www.artshub.com.au/news/opinions-analysis/opera-and-the-doing-of-women-257968-2363191/>.

12 See Hillary LaBonte, "Analyzing Gender Inequality in Contemporary Opera," (DMA diss., Bowling Green State University, 2019), https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/dma_diss/34.

13 Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), xiv.

14 Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, ix.

15 See, for example, Sam Abel, *Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performances* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996) and Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993).

16 Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith, eds., *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

17 Katherine Gantz, review of *Opera in the Flesh* by Abel and *En Travesti* by Blackmer and Smith, *The Antioch Review* 55, no. 1 (1997): 109.

in ways that historically other art forms have not; when one considers the comparative anonymity and lower status they have occupied in theater, literature, and the visual arts until last century. However, given that opera's plots and characterizations tend to be "crushing" for women,¹⁸ the critical questions around core creative agency in opera still lead us to ask: "Who gets to make operatic work and whose perspectives does this work favor?" I believe we must acknowledge that opera has traditionally been made and remains overwhelmingly made by cisgender white men (whether straight, bisexual, or gay) of a certain class.

Although there are many examples of opera's white masculine identity, I point to just one: the Metropolitan Opera in New York, which author, journalist, and producer Danyel Smith calls the "capital of the global opera community."¹⁹ Established in 1883, after premiering its first opera by a woman in 1903 (Ethel Smyth, *Der Wald*), the Met waited a further 113 years before programming its second work by a female composer in 2016 (Kaija Saariaho, *L'Amour de loin*). It was 2021 before the first opera by an African-American composer was performed there (Terence Blanchard, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*). Without even talking about a woman of color composing a work for performance there—an occasion we still await—it was 1955 before the first African-American woman, Marian Anderson, was allowed to sing there, and it took the Met until 2015 to "decide to discontinue blackface."²⁰

Operas by women and gender diverse composers have been largely ignored—a state of affairs that continues at the mainstage level today and is nowhere more apparent than in my country, Australia. As I pointed out in an article published by leading Australian arts review, *Limelight*:

The operatic canon so many stubbornly cling to was written in a period, lasting several hundred years, where 100% white, male composer quotas were in force. ...The canon many of us grew up with, studied, and have listened to all our lives is the direct result of discrimination that continues to have very real implications for equal opportunity among arts workers.²¹

¹⁸ Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, ix.

¹⁹ Danyel Smith, *Shine Bright: A Very Personal History of Black Women in Pop* (New York: Roc Lit 101, 2022), 23.

²⁰ Smith, *Shine Bright*, 23.

²¹ Felicity Wilcox, "Programming Must Get with the Program," *Limelight*, 28 June, 2021, <https://limelight-arts.com.au/features/programming-must-get-with-the-program/>.

Australian mainstream opera companies to date have programmed works by male composers almost exclusively; just one of 48 operas programmed by Opera Australia from 2019 to 2022 was composed by a woman.²² In Australian contemporary opera circles, despite works by composers such as Deborah Cheetham Fraillon, Mary Finsterer, Cat Hope, Andrée Greenwell, and Liza Lim gaining critical acclaim in the independent arts sector, anger about the exclusion of female composers by mainstream opera companies boiled over at the New Opera Workshop 2019, which revealed what Liza Lim called “the extent of the systemic forces that hold back women’s participation in opera as composers.”²³ Since then, Australian state-level opera companies have programmed a handful of operas with female-centered narratives and the occasional female composer or librettist (e.g. *The Call*, co-librettist Kate Miller-Heidke; *Watershed*, co-librettist Alana Valentine; *Parrwang Lifts the Sky*, composer Deborah Cheetham Fraillon), but these remain the exception rather than the rule.

The arrival of a new artistic director, Jo Davies, at Opera Australia in 2023 augured well; Davies programmed five new operas by living composers in a ground-breaking 2024 season. Four living Australian male composers (Joe Twist, Brett Dean, Jack Symonds, Jonathan Mills) saw their works performed. *Breaking the Waves* (2016) was composed by a woman, Missy Mazzoli—an American; *Watershed* (2022) was co-authored by a female librettist, Alana Valentine—an Australian. Jo Davies’ untimely departure in August 2024 was announced with Opera Australia citing “differences of opinion about how Opera Australia should successfully balance artistic innovation, audience development and commercial imperatives moving forward.”²⁴ Yet, “moving forward” appears to have equated to neither artistic innovation nor further inclusion of minority, women, and Australian composers. The only contemporary work and the only work by a woman in the company’s 2025 season is US songwriter Anaïs Mitchell’s hit Broadway musical *Hadestown* (2016), which sits among a suite of traditional operatic offerings and popular music-hall fare made last century.²⁵

22 This work was *Whiteley* (2019) by Australian composer Elena Kats-Chernin.

23 Quoted in Alison Croggon, “Opera and the Invisibility of Women,” *Witness Performance*, May 7, 2019, <https://witnessperformance.com/opera-and-the-invisibility-of-women/>.

24 Quoted in Jason Blake, “Jo Davies to leave Opera Australia over ‘differences of opinion,’” *Limelight*, August 30, 2024, <https://limelight-arts.com.au/news/jo-davies-to-leave-opera-australia-over-differences-of-opinion/>.

25 Opera Australia’s programming for its 2025 season is available on the company’s website, <https://opera.org.au/features/discover-2025-sydney-season/>.

Those who believe that the organizations Australians invest in through their taxes have an obligation to invest in generating new, innovative work from within Australia to reflect its unique society, can only mourn the departure of Davies: the only artistic director of Opera Australia (a Welsh woman) who appears to have taken this vision of reciprocity seriously in recent years.

I am currently based in Europe on an Australian Research Council (ARC) fellowship, on a mission to attend as many new music theater/opera events as possible, with a particular focus on those created by women, gender diverse, and minority composers and librettists. When I find them, they often feature ground-breaking, aesthetically strong scores and offer well rounded representations of female and queer characters, narratives infused with authentic perspectives, diverse casts and themes. They often also present innovation in form, musical and textual treatment, ensemble configuration, and use of performers' bodies on stage—such formal innovation a by-product of marginalization that I find relevant to the discussion (more on this later). They tend to be found in the small-to-medium sector, rather than on the mainstages of the large state companies, at festivals such as Prototype (New York City), Darmstadt (Germany), O. (Rotterdam), and Münchener Biennale (Munich). The diversity of representation and practice in such spaces is an important recalibrating presence for mainstage opera and music theater.

In my casual, regular audits of mainstage opera companies' programming globally I note there persists a glaring lack of gender diversity among the composers commissioned. Some companies have taken on opera's gender problem to the extent that they are commissioning new operas (or programming old ones) that feature strong women in the lead roles or reworking the old operas in ways that challenge gendered stereotypes (e.g. La Monnaie / De Munt: *Cassandra*, 2023, and *Bovary*, 2025; and Opéra de Lyon: *Otages*, 2024); but while male-led creative teams continue to dominate the curation, such initiatives can feel paternalistic.²⁶ I wonder why, when we are clearly making powerful and successful operas on smaller stages, women are yet to be entrusted with telling our own stories for such mainstage outings?

26 Opéra de Lyon's *Rebattre les cartes* festival which aimed to "reshuffle the cards" by presenting three operas featuring strong female lead characters, featured all-male composer/librettist teams on every production. La Monnaie / De Munt (Brussels) commissioned two new works with leading female characters: *Cassandra* (2023) and *Bovary* (2025); again, both were created by all-male composer/librettist teams.

Indeed, so pressing is the issue among elite institutions around the world that a summit called Strategies of Visibility took place at the Academy Second Modernism in Vienna (8 June 2024). Some notable (mainly European) opera companies were represented, including: Opera Ballett Vlaanderen, Grand Théâtre de Genève, La Monnaie / De Munt, Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre, The Icelandic Opera, Open Opera Ukraine, Volksoper Wien and others. Such a turn-out is encouraging, though the impact of such laudable initiatives is too often glacial and willful bias in programming persists. The summit passed a joint declaration: a commitment made by theaters, opera houses, concert venues and festivals to “advance the required structural change with concrete measures.”²⁷ Watch this space.

The Shell Trial was commissioned by the Dutch National Opera and premiered in their Amsterdam opera house in March 2024. It was composed by Ellen Reid in collaboration with librettist Roxie Perkins; both women are American. As evidence of Australian opera director Sally Blackwood’s claim that “innovation, risk-taking and reinvention of the operatic artform are to be found in the ‘small to medium’ environment,”²⁸ it is worth noting that Reid’s career ascendancy started in the experimental space with her opera *p r i s m*, produced by Beth Morrison for Prototype Festival, the latter considered a leading festival of new opera due to its focus on producing high-quality, experimental new work from a diverse pool of creators. Reid went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for *p r i s m* in 2019, recognition that no doubt paved the way to mainstage commissions like *The Shell Trial* (2020). Without the risk-taking, innovation, and inclusion that occur at the grassroots level, extraordinary composers from minority cohorts like Reid would likely remain undiscovered by mainstream opera companies.²⁹ Yet, I would suggest that the latter need to do more urgent, focused work to redress existing programming inequity.

The Shell Trial is the only mainstage production I have seen by a female composer since beginning this research in January 2023. *Quartier Est: Barre d’immeuble IV* (2024) was the only one by a non-binary composer (Eloain Lovis Hübner), which, although commissioned by Opéra de Paris, was staged in their smaller experimental space—Amphitéâtre Olivier Mes-

27 Wiener Festwochen, *Academy Second Modernism: Summit—Strategies of Visibility*, 2024, <https://www.festwochen.at/en/akademie-zweite-moderne-strategien-der-sichtbarkeit>.

28 Sally Blackwood, “(Re)Claim the Frame: A Rethinking of Opera and Operatic Practice in Australia” (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2021), 170.

29 I use “minority” here due to the representational deficits that place female composers in the minority within the cultural structures historically and currently available to them.

siaen at Bastille—and blended original music by Hübner with existing music by an equal mix of male and female composers. There was much about both of these works that resonated with me: distributed cocreation processes; diverse creators, directorial teams, casting, and perspectives; using the theater as “a space for reflection.”³⁰ Beyond the inspiration these works provide for new practice, the role modelling Reid and Hübner offer other composers who are not men, and the enthusiastic responses from audiences full of queer folk, and people of color, women, and young people—we do not need to look far for the reasons diverse composer representation matters.

Music at the margins

Juliet Fraser, though a busy and influential performer, still describes herself as part of a community of “outsiders, many of whom have lost a battle to fit in within existing structures.”³¹ She points to the dangers of isolation for those on the margins, and of the vital importance of role models, of exemplars whom she prefers to call “trailblazers”: “We must not underestimate our need for examples... that support us, even if only subconsciously, that provide meaning, impetus, resonance and depth to our life choices.”³² Of course, such examples don’t have to be of the same gender, but research shows they are much more effective when they are.

A priority of our recent study was to examine the importance of role models for women and gender diverse composers. We found that nearly one third of respondents (30.13%) did not see role models in their field.³³ Further, of those who did, only 3% could identify role models who “looked like them”—meaning they held key aspects of identity such as race, age, and specific gender identification in common.³⁴ And in turn, a lack of role models appears to have a dampening effect on confidence, morale, sense of inclusion, productivity, capacity to step up for opportunities, and to imagine pathways forward.³⁵ This might help to explain why representation for

30 *The Shell Trial*, National Opera and Ballet, online program, 2024, <https://www.opera-ballet.nl/en/online-programme/the-shell-trial>.

31 Fraser, “Deconstructing the Diva.”

32 Fraser.

33 See Wilcox and Shannon, *Women and Minority Genders in Music*, 28.

34 Wilcox and Shannon, 29.

35 Wilcox and Shannon, 38.

female and gender diverse composers remains so low. It's not only about the music, but clearly about who is making it.

Susanne Kogler asserts that “artists, and in particular female artists, often create their works beyond the framework of institutionalized forms and genres.”³⁶ We should add gender queer artists to this sentence, for whom marginalization is even more pronounced, defining their daily experience, not only their artistic one. As one non-binary respondent to our study revealed, “I spend time thinking about how to navigate situations and career rather than seeing and following an example”³⁷ The sense of being an outsider is no doubt also experienced by some male composers, in particular those from minority identities.

Marginalization can take different forms. Chinese American composer Du Yun's work *In Our Daughter's Eyes* (2023) is a collaboration with singer Nathan Gunn and librettist/director Michael McQuilken. It presents a moving story about a pregnancy and loss, told from the point of view of the baby's father. McQuilken fed elements of his own personal experience into the work, saying: “We found a way into the subject that actually had to do with redefining masculine strength or something, and that became a topic that I think then opened up.”³⁸ Du and McQuilken made the opera in consultation with solo performer and father of five, Nathan Gunn, who also brought his own experience to the story.

Du says she wanted to make *In Our Daughter's Eyes* for her own father but that, as a woman of color, it felt unfamiliar for her to allow two cisgender, white men into the heart of such a personal process.³⁹ The result of this collaboration is an opera that presents a vulnerable story unexpectedly linking masculinity and pregnancy: themes that do not normally go hand in hand. As Du asserts, “When we are talking about diversity, we must also talk about those things as well.”⁴⁰ Opera that includes such nuanced and authentic presentations of masculinity is rare and timely.

An early experience of opera inauthentically representing women's perspectives has directly informed all Du's writing for opera. While viewing her first traditional Western opera as a young adult, Du recalls that she

³⁶ Susanne Kogler, “Hannah Arendt and the ‘Fragility of Sounds.’ Aesthetics and Politics in the 21st Century,” in *Sounding Fragilities. An Anthology*, ed. Irene Lehmann and Pia Palme (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2022), 136.

³⁷ Wilcox and Shannon, *Women and Minority Genders in Music*, 30.

³⁸ Michael McQuilken, interview with the author, March 4, 2023.

³⁹ Du Yun, interview with the author, August 11, 2023.

⁴⁰ Du, interview.

was aghast that the composer gave the female lead an aria to sing at the very moment she was being violated. This disconnect between the material and its artistic treatment stayed with her and she vowed at that point that she would “never do an aria just for the sake of it.”⁴¹ In discussing her work *Angel’s Bone* (2015), an opera about human trafficking, she references this memory:

When people ask ... why is there a punk voice in *Angel’s Bone* and why was it done that way when the Girl Angel was being violated? Because I remember that moment, and ... no woman in that situation, or no survivor in that situation would deliver an aria!⁴²

Without independent, female-led, new opera forums like Morrison’s Prototype Festival—which premiered *Angel’s Bone*, *p r i s m*, and *Breaking the Waves*—and composers of different backgrounds bringing new approaches to stories that touch them, operatic works informed by authentic perspectives cannot emerge, much less flourish, and go on to win awards. When asked what it had meant to her to win the Pulitzer Prize in 2017 for *Angel’s Bone*, Du says:

Sometimes you think it doesn’t matter, but it does matter, because it does open the doors and also people do pay attention to the work, and maybe also to the other work [you do]. So, in that regard we cannot pretend it doesn’t matter, especially if you are a woman, and not white. Absolutely it matters.⁴³

The silver lining is that finding yourself on the margins demands resilience, which results in new ways to practice, produce, and listen. It is this questioning form of professional enquiry—that I am going to call evolutionary rather than revolutionary—that interests me; the idea of challenging the status quo through artistic practice that is as much political in its subject matter as activist in its ways of doing.

Australian composer Liza Lim is one practitioner who engages in this type of compositional activity. Particularly evident in her operas (e.g. *Atlas of the Sky*, 2018; *Tree of Codes*, 2016), Lim’s practice reflects a commitment

⁴¹ Du, interview.

⁴² Du, interview.

⁴³ Du, interview.

to “let the material speak”⁴⁴ and also enacts Hannah Arendt’s “aesthetic of doing,” through which all art has the potential to be implicitly political.⁴⁵ Lim writes:

In so many operatic mad scenes, the female voice has been associated with emotional volatility and loss of control. ... The gendered valuations and devaluations of things variously called shrill, volatile, hysterical—in other words, everything related to distortion—are for me a source of deep knowledge and beauty. For me, there’s a basic truthfulness in noise, particularly the high intensity full spectrum kind, and the way it disrupts norms, the way it invades the body and blurs boundaries. ... Noise creates force fields with which and within which one can conjure up presences.⁴⁶

So maybe it’s time to shoot the can(n)on? Quite aside from questions of equity, inclusion is about sustainability, especially in countries like Australia that are increasingly embracing their own cultural identity and autonomy outside a Eurocentric framework. As First Nations Australian composer Christopher Sainsbury says:

There’s still a lot of old fashioned ... people who really just want to hear the Beethoven and the Mozart and, ... even Indigenous aside, I just think that is unsustainable, and it’s a bit of a nod to try to be a culture that we are not.⁴⁷

If, as an arts community, we are to meaningfully respond to concerns raised about the sustainability of opera in *The National Opera Review Final Report*,⁴⁸ in particular, with regards to its social relevance, it is incumbent upon us to ensure a broader diversity of creators and the new repertoire they generate are invited in from the margins and offered a seat at the table.

44 Du, interview.

45 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958).

46 Liza Lim, “Rifts in Time. Distortion, Possession and Ventriloquism in my Operatic Works,” in Lehmann and Palme, *Sounding Fragilities*, 206.

47 Christopher Sainsbury, interview with the author, February 23, 2024.

48 *The National Opera Review Final Report* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016).

Linking acoustic ecology to more inclusive methods in opera

Returning now to Fraser's second question, "What are we building?";⁴⁹ perhaps the answer lies in listening more attentively to the world around us.

Composers have been co-constructing the idea of an ecology of music since the 1960s.⁵⁰ Important practitioners and early thinkers in this area include William Kay Archer, John Cage, Annea Lockwood, Pauline Oliveros, and Hildegard Westerkamp, among others. It is noteworthy that this area of practice is well populated by women, compared with other fields of composition. Westerkamp considers soundscape composition and acoustic ecology as a place "to awaken our curiosity and ... as composers to 'speak back' to problematic 'voices' in the soundscape, to deepen our relationship to positive forces in our surroundings or to comment on many other aspects of a society."⁵¹ Austrian composer, performer, and researcher Pia Palme writes: "Listening brings the inner and outer dimensions together and in this totality the entire ecosystem can be heard ... a polyphony of voices."⁵²

This type of listening has broad roots and resonances within global Indigenous knowledge systems. As Australian First Nations scholar Margo Neale writes, "Everything starts and finishes with Country in the Aboriginal worldview."⁵³ In describing the interrelated systems inherent in Aboriginal Songlines she writes, "knowledge carried in the Songlines decrees that humans are equal with all things animate and inanimate. Together we form part of a web, in which each component sustains the land and keeps the archive alive."⁵⁴

In *The Visitors* (2023), a Victorian Opera production, Dharug man and composer Christopher Sainsbury drew on the sounds of his Country⁵⁵ of Eora/Sydney to create what he called the work's "sonic signature."⁵⁶ Dha-

49 Fraser, "Deconstructing the Diva."

50 See William Kay Archer, "On the Ecology of Music," *Ethnomusicology* 8, no. 1 (1964): 28–33.

51 Hildegard Westerkamp, "Linking Soundscape Composition and Acoustic Ecology," *Organized Sound* 7, no. 1 (2002): 52.

52 Pia Palme, "Composing Futures. Activism and Ecology in Contemporary Music," in Lehmann and Palme, *Sounding Fragilities*, 51.

53 Margo Neale and Lynne Kelly, *Songlines: The Power and Promise* (Port Melbourne: Thames & Hudson Australia, 2020), 1.

54 Neale and Kelly, *Songlines*, 46.

55 I use the upper-case "C" for "Country" to follow Neale's lead in articulating this First Nations concept of place.

56 Sainsbury, interview.

rug, the primary traditional language of the Sydney region and Sainsbury's ancestral language, is woven through Jane Harrison's libretto with certain words recurring like sonic motifs. Sainsbury used sand blocks as percussion instruments to represent the region's sandstone environment and developed a leitmotif to reflect its naturally echoing soundscapes characterized by dramatic escarpments. He transcribed the songs of local native birds and used them as the basis for melodic material. Conscious of "specifically holding grand European opera at a distance,"⁵⁷ he drew on scalar and intervallic structures found within traditional Aboriginal song from the Sydney region and explored a more "elemental orchestration"⁵⁸ with pared-back textures and percussion when he felt it appropriate to evoke an Aboriginal identity through the work. These signifiers ground the listener to place, implicitly articulate Sainsbury's Aboriginal identity, and situate Country as a key character in this story of a historic moment between First Nations peoples and English First Fleet colonizers. Such aesthetic choices again reflect a commitment to let the material speak and are examples of how diverse identities in the opera space can shape form, bring new aesthetics, and contribute to its renewal.

US composer Pauline Oliveros' concept of "deep listening"⁵⁹ is key to the fields of both acoustic ecology and feminist listening. I am coming to understand the concept of an ecology of music as linked to a more wholistic form of practice that is less transactional, slower, iterative, incorporating improvisation elements, and that involves deep listening, not just to the sounds themselves, but to the people I am involved with in the music making. I am increasingly applying such an ecological approach as a guiding principle. I feel such a perspective should include and also stretch beyond the realm of nature to members of our own species who may be hidden from view, struggling to survive, or silenced by the forces of our masculinized, militarized, industrial society and the structures of patriarchy. I feel we must attend to, as Westerkamp asserts, "the ecological health of our acoustic environment *and all living beings within*."⁶⁰ In other words: certain people, ideas, and voices that we don't usually get to hear above the din.

EMERGENC/y is an original work of music theater which takes gender in music as its central theme. It is the key output commissioned by the

57 Sainsbury, interview.

58 Sainsbury, interview.

59 Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (New York: iUniverse, 2005).

60 Westerkamp, "Linking Soundscape Composition and Acoustic Ecology," 52. Emphasis mine.

ARC under my current Discovery Early Career Researcher Award project which goes under the umbrella title, “Emergence.”⁶¹ The opera is currently in development with a diverse cast of singers to ensure a range of perspectives and practices are included in shaping it. Alana Valentine’s libretto will draw on anonymized testimonials in the *Women and Minority Genders in Music* report to include the perspectives of over 200 women and gender diverse people. It is currently being developed with mezzo-soprano Jessica Aszodi in the lead role, whom Blackwood described as a performer who has “deliberately chosen a path away from the standard repertoire opera to ... actively participate in the operatic subfield, which is testing the boundaries of what opera can be.”⁶² Other soloists include non-binary soprano Quin Thomson, self-described as “a composer ... multi-instrumentalist, improviser, live sound designer, musical director, and advocate through making”;⁶³ Sonya Holowell, a “vocalist, composer, writer and educator of Dharawal and Inuit descent [whose] work spans many contexts and forms, with improvisation as a primary mode towards emancipatory aims”;⁶⁴ and Nicole Smede, a multi-disciplinary artist of Warrimay/Birri-bay and colonial descent, who explains that “a reconnection to ancestry, language and culture ripples through her work in voice, song, sound and poetry.”⁶⁵ The chorus is made up of young female and gender diverse vocal performers from The House that Dan Built Ensemble, including several living with disability.⁶⁶ This casting was targeted towards creating an ensemble of diverse identities who were also skilled in the musical methods I want to explore in this work.

Stepping outside standard operatic constraints around practice and aesthetics is particularly relevant when working with young performers, First Nations performers, and performers of diverse cultural backgrounds and abilities. Together, we are developing techniques that explore the individual ecology of their voices and instruments. I am developing the score through

61 The “Emergence” project website can be accessed here: <https://emergenceopera.com>.

62 Blackwood, “(Re)Claim the Frame,” 169.

63 “About me,” QVocal – Quin Thomson’s official website, accessed June 27, 2024, <http://www.qvocal.com>.

64 “About,” Sonya Holowell’s official website, accessed June 8, 2024, <https://www.sonya-holowell.com/about>.

65 “About,” Nicole Smede’s official website, accessed June 8, 2024, <https://nicolesmede.com/about>.

66 See “About the House,” The House that Dan Built’s official website, accessed June 8, 2024, <https://www.thehousethatdanbuilt.com>.

guided improvisations on music and text and will incorporate improvisation within the final work. These techniques and the extensive development period have the benefit of giving performers from minority identities agency in presenting the material and together contributing—at least in this work—to a disruption of opera’s hegemonic structures.

Through development workshops in 2023, guided improvisations allowed me to start by listening to my company, to the sounds they make and the ideas they share as individuals and as a collective. I found the dual act of “giving space and taking responsibility at the same time”⁶⁷ was the most natural urge, yet walking this tightrope was also the greatest challenge. It *became the work*; it was constant; it required vigilance and commitment, self-regulation. It was about creating a culture, paying attention to people, and also paying attention to the work. It felt profoundly feminist to me in that it was about care; listening; agility; flexibility; availability. All the things I have practiced in my traditionally feminine roles as a mother and a teacher. Yet it was also about nuanced, engaged, high-level arts practice. It took all of me. I suspect that’s what it will take from all those who are intent on breaking the stranglehold of centuries-old hierarchies.

Increasingly through my works I wish to invite audiences to listen differently. As expressed by Australian music theater director Adena Jacobs, I am interested in seeing whether it is possible to “rewire ourselves to experience things that are different to each one of us.”⁶⁸ Through these methods and the aesthetics that result, I hope that we might reconsider opera’s inherent “hierarchies of language and voice”⁶⁹ and be open to where we might go together. Integrating sounds a traditional opera audience might not expect to hear within an operatic work also seems an important expression of what it can feel like to be situated on the margins, to be misheard, or not to be heard at all, and of some of the new ways to practice, produce, and listen that the marginalized cultivate by necessity.

Du Yun says that opening the parameters that constrain standard operatic practice through improvisation is “critically important”⁷⁰ as it enables singers who don’t come from western operatic traditions to participate in the artform. She demonstrates this in *Sweet Land* (2020), her opera with

67 Palme, quoted in Juliet Fraser, “In the Thick of It. Further Reflections on the Mess and the Magic of Collaborative Partnerships,” in Lehmann and Palme, *Sounding Fragilities*, 255.

68 Jacobs, quoted in Blackwood, “(Re)Claim the Frame,” 171.

69 Susan Bickford, *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict, and Citizenship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 129.

70 Du, interview.

Native American composer, Raven Chacon, in which singers from different cultures and vocal traditions contribute to telling a story of colonization.

Two Australian opera makers who practice the intentional inclusion of members of Indigenous communities in the making and performance processes of their own operatic works, are Sainsbury and Yorta-Yorta woman Deborah Cheetham Fraillon, whose project, *Short Black Opera*, aims to “to increase First Nations representation in the world of classical music by creating a clearly defined pathway for singers and instrumentalists; [and] to develop new audiences for live performance by presenting First Nations stories and culture.”⁷¹ Cheetham Fraillon, who is a trailblazer for new music theater in Australia, asserts that opera is simply “storytelling through music, drama, dance and singing,” and that Aboriginal people have been doing that “for thousands of years.”⁷²

On feminist listening

Women and queer communities have coined the term “feminist listening” to weaponize their marginalized status. Many practitioner-theorists couch acoustic ecology within a feminist musical framework due to its alignment with non-hierarchical approaches to the conception, creation, and reception of music/sound works.⁷³ Operatic practice that establishes more egalitarian relationships between creators, performers, and audiences through disruption of traditional approaches to movement and staging “has the potential to change the power relations within and beyond the creative space, reclaim artistic agency and give voice to all those in the room.”⁷⁴ It is interesting that such works also frequently interrogate themes related to feminisms and ecologies.

For example, US composer Gelsey Bell’s *morning [morning/mourning]* (2023) was premiered at Prototype Festival 2023, and is a music theater work

71 “About,” *Short Black Opera*, official website, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://short-blackopera.org.au/content>.

72 Cheetham Fraillon, quoted in Blackwood, “(Re)Claim the Frame,” 180.

73 See, for instance, Hildegard Westerkamp, “Listening to the Listening,” transcription of the talk presented at the panel *Sounding Out Genders: Women Sound Artists Talk about Gender and Technology*, International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA), Montreal, 1995, https://hildegardwesterkamp.ca/writings/writings-by/?post_id=21&title=listening-to-the-listening; Oliveros, *Deep listening*; Lehmann and Palme, *Sounding Fragilities*.

74 Blackwood, “(Re)Claim the Frame,” 169.

about life on Earth after humans have disappeared; the five singers were also responsible for performing the instrumental score, often with sound sources that did not conform to standard orchestral instrumentation. Bell explained this as an intentional decision she took in order to shake off the “baggage” of those instruments and the weight of the classical western canon with which they are associated.⁷⁵ This resulted in an interesting and playful approach to sound generation that was seamlessly integrated into the choreography, with instruments multi-tasking as visual design elements, props for storytelling, and sound sources.

Another work that brings a creative approach to placement of bodies within an operatic context is *Sun & Sea* (2017) by composer Lina Lapelytė, writer Vaiva Grainytė, and director Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, which has been staged in more than 35 different locations since it was premiered in the creators’ native Lithuania. Like *manin* [morning/mourning], it presents texts on an ecological theme, presenting different characters’ viewpoints on “an exhausted Earth.”⁷⁶ Soloists deliver arias while reclining on beach towels or deck chairs, with the chorus playing and picnicking even as they sing. Further consideration is given in this work to the placement of the audience, who, at each location, are looking down from a gallery onto the performers below them on the sand, and who are free to enter, leave, and move around the space at will.

A third work exploring ecological themes is Japanese composer Kai Kobayashi’s *Shall I Build a Dam?* (2024), which she created with non-binary director Simone Aughterlony. Aughterlony devises “queer-spirited choreographic works ... that foster both familiar and unknown quantities.”⁷⁷ Centering water as subject, object, and a constant sound within the score, performers appeared in wet suits and waterproof costumes; used spray guns as props; ice blocks were used as stools, placed inside a grand piano as preparations, and added to gin and tonics offered to the audience; water trickled through overhead plastic tubes integrated within the set. Throughout this work, human and instrument bodies were as fluid and malleable as the watery element itself, moving among the audience, sitting, standing, balancing, lying down, running, crawling, intertwining. Some say that feminist

⁷⁵ Gelsey Bell, interview with the author, January 12, 2023.

⁷⁶ Lucia Pietroiusti, *Sun & Sea*, official website, accessed June 8, 2024, <https://www.su-nandsea.lt/en>.

⁷⁷ “Simone Aughterlony,” Münchener Biennale 2024, official website, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://2024.muenchener-biennale.de/en/artist/simone-aughterlony/>.

listening is about embodiment;⁷⁸ perhaps the different approach to the use of bodies in the works led by women and gender queer practitioners cited above is a reflection of this idea.

There is no single way to define feminist listening, but I believe it relates to models of listening aligned with Nancy Bereano's assessment that "it is the work of feminism to make connections, to heal unnecessary divisions"⁷⁹—often imposed by hierarchical (and patriarchal) power structures. Patriarchal listening, asserts Jennifer Stoever, is "socially constructed ... and normalizes the aural tastes and standards of white elite masculinity as the singular way to interpret sonic information."⁸⁰ Christina Fischer-Lessiak writes that "feminist listening can infiltrate compositional practices and impact creative choices" and asserts that "the feminist ear and feminist listening [are] active and challenge an imagined normative or patriarchal listening."⁸¹ In other words, feminist listening critically examines the canonic listening model that shuts so many people out.

In both my roles as a creator of new music and as a researcher on gender in music, I am interested in asking performers and audiences to take responsibility for listening "as an active and creative process";⁸² due to my mix of identities I am certainly interested also in challenging so-called "normative listening" and making music that functions as a positive influence on the ways a more diverse range of people might experience the world and themselves.⁸³

Hildegard Westerkamp suggests that "there might be differences between how the feminine in us processes what we hear and how the masculine in us does it":⁸⁴ a framing that leaves the question of a person's gender open. I think it is important to make this distinction; saying that all women practice feminist listening or unconsciously listen in the same way is as much of an overreach as asserting that a "women's music" exists. Indeed, through our report, many women spoke of an unconscious bias that

78 See, for example, Pia Maria Palme, "The Noise of Mind: A Feminist Practice in Composition" (PhD diss., University of Huddersfield, 2017), 27.

79 Nancy K. Bereano, "Introduction," in Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 9.

80 Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 13.

81 Christina Fischer-Lessiak, "How Feminism Matters. An Exploration of Listening," in Lehmann and Palme, *Sounding Fragilities*, 97 and 94.

82 Bickford, *The Dissonance of Democracy*, 129.

83 Fischer-Lessiak, "How Feminism Matters," 97.

84 Westerkamp, "Listening to the Listening."

conflates female gender and musical content, giving rise to the perception of what one respondent aptly referred to as “gender [as] a genre.”⁸⁵ Clearly, these are unhelpful assumptions and to be avoided. I do feel however, that “listening inward and outward in the same way and involving one’s own mind in the process” is feminist,⁸⁶ and speaks to a capacity honed by living within societal structures that place us in caring roles, on the receiving end of power, and within tightly knit collectives of solidarity that protect and sustain us. Women and gender queer folk are expert listeners because we have had to be.

Conclusion

So, by tying together some of these threads, perhaps we can begin to form a response to Fraser’s final question: “What do we want our legacy to be?”⁸⁷

While acknowledging the legacy I am privileged to inherit, and the shoulders on which I stand, I also feel it is time to move the conversation on. Rather than “feminist listening,” “inclusive listening” de-emphasizes gendered ownership over new ways to listen. This term also chimes more consonantly with the notion of intersectionality; as Oliveros states, “inclusive listening is impartial, open and receiving and employs global attention.”⁸⁸ And if there is any edict at all guiding my approach as a composer now, it might be to listen inclusively, which, as Palme expresses, “means also to listen closely to silences, background noises, the concealed, and unsaid.”⁸⁹

I believe by using methods such as: improvisation; group decision making; iterative processes that embrace feedback and revision, that draw on theories of acoustic ecology and feminist listening, and that are informed by First Nations knowledges; practitioners might disrupt the operatic canon and the *auteur* model that have proven to be so toxic and exclusionary in the past. Through these methods we can perhaps all be part of a new legacy that promotes “a multi-voiced literacy around music theatre.”⁹⁰

85 Wilcox and Shannon, *Women and Minority Genders in Music*, 51.

86 Palme, quoted in Fischer-Lessiak, “How Feminism Matters,” 92.

87 Fraser, “Deconstructing the Diva.”

88 Oliveros, *Deep Listening*, 15.

89 Palme, quoted in Fischer-Lessiak, “How Feminism Matters,” 92.

90 Pia Palme, “An Anthology as Polyphony. An Introduction,” in Lehmann and Palme, *Sounding Fragilities*, 11.

If “an ecological approach to music creation focuses on the relationships between composers, performers and listeners as a part of a system that includes external factors such as genre, historical reception, sonic context and performance scenario,”⁹¹ then it is no longer enough to program the same composers and their well-worn, albeit well-loved canonic works. Nor to entrust all-male creative teams with stories that belong to female and gender diverse characters and creators. These patterns are flagrant in mainstream opera, but, as also evidenced here, are now being disrupted by innovative contemporary opera and music theater productions found on smaller stages and within experimental spaces.

An ecological approach to music creation and an inclusive approach to listening offer evolutionary frameworks from which we might all, regardless of our individual identity, contribute to the dismantling of old systems that alienate so many. If we are to evolve the art form at the pace and depth now needed, it is important to be reflective in our listening choices as opera consumers as much as in our roles as practitioners, and to get behind work that, both through its content and its doing, creates “a public realm where a plurality of voices, faces, and languages can be heard and seen and spoken.”⁹² To listen within and without, and to let new voices emerge.

91 Michael Gurevich and Jeffrey Treviño, “Expression and Its Discontents: Toward an Ecology of Musical Creation,” in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on New Interfaces for Musical Expression*, ed. Langdon Crawford (New York: NIME, 2007), 108.

92 Bickford, *The Dissonance of Democracy*, 129.

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Abstract

What does it mean to be part of a music industry that, for centuries, has ignored your perspective, undermined your talent and confidence, objectified your body, and systematically erased composers like you from the canon? An acclaimed Australian composer here shares aspects of her current research project on contemporary opera, funded through the Australian Research Council. Incorporating research undertaken with leading practitioners of contemporary opera and data from the author's recent report, *Women and Minority Genders in Music* (Wilcox and Shannon 2023), this paper interweaves first-source interview data, auto-ethnographic reflection, qualitative and quantitative analysis, and a selective overview of contemporary global practice to examine the structural inequity at opera's core, and new disruptive practice that challenges the status quo. The author ties together theoretical discourse on intersectional feminism (Lorde 1984), feminist listening (Palme 2022), and acoustic ecology (Westerkamp 2002) to outline a compositional approach that engages experimentally with sound through guided improvisations on music and text, extended techniques, explorations of embodiment, "deep listening" (Oliveros 2005), and consultative conceptual development that respects and welcomes difference. Extending this to a broader context, she suggests frameworks for more inclusive practice and audience engagement in opera.

Dr. Felicity Wilcox is an award-winning Australian composer described as "one of Australia's most versatile and prolific composers" (*Limelight* 2023) and "an important voice in contemporary classical music" (*Daily Telegraph* 2021). Her concert music has been programmed widely in Australia, USA, UK, France, Germany, South Korea, and Finland. She was composer and Assistant Music Director for the 2000 Paralympic Games in Sydney and has composed soundtracks for over 60 screen productions, distributed around the world. Felicity holds a Doctorate in Composition from Sydney Conservatorium of Music and is a Senior Lecturer in Music and Sound Design at the University of Technology Sydney. She is the recipient of a Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (2023–26) from the Australian Research Council, awarded to compose a new contemporary opera, *EMERGENC/y*. She publishes regularly on gender in music, co-authoring the *Women and Minority Genders in Music* report (2023) with Dr. Barrie Shannon, and editing the first anthology on the music of female screen composers, *Women's Music for the Screen: Diverse Narratives in Sound* (2022). She is an advocate for gender diversity in music, active at the international level since 2016.