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Cover: Scene from a performance of *Sakurahime Azuma no Bunsho* by Kinoshita Kabuki.
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Contents

Performances

More 1980s than the 1980s:

Hauntological and Hyperreal Meanings of Synthwave Soundtracks

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A while ago, my interest in postmodern music revivals and adaptations bloomed as a relatively early listener of vaporwave and synthwave music, and I knew my understanding of such phenomena would benefit from an in-depth study of these two sibling genres born on the Internet and sharing a peculiar fascination with powerful visual aesthetics and a sort of obsession for the past. I was right. During my research, I noticed a recent spike in the academic study of vaporwave,[1] while synthwave looked like a relatively understudied subject, despite its favor in the popular press since its inception.[2] I could only find a handful of reliable, properly researched sources, especially those addressing synthwave's retrofuturist qualities; and

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1 Vaporwave will only be mentioned sparsely in this paper; further readings on the subject, which can help in framing synthwave into wider context, are: Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre," *Music and Letters* 98, no. 4 (2017): 601–47; Ross Cole, "Vaporwave Aesthetics: Internet Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse," *ASAP/Journal* 5, no. 2 (2020): 297–326; Laura Glitsos, "Vaporwave, or Music Optimised for Abandoned Malls," *Popular Music* 37, no. 1 (2018): 100–118; Padraic Killeen, "Burned Out Myths and Vapour Trails: Vaporwave's Affective Potentials," *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 626–38; Raphaël Nowak and Andrew Whelan, "'Vaporwave Is (Not) a Critique of Capitalism': Genre Work in An Online Music Scene," *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 451–62; Sharon Schembri and Jac Tichbon, "Digital Consumers as Cultural Curators: The Irony of Vaporwave," *Arts and the Market* 7, no. 2 (2017): 191–212.

2 Several of the richest articles located on the internet will be referenced throughout the article. In addition, I suggest reading Christian Caliandro, "Dreamwave, Synthwave, New Retro Wave. Appunti sulla nostalgia sintetica," *Artribune*, March 8, 2015, https://www.artribune.com/arti-performative/musica/2015/03/dreamwave-synthwave-new-retro-wave-appunti-sulla-nostalgia-sintetica/; Jon Hunt, "We Will Rock You: Welcome to the Future. This Is Synthwave," *l'étoile*, April 9, 2014 (site discontinued, available through Internet Archive at https://web.archive.org/web/20160401172404/http://www.letoilemagazine.com/2014/04/09/we-will-rock-you-welcome-to-the-future-this-is-synthwave/).

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yet I had the feeling that this was just one side of the story. For instance, the use of synthwave music in cinema, and more generally its numerous connections and references to the cinematic realm, had not yet been given the attention it deserved. Back then, I had already watched several movies and tv series featuring synthwave as their main soundtrack; as a film music enthusiast, the relationship between synthwave and cinema struck me from the very beginning of my exploration and looked very much like one the most typical features of synthwave (as opposed to vaporwave). So, I decided to get in touch with one of the most relevant internet community populated by synthwave fans—i.e., the "Synthwave" Facebook group—asking for a list of movies featuring what they would term "synthwave soundtracks."[3] Thus, I obtained hours and hours of promising material for a series of truly instructive and entertaining screening sessions, potentially leading me to the discovery of specific patterns and recurring significations in the use of synthwave music. Soon, the functions and connotations of synthwave soundtracks began to look like a quite intricate constellation—much more ramified than I expected—which is traditionally reduced to just 1980s-inspired electronic soundtracks for sci-fi movies, as the aesthetics surrounding much synthwave music suggests.

This paper attempts at redefining synthwave's archetypical functions and connotations by focusing on its cinematic uses. To do so, I identify first- and second-order associations between cinema and synthwave music, analyzing four categories (association with sci-fi cinema, association with B-movies, age-synecdoche, and aesthetic mediation). While first-order associations can be made with respect to 1980s cinema, pointing directly to certain themes and peculiarities of the films in which such music is featured, second-order associations refer to the artifacts which established those connections in the first place, reflecting on them from a nostalgic and/or cosmetic perspective, and using them as a means to referencing specific (perceived) traits and characteristics of the 1980s and its (geek) culture. Both these orders of associations are involved in a dialectical process where cinema and music are always mutually implied (even in the case of non-cinematic synthwave music). In my analysis, I rely on various notions traditionally associated with postmodernism (such as "hauntology," "retrofuturism," and "hyperreality") which will get a closer definition later in the paper. The outcome of my research, then, includes 1) a map of first- and second-order associations, and their possible meanings, in the cinematic

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3 Most of those movies will be referenced throughout the paper.

realm; 2) a relativization of the mainstream connection between synthwave and sci-fi iconography and themes, a connection which I believe to be insufficient for a full understanding of the phenomenon's wide spectrum of connotations and contemporary uses, which employ a wider palette of references to B-movies and geek culture from the 1980s.

Two Caveats

Before delving into a proper analysis of the phenomenon, a couple of important premises:

1) according to most historiographical accounts,[4] synthwave—as a sort of postmodern,[5] nostalgic, and revivalist subgenre of electronic popular music, heavily inspired by certain kinds of music from the 1980s such as synthpop, post-punk (especially darkwave's most electronic-oriented declinations),[6] and early video game music—has existed since the mid-2000s.[7] Because of this, I refer to the genre's earlier musical models from the 1980s as "proto-synthwave." In this category, I include different kinds of music (including those listed above) which are mostly independent from modern synthwave, but which were first associated with cinema and served as main inspiration for the present-day genre, both musically and in its cinematic connection.

2) under the label "synthwave" I include a range of diverse yet partially overlapping notions such as "outrun," "retrowave," and "futuresynth" as well as subgenres such as "slasherwave," "darksynth," "dreamwave," or

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4 Which, at present, are mostly compiled by fans and journalists, as mentioned above.

5 Synthwave's relationship with postmodernism—already partially explored in Martynas Kraujalis, "Synthwave Muzikos Stilius: Keistumas Ir Hiperrealybě" (master's thesis, Lietuvos muzikos ir teatro akademija, 2020)—and particularly with the notion of "hauntology," will be discussed later.

6 Júlia Dantas de Miranda, "Relações entre a imagem e a música eletrônica: a visualidade do gênero synthwave" (Licenciatura thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, 2018), 19.

7 Julia Neuman, "The Nostalgic Allure of 'Synthwave,'" *Observer*, July 30, 2015, https://observer.com/2015/07/the-nostalgic-allure-of-synthwave/; Andrei Sora, "Carpenter Brut and the Instrumental Synthwave Persona," in *On Popular Music and Its Unruly Entanglements*, ed. Nick Braae and Kai Arne Hansen (Cham: Springer International Publishing, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 143. Other than these two examples, virtually every account agrees with the "official" timeline.

"chillwave."[8] These forms of synthwave music are connected with artists like Carpenter Brut, College, Survive, Mega Drive, Dance with the Dead, Gunship, Com Truise, GosT, and Scandroid—all emphasizing, with their music, different aspects of the genre's affordances. For instance, Perturbator's music is often darker (thus representing the quintessential example of the darksynth subgenre), while Carpenter Brut's is more aggressive and Gunship's more accessible and catchier. Some of these artists also try to deviate more substantially from the mainstream: GosT's music relies on black metal influences and Com Truise uses synthwave sounds to create atmospheres that are often sophisticated, ethereal, introspective, and quite unusual for the genre. Therefore, even though I understand that grouping all these different kinds of music under a single label might constitute a gross simplification, I do believe that over analyzing might impact negatively on general readability here. After all, all taxonomies tend to be more about the mood of the music than its style, which in this case does not vary significantly from subgenre to subgenre. Indeed, what makes this genre so easily recognizable is that its style flags are featured in almost every incarnation of synthwave. According to Philip Tagg, a "style flag" is a sign type that "uses particular sounds to identify a particular musical style and often, by connotative extension, the cultural genre to which that musical style belongs."[9] Such stylistic features help establish a home style in the track ("style indicators"), or they can refer to a foreign style from a track that employs a different style ("genre synecdoche"). In the case of synthwave, we can identify as style flags the arpeggiated "fat line bass" sound from keyboards such as the Korg PolySix (1981) synthesizer and, more generally speaking, the use of vintage synthesizers such as Yamaha DX7 (1983), Roland Jupiter 8 (1981), Juno-60 (1982), Juno-106 (1984), and Oberheim OB-X (1979), plus the drum machines Linn LM-1 (1980) and Roland TR-808 (1980).[10] Production tech-

8 Miranda, "Relações," 13–17, provides a systematization in which synthwave is seen as an evolution of the first "outrun" revival of 1980s electronica, explicitly drawing inspiration from cinematic sources. In websites devoted to the genre, such as *Iron Skullet* (site discontinued, available through Internet Archive at https://web.archive.org/web/20210421211537/https://ironskullet.com/), one can find a similar distinction where outrun music mixes elements from 1980s pop culture with house music and other kinds of contemporary electronic music.

9 Philip Tagg, *Music's Meanings: A Modern Musicology for Non-Musos* (New York: The Mass Media Music Scholars' Press, 2012), 522.

10 See Jessica Blaise Ward, "Style and Digital Music Genres: Combining Music Style Parameters with the 'Paramusical'" (BFE-RMA Research Students' Conference 2020, The Open University, Milton Keynes, 2020); Arttu Kataja, "Elektroninen tanssimusiikki. Synthwave -singlen tuotanto" (Thesis, Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulu, 2017), 16.

niques are also recognizable,[11] and play a very important role in the definition of "retro" sound,[12] mixing together elements immediately perceived as 1980s trademarks (e.g., gated reverb snare) and those derived from present-day EDM, which tend to make the sound "thicker." The subgenres' labels also point to the relationship with specific film genres such as horror (e.g. *slasher*wave) and sci-fi (e.g. *future*synth), which is something that leads me to the next point.

Proto-Synthwave and First-Order Associations

Since many of these taxonomies highlight the connection of synthwave with film genres like science fiction and horror/slasher movies, now is a good time to start investigating proto-synthwave music and first-order associations, which have indeed a lot to do with sci-fi and B-movies (especially the horror kind). Science fiction is perhaps the genre most frequently associated with synthwave.

A few thoughts about the popularity of this association. First, even though the connection between sci-fi films and electronic music was no longer new in the 1980s,[13] it was around this time that synthesizers became

11 This is especially true when the presence of technological mediation is made apparent, if not overemphasized, as it happens in much "retro" music employing what Brøvig-Hanssen calls "opaque mediation" (as opposed to the "transparent mediation" sought by most popular music). See Ragnhild Brøvig-Hanssen, "Listening to or Through Technology: Opaque and Transparent Mediation," in *Critical Approaches to the Production of Music and Sound*, eds. Samantha Bennett and Eliot Bates (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 195–210.

12 See Silvia Segura García, "Nostalgia ON: Sounds Evoking the Zeitgeist of the Eighties," *Journal of Sound, Silence, Image and Technology* 2 (2019): 24–43. More specifically on this topic, Segura García mentions Eirik Askerøi's categorization of three kinds of "sonic markers of time," retromaniacally referencing to past ages of popular music history: vocal peculiarities, (e.g. singing styles, like crooning), instrumental sound and style, and, most importantly, technological aspects of production. Eirik Askerøi, "Reading Pop Production: Sonic Markers and Musical Identity," (PhD diss., Universitetet i Agder, 2013), 2.

13 See Maurizio Corbella, "Suono elettroacustico e generi cinematografici: da cliché a elemento strutturale," in *Suono/immagine/genere*, eds. Ilario Meandri and Andrea Valle (Torino: Kaplan, 2011), 29–48. As a matter of fact, the connection between electronic sounds and the (science-fictional) "other" can be traced back to the origins of both sound synthesis and cinema and is not limited to the common link with technology—see Maurizio Corbella and Anna Katharina Windisch, "Sound Synthesis, Representation and Narrative Cinema in the Transition to Sound (1926–1935)," *Cinémas* 24, no. 1 (2013): 59–81.

"the sound of the future,"[14] being the finest piece of music technology available, capable of emulating virtually every acoustic instrument, but also of creating an entirely new world made by previously unheard sounds.[15]

Second, the biggest difference from the past was that the new films featured more popular electronic music rather than avant-garde electroacoustic works (e.g., Bebe and Louis Barron's celebrated soundtrack for *Forbidden Planet*).[16] Indeed, already the 1970s saw the rise of the first stars of electronic popular music such as Kraftwerk, Tangerine Dream, Brian Eno, and Jean-Michel Jarre, all of whom were making music appealing to a wider audience, thus facilitating the spread of that kind of music within the world of cinematic soundtracks as well. Electronic soundtracks became more palatable for general audiences (not least due to cross-promotion between films and songs), while also highlighting the advantage (from a producer perspective) of being less budget-demanding than most kinds of film music.

Third, several sci-fi movies featuring proto-synthwave soundtracks had a strong impact on popular culture. Particularly, two films made the association with sci-fi cinema even stronger, thanks to their success: Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), scored by Vangelis and featuring an unprecedented work of synthesized orchestration,[17] and *Giorgio Moroder Presents*

14 This expression comes from Giorgio Moroder's own words featured in the intro to Daft Punk's song "Giorgio by Moroder." Anecdotes aside, it is easy to see why the sound of the synthesizer could be perceived as something quintessentially new, artificial, mechanical, technological, and futuristic.

15 See James Wierzbicki, "Weird Vibrations: How the Theremin Gave Musical Voice to Hollywood's Extraterrestrial 'Others,'" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30, no. 3 (2002): 125–35, for an account of the first associations between electronic music (and especially the theremin) and sci-fi. Lisa M. Schmidt, "A Popular Avant-Garde: The Paradoxical Tradition of Electronic and Atonal Sounds in Sci-Fi Music Scoring," in *Sounds of the Future: Essays on Music in Science Fiction Film*, ed. Mathew J. Bartkowiak (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2010), 22–41, goes in the same direction when stating that "no matter how pleasing it may be to the ear, the electronic may always signify both itself and an anxiety about authenticity, and might have always been pre-destined to be alien" (36).

16 See Timothy D. Taylor, *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 93–94; Andrew May, *The Science of Sci-fi Music* (Cham: Springer, 2020), 12–14. Schmidt, "A Popular Avant-Garde" further examines the role of experimental sci-fi music as opposed to what followed. On *Forbidden Planet*, see Rebecca Leydon, "*Forbidden Planet*: Effects and Affects in the Electro Avant-garde," in *Off the Planet: Music, Sound and Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Philip Hayward (London: John Libbey, 2004), 61–76.

17 See Michael Hannan and Melissa Carey, "Ambient Soundscapes in *Blade Runner*," in Hayward, *Off the Planet*, 149–64. In 1982, Vangelis was also the first composer awarded with an Oscar for a completely synthesized soundtrack (*Chariots of Fire*).

Metropolis (1984), a version of Fritz Lang's iconic film (1927) edited and restored by the Italian music producer who also wrote a new soundtrack, with an electronic style fitting the "mechanic imagery" at the film's core.[18] Another important movie from that time is *Tron* (1982), with music by Wendy Carlos, whose visual style looks closer to what would become typical synthwave aesthetics. However, musically speaking, *Tron*'s soundtrack is quite different from the typical present-day synthwave sound, as it features a lot of Carlos' typical "neoclassical" synth-playing style and orchestral arrangements.[19]

While these strong associations can help understand why synthwave music and sci-fi imagery are often paired, there is another first-order association still in need of investigation—i.e., Tangerine Dream's soundtracks. True, the German electronic band was prolific in relation to both proto-synthwave music and sci-fi realm.[20] Yet, while apparently fitting within the first kind of first-order associations, Tangerine Dream's soundtracks work better as an example of the second kind, since their relationship with sci-fi cinema should be put in proportion (see Table 1). The widespread tendency to overestimate Tangerine Dream's musical contribution to sci-fi cinema is likely fostered by the fact that they were pioneers of the *kosmische Musik* movement. Not only the name of the movement, but also track titles (e.g., "Alpha Centauri," "Sunrise in the Third System," "Birth of Liquid Plejades") and album artworks emphasized Tangerine Dream's fascination for outer space from the very beginning of their career. This interest has been interpreted as a way of distancing—using a typically German musical means, *elektronische Musik*, only in a more popular way—from 1960s German popular music, which had not changed much since WWII.[21] Synthesizers became the voice of such urgency, and so Tangerine Dream's music became one with cosmic sceneries well before it ended up

18 See Jeff Smith, "Bringing a Little Munich Disco to Babelsberg: Giorgio Moroder's Score for *Metropolis*," in *Today's Sounds for Yesterday's Films: Making Music for Silent Cinema*, ed. K. J. Donnelly and Ann-Kristin Wallengren (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 107–21.

19 This is similar to another candidate for the position of influential synthwave movie from the same years: *The Terminator* (1984).

20 Molly Lambert, "*Stranger Things* and How Tangerine Dream Soundtracked The '80s," *MTV News*, August 4, 2016, http://www.mtv.com/news/2914736/molly-lambert-on-the-german-synthrock-bands-tv-moment/, provides an overview of the soundtrack production by Tangerine Dream and of their relevance in the definition of contemporary synthwave clichés.

21 Alexander C. Harden, "Kosmische Musik and Its Techno-Social Context," *IASPM@ Journal* 6, no. 2 (2016): 154–73; more on the genre in Alexander Simmeth, *Krautrock transnational: Die Neuerfindung der Popmusik in der BRD, 1968–1978* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016).

soundtracking a variety of 1980s movies. The most celebrated soundtracks by Tangerine Dream—e.g., those for William Friedkin's *Sorcerer* (1977) or Michael Mann's *Thief* (1981)—, but also their albums that had nothing to do with cinema such as *Exit* (1981) and *Hyperborea* (1984), sound exquisitely synthwave; yet, ironically, most of the 1980s movies they recorded for do not fall into the category of sci-fi at all (see Table 1)—with notable exceptions to be found in *Wavelength* (1983) and *Firestarter* (1984) and in single futuristic, dystopic, and fantastic elements that sometimes infiltrate other non-sci-fi films.

Title	Year	Director	Genre
Strange Behavior	1981	Michael Laughlin	Horror
Thief	1981	Michael Mann	Neo-noir
The Soldier	1982	James Glickenhaus	Action
Brandmale	1983	George Moorse	Drama
The Keep	1983	Michael Mann	Horror
Risky Business	1983	Paul Brickman	Comedy
Spasms	1983	William Fruet	Horror
Wavelength	1983	Mike Gray	Sci-fi
Firestarter	1984	Mark L. Lester	Sci-fi
Flashpoint	1984	William Tannen	Thriller
Heartbreakers	1984	Bobby Roth	Drama
Red Heat	1985	Robert Collector	Exploitation
Vision Quest	1985	Harold Becker	Drama
Zoning	1986	Ulrich Krenkler	Thriller
City of Shadows	1987	David Mitchell	Thriller
Near Dark	1987	Kathryn Bigelow	Horror
Shy People	1987	Andrei Konchalovsky	Drama
Three O'Clock High	1987	Phil Joanou	Comedy
Dead Solid Perfect	1988	Bobby Roth	Drama
Miracle Mile	1988	Steve De Jarnatt	Thriller
Red Nights	1988	Izhak Hanooka	Drama
Catch Me If You Can	1989	Stephen Sommers	Drama

Table 1 – 1980s movies featuring Tangerine Dream soundtracks.

The same can be said of John Carpenter, who wrote the soundtrack for most of his own films, only a few of which can be defined as purely science fictional, although many of them involve fantasy or supernatural elements (e.g., monsters, imaginary dimensions, paranormal phenomena). His most iconic work is probably the soundtrack for *Escape from New York* (1981), and his only other soundtrack for a 1980s sci-fi film he directed is the one for *They Live* (1988), since *The Thing* (1982) was officially scored by Ennio Morricone.[22]

Thus, two of the most influential artists for contemporary synthwave—Tangerine Dream and John Carpenter—originally had much more to do with B-movies and geek culture than with sci-fi cinema. These examples highlight the insufficiency of first-order associations with sci-fi in encompassing the whole spectrum of associations between cinema and proto-synthwave music. Therefore, let me introduce a new first-order association: that between proto-synthwave and B-movies. Indeed, proto-synthwave music often appeared not only in sci-fi films but also in horror and action movies, all typically belonging to the category of B-movies. There is often a lowbrow, sometimes even "cheap" (if not altogether kitsch) connotation in a lot of proto-synthwave music, just as lowbrow are many B-movies featuring such music. A perfect match: inexpensive music for low-budget cinema; popular, commercial, easy-listening, and "easy-watching" products for geeks and nerds. An association so powerful that its consequences are noticeable in present-day second-order associations as well.

Hauntology, Retrofuturism, Hyperreality, and the Rise of (Post-)Modern Synthwave

Fast-forward to some thirty years later. The cultural setting has changed quite a bit and we are in the postmodern era. Modern synthwave, which emerged around the mid-2000s, starts to gain popularity over the early

22 Only one of Morricone's compositions was used in the final version of the film, and Carpenter himself added some basic electronic background music to a few scenes. On the process of creating *The Thing*'s soundtrack, see Chris Evangelista, "John Carpenter's *Anthology: Movie Themes 1974–1998* Resurrects the Horror Master's Classic Music," */Film*, October 19, 2017, https://www.slashfilm.com/john-carpenters-anthology-movie-themes-1974-1998-resurrects-the-horror-masters-classic-music/.

2010s.[23] 2011 looks like a truly significant year:[24] it is the year in which Nicolas Winding Refn's film *Drive*—featuring Kavinsky's track "Nightcall," arguably synthwave's first "hit song"—is released. The following year, the Swedish video game *Hotline Miami* (2012) featured several synthwave artists as part of its soundtrack (e.g., M.O.O.N. and Perturbator), thus "greatly contribut[ing] to the expansion of synthwave."[25] Along with the music, the game's visual style made more and more frequent apparitions on the internet—fancy cars, retro commercial titles (*Out Run*, *Street Fighter*), exposed polygons,[26] purple-dominated dark visual atmospheres (including primary colors blue and red), and a general glossy graphic style stemming from 1980s film posters (e.g., *Blade Runner* and *RoboCop*).[27] Synthwave typographic layouts became quite standardized as well: "thick, 3D styled, and textured in a metallic way, chromed with mountain or desert reflections, and sometimes a few luminous halos bring elements of brilliance to the top of some letters."[28]

23 According to Segura García, "Nostalgia ON," 26, the second decade of our century corresponds to a typical "retro twin" revival cycle (in this case, of the 1980s) as theorized by Simon Reynolds in his influential volume *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2011), 408–9.

24 Sora, "Carpenter Brut," 143.

25 Solaris, "Synthwave: Everything About This Genre Coming from the 2080s," *Synthspiria*, September 27, 2018, (site discontinued, available through Internet Archive at https://web.archive.org/web/20200616090317/https:/synthspiria.com/en/everything-about-synthwave/). In the same article, Solaris describes a situation in which the underground and back then still unnamed synthwave reality (elsewhere apparently called "outrun," thus referencing the arcade video game of the same name, featuring proto-synthwave music) gained its final form and recognition after the release of *Drive*. According to Franco Fabbri, "How Genres are Born, Change, Die: Conventions, Communities and Diachronic Processes," in *Critical Musicological Reflections: Essays in Honour of Derek B. Scott*, ed. Stan Hawkins (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 179–91, the act of naming a genre is crucial in the recognition of its birth.

26 The importance of polygons or, more generally speaking, of the grid/matrix aesthetics, is emphasized by Kraujalis, "Synthwave Muzikos Stilius," 13, and put into relation with the world of computers, futurism, and hyperreality. See Nintendo's marketing campaign for the new Game Boy (Khepri Gaming, "Nintendo Game Boy TV Commercials, 1989–1993," YouTube video, July 23, 2020, https://youtu.be/3Pz2a4aUfLI) for a popular example.

27 Sora, "Carpenter Brut," 143–44.

28 Solaris, "Synthwave." Although, on the surface, the aesthetics can easily be juxtaposed, synthwave's sibling genre vaporwave is characterized by precise configurations which only partially overlap with those described here; see Ross Cole, "Vaporwave Aesthetics," for an introduction to this matter. For a more direct comparison, see Paul Ballam-Cross, "Reconstructed Nostalgia: Aesthetic Commonalities and Self-Soothing in Chillwave, Synthwave, and Vaporwave," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 1 (2021): 70–93.

Such aesthetic standards and the long history of associations with sci-fi contributed to the definition of synthwave as a genre constantly implying the idea of a future rooted in the past—an imaginary future which never came true.[29] Postmodern thought have abundantly addressed these kinds of phenomena, with Mark Fisher as one of the most influential scholars in the field. Fisher has written extensively on hauntology,[30] a concept that is closely related to synthwave and several other kinds of present-day music. The term designates a specific trait of the postmodern condition: its perpetual anachronism, namely its constantly being "haunted" by the specters of the past, by the "no longer" and the "not yet." We cannot let the past go, and we cannot get rid of old forms, now that the waning of history has become reality, and thus we are stuck in an ongoing act of nostalgic repetition. The past persists, from beyond the grave, in a state that is neither dead nor alive, spectral, and incapable of letting the present be. Fisher describes this condition by paraphrasing Derrida:

> Haunting, then, can be construed as a failed mourning. It is about refusing to give up the ghost or—and this can sometimes amount to the same thing—the refusal of the ghost to give up on us.[31]

He also draws explicitly from Fredric Jameson's thought:

> Fredric Jameson described one of the impasses of postmodern culture as the inability "to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience." The past keeps coming back because the present cannot be remembered.[32]

In this context, the sounds and colors that characterized B-movies from the 1980s (and especially the first-order association with sci-fi) acquire a

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29 See Kraujalis, "Synthwave Muzikos Stilius."

30 Mark Fisher, "What is Hauntology?," *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012), 16–24; Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014); Reynolds, *Retromania*, applies the concept to the musical realm more specifically. Fisher borrows the term from Jacques Derrida's writings, where it is used with a quite different meaning; see Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994).

31 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 22.

32 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 113–14. The original quotation is from Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 117.

bittersweet taste, a hauntological feeling contaminated with retrofuturism, as a kind of nostalgia for an image of the future that was implied in the popular culture of the past, where it now lies forsaken, thus blending the "not yet" and the "no longer" together.[33] In this "dyschronia" or "temporal disjuncture" (to use Fisher's words) we are fascinated by, if not obsessed with, past images of a possible future—which is now lost, overwritten by our present. This "retrofuturistic" feature of synthwave qualifies the latter genre as quintessentially hauntological, since the nostalgia involved in modern synthwave sends us back to an image of a lost past *and* a lost future at the same time; for the past is always lost, and the future imagined in the 1980s never existed outside the fiction soundtracked by the proto-synthwave classics.

But that image of a future from the past still exists in its own way. Being created by mediatized fantasies, mass-distributed products, and kept alive by the self-referential narrations of mass media, that fictional world has become "more real than real," as did the collective and idealized memory of the time in which these narrations were first conceived—i.e., the 1980s. To follow Jean Baudrillard's well-known notion of "hyperreality" we can say that, in the postmodern age, reality itself has undergone a process of mediatization, in which signs and images experienced through media (especially TV, at the time Baudrillard was writing) lose their status of representations, thus being actualized in a world of simulation that we experience as (hyper) real.[34] This kind of proxy-reality, constantly hyped and enacted by mass media narrations, ends up occupying the highest throne in the hierarchy of what we perceive as "real." It becomes our basic way of understanding the phenomena around us and obfuscates the boundaries between reality and imagination. Though phantasmatic and ethereal, the specters described above do not stop being active within our collective imagination, resulting in a blurred image in which present, past, and (imaginary, science-fictional) future overlap.

33 For an introduction to retrofuturism, see Elizabeth E. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 152–59.

34 See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994). This concept has already been successfully applied to synthwave's sibling-genre vaporwave in Gytis Dovydaitis, "Celebration of the Hyperreal Nostalgia: Categorization and Analysis of Visual Vaporwave Artefacts," *Art History & Criticism* 17 (2021), 113–34.

Second-Order Associations: 1. Synthwave as an Age-Synecdoche

Such pseudo-hallucinatory experiences thus result in second-order associations. The connection between modern synthwave and themes like technology, the future, and the metropolis are probably the most immediate one could think of. Yet, similarly to the past, today synthwave is not exclusively linked to science fiction. Ironically, it is easier to find sci-fi imagery in the artworks, lyrics, and concepts of non-cinematic synthwave music (Perturbator probably being the clearest example).[35] Science fiction (especially its dystopic and cyberpunk declinations) has permeated the realm of synthwave clichés, perhaps making "autonomous" synthwave music the most accurately "retrofuturistic" one. Nevertheless, as a hauntological genre, synthwave's ties to the past are even more noticeable when people involved in the revivalist process can relate to the geek culture of that period—being fascinated by science fiction, fantasy, "cult" movies, video games, and comic books, often taking that passion to a higher level by reproducing their favorite iconic symbols via graphic arts, action figures, roleplaying, and so on.[36] This does mean that only those who lived and experienced that era (coinciding more or less with the so-called Generation X) can fall under the fascination of products that try to revive the specific feeling of the 1980s popular culture. The cultural artifacts from that era are still around us, anyone can experience and love films from the 1980s, and anyone can be fascinated by the specific aesthetics from that age, or at least by those traits which the revival of that age decided to take into our times.[37]

35 Miranda, "Relações," features an entire gallery of original illustrations in "retrowave style" for each song off a Perturbator album, with explanations and descriptions that are useful to understand visual aesthetics of synthwave.

36 See Benjamin Woo, *Getting a Life: The Social Worlds of Geek Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018).

37 Marcello Sorce Keller, "Piccola filosofia del revival," in *La musica folk. Storia, protagonisti e documenti del revival in Italia*, ed. Goffredo Plastino (Milano: il Saggiatore, 2016), 59–106, emphasizes the role of revivals in the selection of specific traits of the original phenomenon following aesthetical, political, and ideological principles, thus partially betraying the very thing they are trying to revive. In the case of synthwave, it is quite clear that there is an idealization of the 1980s that gets mixed with clichés deriving from the representation by the media of that same age—again: a sort of hyperreal version of the 1980s. Synthwave also fits the notion of "vintage mood" elaborated by Daniela Panosetti, "*Vintage mood*. Esperienze mediali al passato," in *Passione vintage. Il gusto per il passato nei consumi, nei film e nelle serie televisive*, ed. Daniela Panosetti and Maria Pia Pozzato (Roma:

These are the main coordinates for the first second-order association between synthwave and contemporary cinema, in which synthwave soundtracks serve the purpose of bringing back to life not just a style of music, but rather the whole "1980s era" geek culture portrayed in the movie. Thus, music becomes a synecdoche for an age (form now on "age-synecdoche"): it works as a *part* to reference the *whole*—the part being music and the whole being 1980s geek culture. That era can be represented in both explicit and implicit ways, as we can witness from two examples. First, the Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016-ongoing) celebrates explicitly the 1980s geek culture and attempts at reviving the feeling of watching a B-movie from that era,[38] thanks to the extensive use of narrative *topoi* from that world and the inclusion of hit songs from the same decade.[39] The story is mainly narrated from the point of view of a group of kids and deals primarily with mysteries, missing people, monsters, supernatural powers, and conspiracies (plus the inevitable love stories). Composers Michael Stein and Kyle Dixon are both members of the synthwave band Survive, so their presence serves the series' hauntological aim of reviving the 1980s quite spontaneously.[40] This is made abundantly clear from the very beginning of each episode, as the opening theme is one of the most synthwave-ish tracks of the entire soundtrack (figure 1).[41]

Carocci, 2013), 13–59. Panosetti describes the fascination with the past as a comfort zone which people can occasionally visit for a limited period to reuse or even transform single elements to transcend time.

38 See Kayla McCarthy, "Remember Things: Consumerism, Nostalgia, and Geek Culture in *Stranger Things*," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 52, no. 3 (2019): 663–77.

39 See Jason Landrum, "Nostalgia, Fantasy, and Loss: *Stranger Things* and the Digital Gothic," *Intertexts* 21, no. 1–2 (2017): 136–58. The series' soundtrack is indeed rich with references to actual 1980s songs by artists like Kate Bush, Kiss, Metallica, Talking Heads, and The Police. As described by Segura García, "Nostalgia ON," 27, several scholars and critics (for example, Simon Frith and Simon Reynolds) have long emphasized the power popular songs have in shaping collective memory and evoking the vibe and atmospheres of their time.

40 See Sean O'Neal, "*Stranger Things*' Score is a Gateway into Synthwave," *The A.V. Club*, August 2, 2016, https://tv.avclub.com/stranger-things-score-is-a-gateway-into-synthwave-1798250478.

41 Music transcriptions by the author.

Fig. 1 – An excerpt from the *Stranger Things* opening theme

The leading voice here is an arpeggiated figure over a Cmaj7 chord played by an Oberheim Two Voice synthesizer throughout the whole track.[42] The quality of the sound is gradually modified by an ever-changing cutoff filter, while a deep pulsating kick drum sound (not included in Figure 1) keeps the track rhythmically engaging. The main melody is played by the bass sound (a Roland SH-2) moving around C and E, harmonically characterizing the theme. In fact, the main arpeggio can be interpreted either in the tonal area of C major (with an added major seventh) or E minor (with an added minor sixth) depending on the bass note being played, and so the track oscillates modally to fit the overall "moody" sound. The same duality can be found in the series, alternating playful and pleasantly nostalgic moments with creepy and dark sequences. With additional synth pads (probably played on a Prophet 5) and sweeping effects, the overall impression of being hit by a "wave" of synths becomes even stronger.

While *Stranger Things* includes sci-fi elements, its primary goal is to revive the peculiar "1980s feeling" as a whole[43]—or, at least, to wink at the geeky popular culture from that time. Supernatural powers and creatures are but one of the ingredients of an entirely nostalgic operation. This aesthetic project is pursued by giving the soundtrack a significant role in the process: synthwave works here as a synecdoche for an entire era, and espe-

42 For an introduction to every synthesizer used in the opening theme, see "*Stranger Things* Composers Break Down the Show's Music | Vanity Fair," YouTube video interview for *Vanity Fair*, uploaded June 15, 2018, https://youtu.be/lIrBQim8dzk.

43 See Landrum, "Nostalgia, Fantasy, and Loss."

cially for its geek culture and lowbrow connotations; both things that were already present in the first-order associations, which now get remediated by the music. Here, the reference is explicit, given the years in which the story is set, the music the characters listen to, the abundant citations, and the general celebration of geek culture and B-movies from the 1980s. Other relevant examples of this process can be found in less-known products, all set in the 1980s and featuring synthwave soundtracks: *Summer of 84* (2018), with music by the Canadian band Le Matos, an independent film in which the young protagonists try to solve mysteries; the quintessentially nostalgic episode "San Junipero" from the *Black Mirror* series (music by Clint Mansell); the series *Halt and Catch Fire* (2014–2017), possibly not so much interested in nostalgia as in featuring music by Tangerine Dream's Paul Haslinger.

On the other hand, an implicit reference to the 1980s can be found in *It Follows* (2014), a horror film directed by David Robert Mitchell and scored by Richard Vreeland—better known as Disasterpeace—with a style that hybridizes classic synthwave with idiomatic traits of horror film music. The film deals with the story of Jay, a teenage girl trying to get rid of an entity whose potentially mortal curse is transmitted via sexual intercourse from victim to victim. Set in an unspecified time, the film nevertheless hints at the past through the celebration of its main cinematic influences—i.e., classic horror-slasher movies from the late 1970s and '80s, especially those directed by John Carpenter and George Romero,[44] which occupy "a space within our collective, pop cultural, consciousness."[45] As many of those films do, *It Follows* tells an apparently straight-forward, compelling, and entertaining story in an aesthetically effective way, and with lots of subtexts and possible further levels of interpretation (in this case, an allegoric tale about AIDS,[46] referencing the decade sadly remembered as the "golden age" of the disease), without ever sacrificing the lowbrow connotations of the film as an entertaining product of popular culture. *It Follows*' reveren-

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44 As David Crow puts it, the 2014 movie is set in "John Carpenter's backyard." See Crow, "*It Follows*: A Homecoming for '80s Horror," *Den of Geek*, October 22, 2018, https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/it-follows-a-return-to-1980s-horror-john-carpenter/.

45 Joseph Barbera, "The Id Follows: *It Follows* (2014) and the Existential Crisis of Adolescent Sexuality," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 100, no. 2 (2019): 395.

46 Charlie Lyne, "*It Follows*: 'Love and Sex Are Ways We Can Push Death Away,'" *The Guardian*, February 21, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/feb/21/it-follows-teen-horror-movie. For a more scholarly account, see Victor Samoylenko, "Defying STIgma in *It Follows*," *Monstrum* 1, no. 1 (2018): 198–210, and David Church, "Queer Ethics, Urban Spaces, and the Horrors of Monogamy in *It Follows*," *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 3 (2018): 3–28.

tial and cinephile use of synthwave music reinforces the celebration of a certain kind of 1980s "cult" films to which Mitchell owes a huge debt and stages an intertextual game that is entirely played within the field of cinema, in which authors, genres, and manners of doing popular films become more important than the connotations of the entire age, of which only a small portion is now being simulated. An example is provided by the track "Detroit" (figure 2), played with high priority in the mix during a scene in which the protagonists drive through the streets of the eponymous city, contemplating the urban (at times, eerie) landscape.
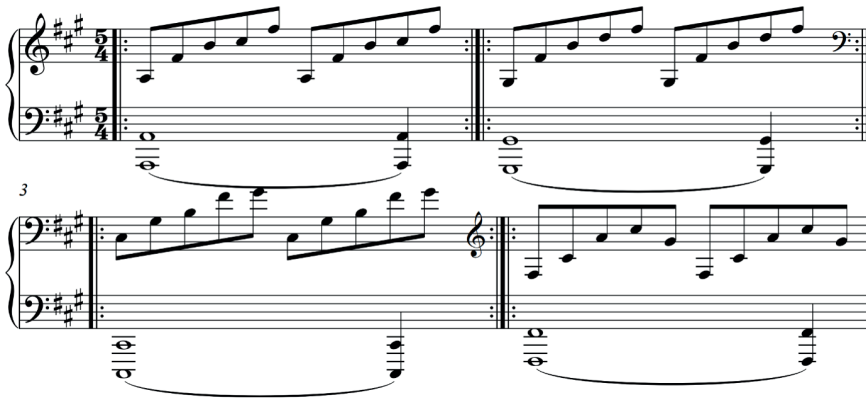
Fig. 2 – Excerpt from the track "Detroit"

As with the previous example, an arpeggiated synth line is the main protagonist of the track, and there is not much more going on, except for some filter modulation and the unusual time signature (5/4, after an introduction in 4/4) emphasizing a ghostly sense of instability and tension (also tangible in the harmonic structure). More importantly, the music is featured during a scene filled with explicit references to Carpenter's movie *Halloween* (1978)[47]—just as several sections of the film are a tribute to the cinema of the past. The link between the two eras is authenticated by a soundtrack referring directly to the 1980s, especially to the old B-movies featuring the same kind of music.

47 On YouTube there are interesting edited clips in which shots from the two movies are compared: see, for example, Jose Ortuño, "*It Follows* vs *Halloween*," YouTube video, uploaded on September 6, 2016, https://youtu.be/aD7TGaVy8Mk; Alessio Marinacci, "*Halloween/It Follows* (atmosphere)," YouTube video, uploaded on February 12, 2017, https://youtu.be/-KOXw8YDKDE.

After all, this is another way (less direct, more subtle, and maybe even exoteric, but just as hauntological) of celebrating a long-lost culture, reviving it through a music style that was associated with it in the 1980s and that is now capable of remediating that same era in the form of "age-synecdoche."[48]

Another example in this direction is *Turbo Kid* (2015), a Canadian film by the same directors responsible for *Summer of 84* (see *supra*) François Simard and the Whissell Brothers. The film is not set in the 1980s, but rather in an alternate 1997;[49] yet, the plot, special effects, cast choices, and—of course—synthwave music are all open tributes to "cult" (B-)movies from the 1980s. The same could be said of other (mostly thriller/horror) films featuring synthwave music such as *Starry Eyes* (2014) or *Bloodline* (2018), the latter also clearly referencing synthwave imagery on the movie poster (but not so much in the cinematography), which shows a picture of the protagonist with highly saturated and contrasted blue and red lighting. In *Maniac* (2012), synthwave music is also motivated by it being a remake of a 1980 film, while *Cold in July* (2014) is set in 1989. Sometimes, this way of referencing 1980s geek culture becomes grotesque and ironic, as it happens with *Kung Fury* (2015), a crowdfunded, over-the-top film that both celebrates and mocks the archetypical 1980s action/sci-fi film—featuring, not surprisingly, tons of synthwave music. In the world of video games, a similar example can be found in *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* (2013, music by Power Glove), a first-person shooter set in a (retro-)futuristic world featuring all the aesthetic and musical archetypes of synthwave.

Second-Order Associations: 2. Synthwave as Aesthetic Mediator

Sometimes the reference to the 1980s can just be "cosmetic," which brings me to the other category of second-order associations—i.e., synthwave as aesthetic mediator. In these cases, the presence of synthwave music in a movie works to strengthen references to canonical visual styles tradition-

48 In Segura García, "Nostalgia ON," 34, the author draws a parallel with Philip Drake's considerations on retro cinema, while also highlighting the relevance of mass media in the depiction of past eras, especially for the definition of codes that qualify as "metonymically able to represent an entire decade." See Philip Drake, "'Mortgaged to Music': New Retro Movies in 1990s Hollywood Cinema," in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 183–201.

49 Probably a reference to Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981), set in that year and featuring the year itself in several (e.g., French, Italian, and Spanish) translations of the title.

ally associated with synthwave (see *supra*). Like the other second-order association, this one can be chronologically located around the first years of the 2010s. One of the first possible examples in this direction comes again from the world of Tron: *Tron Legacy*'s (2010). Yet, despite the movie's mediatic resonance (but just as with the original *Tron*, 1982) the equation does not seem complete: its soundtrack, composed by Daft Punk, is in fact largely symphonic, and even when it is entirely electronic it tends to sound more like generic EDM than synthwave—as it happens with the soundtrack for Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002), composed by Daft Punk member Thomas Bangalter, or with a far less known Canadian film, *Beyond the Black Rainbow* (2010), that mostly employs synths to create an appropriate ambience for the surreal atmospheres and the overall slow pace of the film, but also features more intelligible tracks that are immediately recognizable as synthwave.

A more promising candidate for the role of prototype of this last second-order association is *Drive* (2011) by Nicolas Winding Refn:[50] with that film, the Danish director began what I would call the "synthwave phase" of his cinema, also contributing to synthwave's popularity by using the track "Nightcall" by Kavinsky for the opening credits scene (as previously mentioned). Refn had already shown a certain interest in surreal atmospheres and highly saturated colors (especially red and blue, given the director's color blindness)[51] in the most psychedelic scenes from *Fear X* (2003) and *Valhalla Rising* (2009), but it was only with *Drive* that he began to employ such visual solutions systematically and added one last ingredient to his mature style: synthwave soundtracks. *Drive* (2011), *Only God Forgives* (2013), and *The Neon Demon* (2016) are his three films—to which we could add the miniseries *Too Old to Die Young* (2019)—that feature that kind of music and, at the same time, take Refn's visual aesthetics to a whole new level. The three films can be conceptually grouped not only after some of their shared themes,[52] their dark atmospheres, or their generally slow pace,

50 Sora, "Carpenter Brut," 143.

51 As stated in "*Drive* Director Nicolas Winding Refn Talks Turning Weaknesses into Strengths," YouTube video-interview by Toby Amies for *Nowness*, uploaded on June 22, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPQTAHbD508.

52 A similar grouping after one main topic (that of an orphaned, forsaken individual lost in the postmodern reality) is investigated by Mark Featherstone, "'The Letting Go': The Horror of Being Orphaned in Nicolas Winding Refn's Cinema," *Journal for Cultural Research* 21, no. 3 (2017): 268–85. I think such lens applies quite appropriately for the miniseries *Too Old to Die Young*, too.

but also for their visual hyper-aestheticization (the obsession with beauty is also the main theme of *The Neon Demon*), the saturation of colors (red and blue in particular), and the presence of synthwave music mostly composed by Cliff Martinez.

Martinez's artistic output reaches far beyond his work for Refn. In fact, after quitting as the drummer for Red Hot Chili Peppers, his career as a film music composer took off with his collaboration with Steven Soderbergh.[53] The tracks were mostly in the style of electronic music, but things started to change with *Drive* in 2011 and, just a few months after, with *Contagion*, another Soderbergh movie with sound much more akin to synthwave's standards. Even though there is a lot more in Martinez's works than mere musical signposting, references to synthwave are strongly emphasized, especially in the music he composed for Refn.

Fig. 3 – The main arpeggio in 'Wanna Fight?'

The track "Wanna Fight?" from the *Only God Forgives* soundtrack is a good example not only of how synthwave is used in Refn's recent films, but also of how Martinez's soundtracks often go beyond the pure adherence to the genre's standards—without ceasing to sound entirely idiomatic. We hear a synth arpeggio with modulating filter (figure 3) playing throughout the whole track, and this is the "safe" part. What is unexpected is the presence of organ chords coming in after the first seconds of the track, briefly followed by some clean electric guitar sounds. The two "intruders" could be seen as referencing solutions typical of soundtracks for the Western genre and, in fact, the music here accompanies a duel between the protagonist and one of the villains, with a very slow introduction in which the two characters move around and stare at each other—a visual style closely associated with spaghetti Westerns (figure 4, top left and top right). These same musical elements, with their fluctuating ways of engaging with the arpeg-

53 Once again sci-fi classics and remakes/sequels work behind the scenes of the prehistory of modern synthwave, since one of Martinez's most notable works is the score for *Solaris* (2002), Soderbergh's remake of the classic sci-fi film by Andrei Tarkovsky (1972). In this soundtrack there is surely a lot of electronic music, but still far from synthwave standards.

giated synth, play with the listeners' perception of rhythm, from 3/4 to 6/8 meter at around minute three of the track. But what is more important is the scene's cinematography: red is the dominant color, mostly due to the neon lights and the oriental decoration in the background (figure 4, bottom left), while blue is featured as part of the protagonist's outfit and in those shots where the protagonist's mother approaches the room coming from a dark corridor, while the two men fight. There is an abundant use of slow motion and care for symmetry, while at times we can also see the statue of a man in a fighting pose (more likely a reference to vaporwave than synthwave) in a shady setting, only illuminated by suffuse red and yellow lights (figure 4, bottom right).

Fig. 4 – Frames from the 'Wanna Fight?' scene

Another scene with similar visual aesthetics is set in a bar and features again synthwave-ish music at loud volume. The music here is much less idiomatic: we hear an analog soft synth pad playing a sort of aethereal line at slow pace, while the protagonist is imagining an interaction with the female character standing in front of him (figure 5, top right, bottom left). Props and male actors are soaked in red (and, to a minor degree, blue) lighting (figure 5, top left), while the two women depicted in the scene are distinctively dressed in blue (figure 5, bottom left and bottom right). Despite the quasi-idiomatic kind of synthwave presented here, the scene emphasizes the association between synth(wave) music and a peculiar visual style.

Fig. 5 – Frames from the bar scene

Thus, another second-order association takes shape. Refn is not interested in referencing the 1980s in his movies, nor is there an explicit or implicit connection with geek culture or filming technique from that decade—also given the fact that Refn's cinema tends to be much more highbrow-oriented compared to previous examples. What we can find in his films is the saturation and the aesthetic perfection of an idealized version of 1980s films (or perhaps their promotional material), hauntologically coming back from the world of the dead in its strongest incarnation. The postmodern city outlook, neon lights, the promise of a wealthy future… all worn inside out, playing in reverse, and brought to its extreme consequences, but still there: more 1980s than the 1980s.[54]

Other examples of this kind of second-order association include: the anime series *Devilman Crybaby* (2018), which features a good number of synthwave tracks (although other genres are represented as well), especially in its many "over the top" scenes, colorful to the point of becoming psychedelic; the sci-fi horror movie *Beyond the Black Rainbow* (2010), with a visual style that looks like an overcharged and saturated version of Tarkovsky, and with

54 The idea of "more 1980s than the 1980s" is inspired by another famous film from that same age, *Videodrome* (1983) by David Cronenberg, in which the TV world is described as more real than reality itself. The pseudo-quote paraphrases the original (and exquisitely Baudrillardian) sentence pronounced by Prof. Brian O'Blivion in one of the movie's pivotal scenes: "television is reality, and reality is less than television."

most non-noise music sounding definitely synthwave; *Bliss* (2019), a film dominated by green, blue, and red hypersaturated shots, featuring a kind of synthwave soundtrack that is often distorted and decomposed to better resonate with the mood of the hallucinatory and excessive plot of the film; the Malaysian neo-noir *Shadowplay* (2019), filled with synthwave music and shots often sticking to the abovementioned visual imagery; *VFW* (2019), a horror film shot almost completely indoors, with a high degree of red and blue neon lighting. All these (re)incarnations and celebrations of the 1980s go far beyond what the original phenomenon was. They refer to a hyperreal version of that decade that dwells in our imagination and is being rebuilt day after day by such products. There is no nostalgia here, nor mockery or parody. Just the elegance and aesthetic emphasis that, especially when paired with synthwave music and its history of associations, references the shiny and glossy semblance of a hyperreal, mediatized version of the 1980s.

So, while the description I provided of the four associations may not be exhaustive of all the possible functions and connotations of synthwave music in cinema, it will at least serve to discourage simplistic views of a phenomenon which proved multifaceted, even to my initial expectations. Far from being just an adequate soundtrack for colorful sci-fi B-movies, synthwave builds its essence in dialogue with a wider array of cinematic references and with their role as representatives of a particular culture, its agency, and its visual art—or, at least, a mediatized version of all of this, namely their mortal remains still accessible to us all.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have focused on two eras—the 1980s and the 2010s—identifying archetypical relationships between cinema and synthwave. I argued that we can isolate at least four of them. Two first-order associations were established in the 1980s: the first connects proto-synthwave music with sci-fi contexts through the impact of particularly successful sci-fi films on the later modern synthwave aesthetics (from the "classic" use of electronic music in science fiction and from the technological connotations of the music and the synthesizer as an instrument); the second relates synthwave music to lowbrow "popular" genres, especially B-movies which became cult for geeks.

The other two kinds of second-order associations are a product of the 2010s: the first interprets synthwave as a synecdoche for the 1980s as an era

and its "geeky" popular culture, sometimes referring to certain cinematic authors, genres, and styles, while working at an intertextual level to reference a peculiar cinematic style. The second concerns synthwave acting as an "aesthetic mediator" for a visual style inspired by standardized use of colors, shapes, and atmospheres from the 1980s. Both these second-order associations can be used for ironic, nostalgic, or even just "cosmetic" purposes—which can also be mixed together. All these connections set cinema as a constant implication in every kind of synthwave music, including non-cinematic. From this perspective, modern synthwave music, regardless of its purposes, is essentially remediating 1980s popular culture with only little interest in the accuracy of such simulating activity—thus leading to the paradox of creating a sort of postmodern hyperreality that looks and sounds "more 1980s than the 1980s."

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Chariots of Fire, dir. Hugh Hudson. UK, 1981.

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RoboCop, dir. Paul Verhoeven. US, 1987.

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Shadowplay, dir. Tony Pietra Arjuna. MY, 2019.

Solaris, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky. RU/DE, 1972.

Solaris, dir. Steven Soderbergh. US, 2002.

Sorcerer, dir. William Friedkin. US, 1977.

Starry Eyes, dir. Kevin Kölsch and Dennis Widmyer. US, 2014.

Stranger Things, cr. The Duffer Brothers. US, 2016–19.

Summer of 84, dir. François Simard, Anouk Whissell and Yoann-Karl Whissell. CA, 2018.

The Neon Demon, dir. Nicolas Winding Refn. DK/FR/US, 2017.

The Running Man, dir. Paul Michael Glaser. US, 1987.

The Terminator, dir. James Cameron. US, 1984.

The Thing, dir. John Carpenter. US, 1982.

They Live, dir. John Carpenter. US, 1988.

Thief, dir. Michael Mann. US, 1981.

Too Old to Die Young, dir. Nicolas Winding Refn. US, 2019.

Tron, dir. Steven Lisberger. US, 1982.

Tron: Legacy, dir. Joseph Kosinski. US, 2010.

Turbo Kid, dir. François Simard, Anouk Whissell and Yoann-Karl Whissell. CA, 2015.

Valhalla Rising, dir. Nicolas Winding Refn. DK, 2009.

VFW, dir. Joe Begos. US, 2019.

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Ludography

Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon. Ubisoft Montreal. PC/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360, 2013.

Hotline Miami. Dennaton Games. PC/PlayStation 3–4-Vita, 2012.

Out Run. Sega-AM2. Arcade, 1986.

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Cliff Martinez, "Sister Part 1." *Only God Forgives*, Milan Records, 2013.

Cliff Martinez, "Wanna Fight?." *Only God Forgives*, Milan Records, 2013.

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Kavinsky, "Nightcall." *Outrun*, Record Makers, 2010.

Kyle Dixon & Michael Stein, "Stranger Things." *Stranger Things, Vol. 1*, Lakeshore, 2016.

Tangerine Dream, "Alpha Centauri." *Alpha Centauri*, Ohr, 1971.

Tangerine Dream, "Birth of Liquid Plejades." *Zeit*, Ohr, 1972.

Tangerine Dream, *Exit*, Virgin, 1981.

Tangerine Dream, *Hyperborea*, Virgin, 1983.

Tangerine Dream, "Sunrise in the Third System." *Alpha Centauri*, Ohr, 1971.

Abstract

This article analyzes the close relation between synthwave music and cinema, focusing on the role played by the former in paradigmatic films and TV series from the 1980s and the 2010s. To the two eras correspond two sets of semantic "associations," which designate the functions and connotations embodied by synthwave in the cinematic context. The first analysis focuses on the context in which the association between the two protagonists of this affair has taken place for the first time, trying to understand why sci-fi cinema is often privileged when it comes to the association with (proto-)synthwave music—especially soundtracks by Tangerine Dream, John Carpenter, Giorgio Moroder and Vangelis, which are often referred to as main sources of inspiration for contemporary synthwave. The result is a first set of two "first-order associations" between synthwave and sci-fi cinema on the one side, and with the 1980s geek culture on the other. The focus then shifts towards the present times, exploring the ways in which synthwave soundtracks remediate 1980s popular culture by employing two "second-order associations" between synthwave and mediated, hyperreal versions of the 1980s and its products. In particular, the protagonists of this second analysis are the functions of synthwave soundtracks as an "age-synecdoche" and as an "aesthetic mediator," especially in the series *Stranger Things*, in the movie *It Follows*, and in the late works by director Nicolas Winding Refn.

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Music Syncing as Intermedial Translation

Michele Rota

The increasing accessibility of animation tools prompted by the digital age has brought about new categories of audiovisual artifacts requiring appropriate analytical perspectives. On top of actual animation software, there has been a growing use of educational and entertainment software repurposed to create animations, as well as video editing tools to remix existing animated content. These include software for the creation of animated scores (such as Stephen Malinowski's *Music Animation Machine*, or the AI-based platform *Synthesia*), as well as rhythm games (*Guitar Hero*, *Geometry Dash*) and sandbox games (*Minecraft*, *Line rider*). Many music-synced animated videos produced within these digital and online practices feature an existing piece of music as the starting point around which the visuals are shaped in such a way that they do not merely accompany it, but rather transmediate it. This suggests a different way of looking at audiovisual artifacts, one that treats the musical and visual component as source and target text in a practice analog to translation.

Despite being originally defined as a relation between text-based artifacts, translation studies have since developed the notion out of its medium-specificity, and the resulting term *intermedial translation* has proven itself effective in different contexts. My goal with this paper is to further examine the connection between translation studies and intermediality through a rethinking of the notion of intermedial translation. In doing so, I provide an alternative analytical tool with which to examine music visualization, one that is better suited to recognize the deep link that exists between audio and video in terms of both the production and reception of the artifact. I focus on animated videos produced and disseminated online mostly by amateurs through so-called "casual creators," a category developed by Katherine Compton which includes software that provides a

guided, partly automated, creative process.[1] This choice allows for insights into how a wider sample of the population experiences, understands, and reinterprets music through animated visual imagery, as well as how music is remediated within online communities. Aside from this restriction, I purposefully do not define or develop a specific category for the type of artifacts considered as case studies in this research. Depending on which characteristics are taken to be the focus, these audiovisual works can be understood as part of the visual music tradition,[2] as instances of music remediation, as an expression of fan content (e.g., as Unofficial Music Videos, or UMVs),[3] or, as this paper explores, the result of practices of intermedial translation. Rather than defining a category, my goal here is to showcase the potential of intermedial translation as an analytical tool, finding commonalities among several types of audiovisual works with seemingly very different purposes.

Accordingly, this article is structured in two main sections. In the first part I develop the analytical tools: I first briefly contextualize the field of intermediality and go over the history of the term *intermedial translation*, presenting my own understanding of it in comparison with contemporary research. In order to further explore how the concept of translation can be applied to intermediality, and to audiovisual analysis in particular, I then engage with research from both intermedial studies and translation studies: more specifically, I implement Lars Elleström's modality model to discuss the problematic nature of border crossings and contrast it with a functional understanding of translation so as to achieve a satisfactory notion of intermedial translation. Finally, I relate intermedial translation to audiovisual analysis, engaging with literature about music synchronization. In the second part I put this notion to the test, examining a few examples of audio visualization through educational software and video games repurposed as casual creators. In doing so, I aim to showcase intermedial translation as an

1 Katherine Compton, "Casual Creators: Defining a Genre of Autotelic Creativity Support Systems" (PhD diss., University of California Santa Cruz, 2019), 6.

2 Emmanouil Kanellos points out this intersection of visual music, intermedia, and translation: "Visual music can be understood as a sonic composition translated into a visual content, with the elements of the original sonic 'language' being represented visually. This is also known as intermedia." Kanellos "Visual Trends in Contemporary Visual Music Practice," *Body, Space & Technology* 17, vol. 1 (2018): 26.

3 Dana Milstein, "Case Study: Anime Music Videos," in *Music, Sound and Multimedia. From the Live to the Virtual*, ed. Jamie Sexton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 31.

analytical tool capable of making similarities and differences emerge across different categories of audiovisual artifacts. In particular, I focus on the internet phenomenon of creating amateur animated music videos through online applications such as *Geometry Dash* and *Line Rider*. I argue that the role music plays in these practices and the relation established between visuals and soundtrack in the final product differentiate these artifacts from traditional forms of animation. This suggests an alternative interpretation, in which a musical piece acts as source text while the creative process itself is regarded as an act of translation.

Part 1: Developing the Analytical Tools

A Short History of Intermedial Translation

In the context of intermediality—a notion whose semantic field includes many different types of intermedial relations—a broad distinction is between synchronic and diachronic perspectives.[4] The former, what Siglind Bruhn calls "heteromediality," has to do with how different aspects of an object affect each other as they are experienced. It can be defined as "the multimodal character of all media and, consequently, the *a priori* mixed character of all conceivable texts."[5] In terms of its application to the audiovisual context, the synchronic perspective, or heteromediality, comprises insights on music as accompaniment, such as how the nature of the soundtrack radically influences the audience's perception of what is being shown on screen. The epitome of this perspective is the notion of "synchresis" developed by Michel Chion, which he describes as "the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears."[6]

4 See Lars Elleström, "The Modalities of Media II: An Expanded Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations," in *Beyond Media Borders, Volume 1: Intermedial Relations Among Multimodal Media*, ed. Lars Elleström (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 73.

5 Siglind Bruhn, "Penrose, 'Seeing is Believing': Intentionality, Mediation and Comprehension in the Arts," in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, ed. Lars Elleström (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 229.

6 Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 5 (see also 64–65). See also Diego Garro, "From Sonic Art to Visual Music: Divergences, Convergences, Intersections," *Organised sound* 17, no. 2 (2012): 103–113; Michael Filimowicz and Jack Stockholm, "Towards a Phenomenology of the Acoustic Image," *Organized Sound* 15, no. 1 (2010): 5–12; Joanna Bailie, "Film Theory and

The diachronic perspective, on the contrary, is adopted when considering relations of transfer and transformation of meaning from one medium to the other, rather than how different media combine. This is closer to the notion of transmediality, understood as "the general concept that media products and media types can, to some extent, mediate equivalent sensory configurations and represent similar objects."[7] Several scholars—such as Andrew Chesterman,[8] Sandra Naumann,[9] and Bruhn[10]—have focused on specific relations, often between no more than two media. This approach has produced many notions such as musicalization, novelization, ekphrasis, and various types of cross-media adaptation, which have been employed successfully in different fields.

Intermedial translation, the notion that this paper means to adapt and apply to the analysis of audiovisual works, falls within this broad category of diachronic perspectives, being loosely described as a relation between two artifacts belonging to different media types that shares some similarities with text-based translation. The original formulation of the concept is unanimously traced back to Roman Jakobson's "intersemiotic translation."[11] Starting from the common notion of translation between languages, he developed this term to describe processes where a verbal text is translated into a non-verbal one. The term has been since redefined to encompass translations between any type of media, as the "verbal" status of the origin text seems to be an arbitrary and ultimately impractical limitation. The adjective *intersemiotic*, while it works in the original context of Jakobson's subdivision between *intralingual*, *interlingual*, and *intersemiotic*, has since been replaced with *intermedial*, to highlight the importance of the materiality and physicality of media within intermedial relations. The resulting

Synchronization," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 18, no. 2 (2018): 69–74; Kathrin Fahlenbrach, "Aesthetics and Audiovisual Metaphors in Media Perception," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 7, no. 4 (2005).

7 Elleström, "The Modalities of Media II," 74.

8 Andrew Chesterman, "Cross-disciplinary Notes for a Study of Rhythm," *Adaptation* 12, no. 3 (2019): 271–83.

9 Sandra Naumann, "The Expanded Image: On the Musicalization of the Visual Arts in the Twentieth Century," in *Audiovisuology, A Reader*, Vol. 2: Essays, ed. Dieter Daniels, Sandra Naumann (Köln: Walther König, 2015), 504–33.

10 Siglind Bruhn, *Musical Ekphrasis: Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting* (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2000).

11 Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in *On Translation*, ed. Reuben Arthur Brower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 232–39.

term "intermedial translation" has thus been employed by scholars such as Vanessa Montesi and Regina Schober.[12]

Montesi's essay "Translating paintings into dance" attempts to bridge the gap between media studies and translation studies, a goal that my research also shares. It also reads as an excellent guideline on the application of such concepts, and its success itself represents a strong argument toward bringing the two fields together. However, this is achieved for the most part through her case study, while on a theoretical level the term "intermedial translation" is merely understood as a synonym for rather wide categorization tools such as Irina Rajewsky's "intermedial transposition."[13] While she makes use of the analogy to successfully integrate concepts from both intermedial and translation studies, I believe the term's strong connotations derived from the latter field might prevent it from becoming a catch-all term. Such a role is already covered by more neutral terms such as the already mentioned "intermedial transposition," or Elleström's analogous "media transformation."[14] My position is that "intermedial translation" is not effective as a synonym for this kind of intermedial relations and should rather be given a narrower meaning in relation to the wider class it tries to replace.

Schober's essay is similarly concerned with application to a case study rather than theoretical analysis, yet it does touch on a few essential points. By describing translation as the "transformation of a pretext of a particular system into another text or system,"[15] it highlights the similarities and even the identity between "intermedial" and "proper" translation—the latter being translation between verbal-based texts. Furthermore, Schober does a good job at stressing the relation between source and target text as a defining aspect of intermedial translation compared to other relations, arguing that "a translation, as an original artwork in itself, is always a modified 'version' of the original, containing features quite distinct and divergent from the reference medium."[16]

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12 Vanessa Montesi, "Translating Paintings into Dance: Marie Chouinard's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and the Challenges Posed to a Verbal-Based Concept of Translation," *The Journal of Specialised Translation* 35 (2021): 166–85; Regina Schober, "Translating Sounds: Intermedial Exchanges in Amy Lowell's 'Stravinsky's Three Pieces *Grotesques* for String Quartet,'" in Elleström, *Media Borders,* 163–74.

13 Montesi, 169. The reference is to Irina Rajewski, "Border Talks: The Problematic Status of Media Borders in the Current Debate About Intermediality," in Elleström, *Media Borders,* 51–69.

14 Elleström, "The Modalities of Media II," 75.

15 Schober, "Translating Sounds," 165.

16 Schober, 166.

In order to adapt the notion of translation to intermediality, it is however important to also be aware of media specificities and differences between the media to which source and target texts belong. How borders between different media are traced is thus critical to determine the nature of intermedial relations. In the case of intermedial translation applied to audiovisual artifacts, identifying the differences between audio and visual opens up the possibility to clarify how translation actually happens, revealing which elements cause friction to the translation (therefore requiring a degree of transformation) and which are shared across media (making the translation itself possible). In order to do so I will now examine Elleström's "modality model," a theoretical system that categorizes relations between media. This model in particular has been preferred among similar projects for a couple of reasons. It is one of the most recent attempts at organizing intermedial relations at this scale,[17] and it is built upon several previous models, comprising different perspectives within a cohesive system. Furthermore, while it distinguishes media borders clearly, it also leaves space for developing a variety of narrower, sometimes media-specific, relations, which suits the purpose of this article. Finally, a summary of his model will also prove to be a useful starting point to further develop my understanding of intermedial translation by critiquing Elleström's own category of "media translation."

The Modality Model

Any model that focuses too heavily on objective differences, trying to define clear borders between media, can result in too strict a definition, making it difficult to account for the existence of border crossings and relations between media. The modality model proposed by Elleström avoids such essentialist pitfall by realizing that media specificities emerge from the complex interactions of their characteristics, all of which are shared, to a certain degree, across media. As a result, it opens the possibility for intermedial relations while still establishing solid categories of artifacts.

To do so, Elleström arranges the many potential traits of media products by dividing and pinpointing the axes along which media differentiate from one another. By doing this, he provides the building blocks to create catego-

17 The modality model was first presented organically in Elleström's 2010 article "The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations" (in Elleström, *Media Borders,* 11–48) and later improved upon in his 2021 article "The Modalities of Media II."

ries with which to circumscribe artifacts that share a similar configuration of characteristics, while still recognizing connections between distinct media. As he explains, "the core of this differentiation consists of setting apart four media modalities that may be helpful for analyzing media products."[18] These "media modalities" are categories of media traits, defined on the basis of their position on the spectrum from the physicality of the artifact to the interpretive mind that is perceiving it. Specifically, the four modalities that Elleström identifies are: material, spatiotemporal, sensorial, and semiotic. Any media trait falls into one and only one of these four categories and is therefore a "mode" of that specific modality.[19] I quote here a brief summary of the system:

> I have argued that there are four media modalities, four types of basic media modes. For something to acquire the function of a media product, it must be *material* in some way, understood as a physical matter or phenomenon. Such a physical existence must be present in space and/or time for it to exist; it needs to have some sort of *spatiotemporal* extension. It must also be perceptible to at least one of our senses, which is to say that a media product has to be *sensorial*. Finally, it must create meaning through signs; it must be *semiotic*. This adds up to the material, spatiotemporal, sensorial and semiotic modalities.[20]

These four modalities determine what Elleström calls "basic media types," which are very broad categorizations of artifacts. Each medium shares at least some modality modes with others, but its specific modal configuration identifies it exclusively. When comparing media types, this kind of granular analysis allows for differences as well as shared characteristics to emerge side-by-side.

The basic media types that I analyze in the context of this paper are the two aspects that combine in the audiovisual medium: the soundtrack and the moving images. I do not mean to propose an essentialist outlook that rigidly separates these two fields or to define them as completely independent from each other, but rather to point out overall differences in the way they are perceived. Images and soundtrack affect each other at a deep level, down to how the information is interpreted by the nervous system through

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18 Elleström, "The Modalities of Media II," 8.
19 Elleström, 46.
20 Elleström, 46. Italics in the original.

processes of multisensory integration ("the mutual implication of sound and vision" as demonstrated by the McGurk effect).[21] Nonetheless, the visual and auditory channels maintain a fairly high degree of separation and allow us to consider each aspect of the audiovisual medium separately. In fact, as exemplified in Chion's notion of "audiovisual contract," while synchresis and contaminations between the two are important aspects of perception, "the audiovisual relationship is not natural but a kind of symbolic contract that the audio-viewer enters into, consenting to think of sound and image as forming a single entity."[22]

In order to clarify some peculiarities of intermedial translation as an analytical tool with which to examine musically-synced works, I will now consider the composite medium of audiovisuality through Elleström's modality model, temporarily treating the two aspects of sound and image as separate media as I discuss each modality.

Two of the four modalities are particularly useful in this context—i.e., the sensorial and spatiotemporal ones. The "sensorial modality" is defined by Elleström as encompassing "the physical and mental acts of perceiving the present interface of the medium through the sense faculties."[23] Its main modes then mostly correspond to the five basic human senses: seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling. In the case of audiovisual works, it is fairly obvious how sound and image are described in relation to this modality: the term *audiovisual* itself separates its two components on the basis of their respective sensorial modes. It is important to note that having two parallel channels of communication affect how easily the spectator is able to receive information from both media simultaneously. While audio and video fundamentally influence each other, the overlap between the two at the level of their sensory perception (e.g., in case of the McGurk effect) is nonetheless limited in nature. This makes it possible for spectators to easily consider both aspects as a unique whole while still being able to recognize their borders fairly accurately. A similar experience has also been studied in relation to another visual medium closely related to music and usually presenting a degree of synchronization: dance. For example, this is what Aasen writes on the subject:

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21 See Kevin J. Donnelly, *Occult Aesthetics: Synchronization in Sound Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6 and 25.

22 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 249n4.

23 Elleström, "The Modalities of Media," 17.

> For the audience, both the object perceived and the sensory modality used to perceive it differ between music and dance. We see the dance, but we hear the music.[24]

When it comes to the "spatiotemporal modality," the relation between the two aspects of the audiovisual medium is more complex. The spatiotemporal modality is described through the established model of three-dimensional space (width, height, depth), with time acting as a fourth dimension. Spatiotemporally, sound-based media exist primarily, though not exclusively, in one dimension: time.[25] A piece of music, for example, is wholly temporal insofar as it is sequentially interpreted through an act of perception, the temporality of which is tied to the length of the piece itself. If we consider the still images that constitute the frames of an audiovisual artifact, they are characterized by the opposite spatiotemporal modes compared to its soundtrack. While sounds can only manifest through time, images exist in a bidimensional space and are, in themselves, static. Only through cinema they obtain the illusion of movement, and thus a temporal dimension.

There are nonetheless nuances to this schematic opposition. Some otherwise static visual artifacts can in fact present sequential qualities: this is the case for printed texts, which are "conventionally decoded in a fixed sequence, which makes them second-order temporal, so to speak: sequential but not actually temporal, because the physical matter of the media products does not change in time."[26] The same consideration can be extended to images that, while not as rigidly sequential as written texts, adopt visual strategies that draw from different types of notation. For example, in the case of animated scores such as the ones generated to aid the learning or the performance of a musical piece, the animation can be said to simply enhance the sense of movement and direction already implicit in the text contained by each frame. Finally, regardless of the eventual pseudo-tempo-

24 Solveig Aasen "Crossmodal Aesthetics: How Music and Dance can Match," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2021): 224.

25 It can be, and has been, argued that there is also an inherent spatial element to sound. In the context of music, an interest towards a kind of dramaturgy of space can be traced back to early examples of antiphonal music. The spatial qualities of sound have then been explored more systematically by twentieth-century composers such as Ives, Varèse, Stockhausen and Brant, and still play an essential role in contemporary music production. For a historic analysis of this notion, see Gascia Ouzounian, *Stereophonica: Sound and Space in Science, Technology, and the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021).

26 Elleström, "The Modalities of Media II," 49.

ral characteristics of the still images that comprise it, cinema, as its name suggests, is fundamentally temporal. When comparing the soundtrack to its visual counterpart, the shared temporal mode between the two media stands out as the main common element between the two.

When considered together, the sensorial and spatiotemporal modalities help clarify the peculiar nature of audiovisual perception: while they happen simultaneously, thus resulting in a certain degree of overlap, each half can be considered distinct on a theoretical as well as practical level on account of the different sensorial modes that are activated by the video and its soundtrack.

Translation within Intermediality

Modal differences are not only useful in setting up media borders but can also help qualify the types of relations taking place between them. On account of the characteristics showed in the previous section, audio and video can be considered to be fairly dissimilar media types, which poses questions if we are to apply the notion of translation to them. As Elleström makes clear, "given that media types and media borders are of various sorts and have different degrees of stability, it follows that media interrelations are multi-faceted."[27] I find it important to add that this consideration does not outright exclude relations between particular media types: intermedial relations are always possible, what changes is how much the source text needs to be transformed in order for its "meaning"[28] to be expressed through a different medium. In other words, artifacts belonging to similar media types can transfer their meaning to each other quite easily, while very dissimilar media require a higher degree of transformation in the process. All of these differences put media and their relations on a spectrum, and therefore do not allow for rigid distinctions to be established.

Despite this, Elleström also proposes a few subcategories of intermedial relations based on modal differences between media. Among these, I find it useful here to discuss his notion of "media translation," which he contrasts to "media transformation." In Elleström's framework, both are understood as forms of transmediality, but the former is intermedial while the latter is

27 Elleström, "The Modalities of Media II," 71.

28 I am aware that notions such as meaning, content, message etc. are effectively impossible to separate from the artifact's medium. Here I am using the term in a loose way. In actuality, the translation process consists in recreating a functionally analog artifact, rather than transferring the meaning from one medium to another.

intramedial—[29] in other words, *transformation* happens between modally dissimilar media, while *translation* only concerns modally similar media. The core of the inter/intra dichotomy lies in drawing clear distinctions on the basis of modal differences, which are, as I noted previously, on a spectrum. Consequently, I do not believe that these subcategorizations are justified on a theoretical level, and should only be considered if they are found to be useful analytical tools. In the first place, "media transformation" seems to be an appropriate term not only for Elleström's notion of intermedial transmediality, but transmediality as a whole, on account of the fact that, as he admits, "media differences bring about inevitable transformations."[30] Therefore, to imply that media translation (as understood by Elleström) does not itself entail any form of transformation seems disingenuous.

More concerning is the employment of the term *translation* itself, as Elleström's notion seems to waste the potential semantic richness inherent in the connection to so called "proper," that is, verbal-based, translation. Elleström justifies employing the term *translation* out of a desire "to adhere to the common idea that translation involves transfer of cognitive import among similar forms of media, such as translating written verbal language form Chinese to English."[31] Such a statement, however, is rooted in a simplistic notion of translation that is now widely considered antiquated. The core bias displayed here has been thoroughly critiqued by scholars such as Maria Tymoczko's, who links the emphasis on verbal translation to a particularly western-centric understanding of cognition as a whole.[32]

Even though Elleström's "media translation" is clearly an attempt to widen the spectrum of translation to other (similar) media, the effort ends up being misdirected: instead of recognizing the specificities that translation shares with a subset of transmedial processes, the mention of verbal languages is merely exploited as an analogy for media with similar modality modes. If verbal translation is taken as a model without an understanding of what characteristics it actually shares with its intermedial counterpart, the multimodal approach itself is betrayed.

A more promising perspective comes from Klaus Kaindl, who, attempting to integrate multimodality with the notion of translation, disregards aprioristic limitations such as modal similarities and instead concludes:

29 See Elleström, 73–86.
30 Elleström, "The Modalities of Media II," 75.
31 Elleström, 75.
32 Maria Tymoczko, *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2007).

If we take multimodality seriously, this ultimately means that transfers of texts without language dimension or the concentration on non-language modes of a text are a part of the prototypic field of translation studies.[33]

This means, for example, considering the iconic (both visual and audio) elements of a movie as eligible source texts for practices of translation. This kind of approach has not only been called for in theoretical writing, but has also found actual use within translation studies in the practice of audiovisual translation. Here is a brief illustration of its goals and areas of interest:

Audiovisual translation is a blooming subfield of Translation Studies, that includes research areas on practices such as subtitling, dubbing, along with new practices such as fansubbing and crowdsourcing, as well as concerns in accessibility with forms that include subtitling for the deaf and the hard of hearing, and audio description for the blind and the visually impaired.[34]

Especially in the latter two cases, the translator is moving between media that are far from modally similar.[35] Elleström's notion of media translation, then, ends up excluding already established intermedial translation practices such as subtitling for the deaf (transfer from iconic, as well as symbolic, audio elements to visual symbolic elements), and audio description for the blind (transfer from iconic visual to symbolic audio), solely on account of their strong modal differences.

In accord with Kaindl's analysis, I believe intermedial translation's specificity lies in its function and has nothing to do with the dissimilarity of media types or the related degree of transformation that the message goes through in the process of transfer. In fact, this perspective, according to which something is transferred more or less unscathed while other expendable elements are "lost in translation," hides an essentialist view of media products. The message of any text or media product is not produced by a delimited section or aspect of the object but by all of its parts in conjunction; in other words, meaning is influenced by the text as a whole. If this observation is taken to its logical conclusion, it implies that translation does

33 Klaus Kaindl, "Multimodality and Translation," in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies*, ed. Carmen Millán and Francesca Bartrina (London: Routledge, 2013), 266.

34 Vasso Giannakopoulou, "Introduction: Intersemiotic Translation as Adaptation," *Adaptation* 12, no. 3 (2019): 201.

35 This is what Andrew Chesterman calls "media-changing translation;" see Chesterman, "Cross-disciplinary Notes," 274.

not simply transfer the core of the message by losing contextual elements, but—insofar as these elements are indistinguishable from the core ones—it always implies partial transformation of the original message. The reason as to why they are undistinguishable is because what is or isn't essential gets decided by the translator on a case-by-case basis: being first and foremost a mediation practice, translation changes both the superficial as well as the deeper elements of the text that it translates.

This consideration is true for so called "translation proper" (see *supra*), but an intermedial or multimodal perspective makes this the more apparent. In the context of audiovisual works, translation can have very different priorities: in dubbing, the requirement of precise lip sync far outweighs any consideration of literal accuracy, and even in subtitling a lot of thought has to be put into how phrasing affects the timing of a line in relation to what is shown on screen. It is a commonly shared position that this only concerns intermedial instances of translation, while notions of equivalence and reversibility are still championed in authoritative works (such as Eco's)[36] as defining characteristics of text-based translation in contrast to its intermedial counterpart. Various researchers have since criticized this position, either indirectly, like Chesterman,[37] as well as directly addressing Eco's work, as in the following note by João Queiroz and Pedro Atã:

> Eco stresses cases of "adaptations" which are not "translations," typically because they do not allow an observer to reconstruct the source from the target. We do not consider this criterion (ability to reconstruct the source-sign from the target-sign) to be necessary for considering some communication a translation.[38]

Conversely, an understanding of translation based on function, and informed by a modal framework such as Elleström's, avoids the pitfalls of the verbal paradigm. Kaindl illustrates this very well:

> Such a definition differs from language-centered approaches in two respects.

36 See Umberto Eco, *Experiences in Translation*, trans. Alastair McEwen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

37 For example: "A target text is often said to 'represent' (semiotically speaking), or 'count as,' its source. But neither 'representing' nor 'counting as' are necessarily reversible relations." Chesterman, "Cross-disciplinary Notes," 280.

38 João Queiroz and Pedro Atã, "Intersemiotic Translation, Cognitive Artefact, and Creativity," *Adaptation* 12, no. 3 (2019): 311–12n4.

On the one hand, there is no fixed relation to the source text based on simi-larity, equality, or equivalence and, on the other hand, the role of language in translation does not take centre stage.[39]

What replaces the source text as the core aspect of this process is "the func-tion of the translation in the target culture, which depends on the actual context of use as well as the expectations and the level of knowledge of the target audience."[40] This highlighting of the subjective aspect is crucial, as it fits translation in our contemporary understanding of media in general. Because the meaning of the text itself emerges through a negotiation pro-cess,[41] the subjective interpretation of the translator becomes integral to the translation itself: their understanding of the source text dictates the content and form of the target text, as well as its intended function. The relation to the source text is not completely erased, as it persists through the transla-tor's interpretation of it, but the focus has shifted towards the act of crea-tion of the target text. What is completely cut out of the definition is any reference to language as a hierarchically more significant medium. Kaindl states explicitly that a necessary step to advance media studies as well as translation studies is "to develop translation-relevant analysis instruments for other modes. Linguistic theories as well as image- and music-theoretical approaches are suitable for this purpose."[42] This is what I will attempt to do in the following section by linking intermedial translation with the specif-ically audiovisual practice of music syncing.

Music Syncing

The gist of my proposal regarding music syncing as intermedial transla-tion can be summarized as follows: when the temporal aspect of visuals and soundtrack coincide, in other words when the two are synchronized, this acts as an interpretive bridge that allows for the creation of relations between opposite (or complementary) aspects of the two media within the same artifact. While their opposite sensorial modes entail a great degree of transformation whenever information is transferred from one medium to

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39 Kaindl, "A theoretical framework," 58.

40 Kaindl, 54.

41 On the concept of "negotiation," see Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Nego-tiation* (London: Phoenix, 2003).

42 Kaindl, "A theoretical framework," 65.

the other, their temporality forms the common ground that makes establishing this transfer possible in the first place.[43]

Any audiovisual product, insofar as it displays both audio and visuals, is, at least in theory, eligible to be analyzed through the lens of intermedial translation; however, instances of actual correlation between the action on screen and the musical events determine whether the potentiality of this specific interpretation actually takes place. As Donnelly explains in his book *Occult Aesthetics*,

> as time-based art forms, film and music have many fundamental attributes in common, despite clear differences. Isomorphic structures on large and small scales, and patterns of build-up, tension, and release are most evident in both… Film, both in terms of its conceptualization and practical production, embraces sound and image analogues (in terms of rhythm, both literally and metaphorically), "Mickeymousing" in music, or gesture and camera movement being matched by or to the "sweep" of music, to name but a few instances.[44]

These correlations between sound and image can be analyzed through the lens of a synchronic perspective, showing how the two aspects affect each other as they are perceived. However, in accord to Elleström's position that "no media products exist that cannot be treated in terms of diachronicity without some profit,"[45] I argue that, whenever an audiovisual object is experienced, it always has the potential of being read in the diachronic perspective as well, as an instance of intermedial translation. In other words, the visuals can be interpreted as translating the soundtrack, or vice versa. Whether the visuals or the soundtrack are considered to be source text varies on a case-by-case basis and is dependent on both the specificities of the artifact as well as the perceiver's context and their inferences regarding the audiovisual object itself. In the examples that I will examine in the following pages, the direction usually goes from music to video, as intermedial translation often overlap with instances of music remediation, where an existing piece of music is incorporated into an audiovisual work. This

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43 Discussing audiovisual synchronization, Kevin Donnelly sums up the complex nature of the medium as follows: "One of its open secrets is the separation of sound and image and their union through mechanical (and increasingly digital) synchronization." Donnelly, *Occult Aesthetics*, 3.

44 Donnelly, 5.

45 Elleström, "The Modalities of Media II," 73.

does not imply the primacy of one medium over the other,[46] but merely that it is possible to interpret an audiovisual work as a translation between its soundtrack and its visuals. According to this perspective, translation isn't just dependent on its perceived function, but is itself a potential function of the target text. Reading a media product as a translation is a strategy that the perceiver can employ to better understand the target text on account of its relation to a (perceived) pre-existent source text, or rather to understand both target and source texts on account of what their relation helps to highlight. This reading is indebted to Elleström's own understanding of intermediality as a whole.[47]

The perception of specific traits in the target text and their similarity to aspects of the source text is entirely dependent on the interpreter's subjectivity. Consequently, insofar as translation is not only a "text-processing activity" performed by the translator, but also and more importantly an interpretive practice employed by the perceiver, what translation ultimately means ends up being decided by the audience, based on their context. Similarly, Cook reminds us that "inter-media relationships are not static but may change from moment to moment, and that they are not simply intrinsic to 'the IMM itself' [instance of multimedia], so to speak, but may depend also upon the orientation of the recipient,"[48] that is to say, the subjective interpretation of the perceiver.

Similarly to what happens with interlingual translation, the same audiovisual artifact, presenting the source text as well as its translation, will be interpreted differently based on the reader's level of proficiency with and ease of access to the source and target language, ranging from virtually disregarding one of the two texts, to a bilingual level, in which case the translation is seen as actualization of one particular interpretive perspective rather than a tool meant to make the source text accessible. Naturally, intermedial translation always has to compete with different potential interpretations, such as regarding the soundtrack as mere accompaniment for the visuals rather than a media product in its own right. Axel Englund

46 If this were to be the case, it would fall among the "hegemonic models in multimedia theory—the idea that one medium must be primary and others subordinate," a notion that Nicholas Cook extensively criticizes in his research. Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 117.

47 I refer here to statements such as: "Intermediality is an analytical angle that can be used successfully for unravelling some of the complexities of all kinds of communication." Elleström, "The Modalities of Media II," 4.

48 Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, 113.

sums up effectively this understanding of intermedial translation as an analytical perspective:

> The emphasis on the interpretative activity is important: what we are dealing with is less an inherent quality exhibited by intermedial works than a fertile strategy for approaching these works.[49]

One approach doesn't exclude the opposite one, and as long as it is understood as a perspective rather than a categorization tool, the notion of intermedial translation developed so far can be applied to any class of media. In the next section of the article I will test it on a range of contemporary practices of music remediation that have developed mostly online through the past decades. However, before doing so, it is useful to very briefly look at different types of music synchronization in order to establish a few guidelines. A fairly direct approach to this is to examine the degree of synchronization that takes place in an audiovisual artifact. This is how Donnelly proceeds:

> Broadly, there are three types of sound and image relation. These run on a spectrum from tight synchronization at one pole and total asynchrony at the other. In between, there is the possibility of plesiochrony, where sound and image are vaguely fitting in synchrony, but lack precise reference points.[50]

While the distinction between tight and loose synchronization is an important and useful way to differentiate audiovisual works, this approach alone is inadequate to specify the quality of synchronization, meaning in what way images and sounds actually correlate to each other. Without introducing a multiplicity of categories, it is possible to at least recognize two different paradigms, which respond to different functions. Media scholar James Tobias qualifies synchronization by identifying two antithetical model: "phrasal" and "rhythmic."[51] These two styles of synchronization can be regarded as the two opposite paradigms at the core of visual-to-music translation. When interpreted this way, any actual work falls somewhere in between on a spectrum defined by these models.

49 Axel Englund, "Intermedial Topography and Metaphorical Interaction," in Elleström, *Media Borders*, 70.
50 Donnelly, *Occult Aesthetics*, 31.
51 James Tobias, *Sync: Stylistics of Hieroglyphic Time* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 99.

On one side, an extremely schematic frame which transposes music on the basis of strict parameters: this is quite similar to, and partially derived from, the system developed in the western tradition to record music in written form. According to this paradigm, music is conceived spatially in terms of *higher* and *lower* pitches, which can be reproduced as easily on film as they are on a pentagram. I have chosen to refer to this first kind as *notational* rather than "phrasal," as its main characteristic seems to be the almost isomorphic mapping of musical information. On the opposite side, a looser but potentially more expressive interpretation, which has its roots in dance rather than written notation. In place of a heavily codified transposition of musical elements into visual ones, dance subjectively illustrates music's emotional content through abstract movements and pantomime.[52] Because of this similarity and the centrality of the dance model in so many descriptions of audiovisual works that present these characteristics, I refer to this type of synchronization as the *choreographic paradigm*, since "rhythmic" is too vague a descriptor. On a theoretical level, distinguishing the two paradigms proves useful, as it provides a tool for the analysis of audiovisual works. However, in practice most animations are informed by both models and showcase a mix of characteristics.

In the second half of this paper I am going to apply the analytical tool of intermedial translation as I have developed it in the previous sections. To recap briefly: I have explained the use of the term *intermedial* as it is a relation between artifacts belonging to two different media, and the word *translation* to highlight the analogy with characteristics developed by translation studies, in particular as they pertain to the notion of translation as function. Whenever an artifact is examined as an instance of intermedial translation, the process that led to its creation is likened to the translator's, who necessarily adds a subjective interpretive layer to the transposition from the source to the target artifact.

This analytical tool can be applied to the analysis of audiovisual artifacts to examine the relation between their audio and video components. According to this perspective, the synchronization of soundtrack and images is understood in terms of one aspect translating the other. This can be es-

52 For literature about the congruence of music and dance, see Carol L. Krumhansl and Diana Lynn Schenck, "Can Dance Reflect the Structural and Expressive Qualities of Music? A Perceptual Experiment on Balanchine's Choreography of Mozart's Divertimento N. 15," *Musicae Scientiae* 1, no. 1 (1997): 63–85; see also Robert W. Mitchell and Matthew C. Gallaher, "Embodying Music: Matching Music and Dance in Memory," *Music Perception* 19, no. 1 (2001): 65–85.

pecially fruitful in instances of music remediation through audiovisual artifacts, which are therefore understood as analogue to a book with original and translated text put side by side. The analogy with translation also helps to establish a spectrum of possibilities in terms of how the soundtrack is translated into a visual interpretation. We can think of the two paradigms suggested by Tobias as different degrees of literality: the notational paradigm representing the more "literal" and somewhat objective translation, and the choreographic paradigm the more subjective interpretation.

Part 2: Animated Scores

The digital age, especially with the wide adoption of digital technologies in the 1990s and early 2000s, saw a flourishing of music-to-visual translation software and practices. These include innovative ideas as well as a significant re-mediation of old media by the new digital tools. Furthermore, the growing accessibility of digital tools greatly accelerated the already ongoing process of blurring the lines between so called high art and low art. Accordingly, in this second half I intend to explore practices at the intersection of art, entertainment, and education. An exhaustive overview is of course outside the scope of this article: my goal here is rather to touch upon a variety of software to demonstrate the width of practices that can be productively grouped together and compared by applying an intermedial translation perspective.

Music Animation Machine

The first example I cover is Stephen Malinowski's *Music Animation Machine*, a pioneering visualization software. It was first developed in the mid-1980s, but progressively modified and perfected through the past three decades. Matt Woolman's book *Sonic Graphics/Seeing Sound* offers a good description of it:

> This piece of software by Stephen Malinowski makes animated graphical scores of musical performances. The scores are specifically designed to be viewed on videotape or computer screen while listening to the music. Stephen Malinowski's inspiration comes from the visual theories of Paul Klee, and a desire to extract conventional musical scores from their static page-frames. They contain much of the information found in a conventional score, but

display it in a way that can be understood intuitively by anyone, including children.

> Each note is represented by a colored bar and different colors denote different instruments or voices, thematic material or tonality. … The bars scroll across the screen from right to left as the piece plays, and each bar brightens as its note sounds to provide a visual marker for the viewer. The vertical position of the bar corresponds to the pitch: higher notes are higher on the screen, lower notes are lower. The horizontal position indicates the note's timing in relation to the other notes.[53]

The denomination "animated graphical score" already characterizes this music-to-video translation as pertaining to the strict notational paradigm. In fact, when documenting the various stages of his process, Malinowski notes that his initial goal was to update musical notation, in order to make it more accessible to listeners regardless of their level of musical competence. Here is what he writes:

> I made my first graphical score because I wanted to eliminate some of the things that made it hard to follow a conventional, symbolic score in real-time: a complicated mapping of pitch to position (multiple staves, multiple clefs, and sometimes multiple transpositions), and the need to remember which staff corresponds to which instrument (these are labeled at the first page of a movement, but usually not on subsequent pages, and only within a page when there's a change of instrument on a staff), and a symbolic system for showing timing.[54]

Timing is a particularly important feature, as it arguably represents the least intuitive aspect of traditional notation. The choice to visualize it as movement along the horizontal axis is the logical adaptation of the left-to-right flow that is already embodied in the pentagram as well as verbal written text. The resulting score is a mostly mathematical representation, in the form of a diagram. At its core, it converts the basic pitch and rhythm by placing nodes on a graph (the vertical axis recording pitch, the horizontal one time), in such a way as to replicate traditional musical notation

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53 Matt Woolman, *Sonic Graphics: Seeing Sound* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 10.
54 Stephen Malinowski, "What am I doing?" on his personal website *musanim.com*, accessed October 17, 2023, http://www.musanim.com/WhatAmIDoing/.
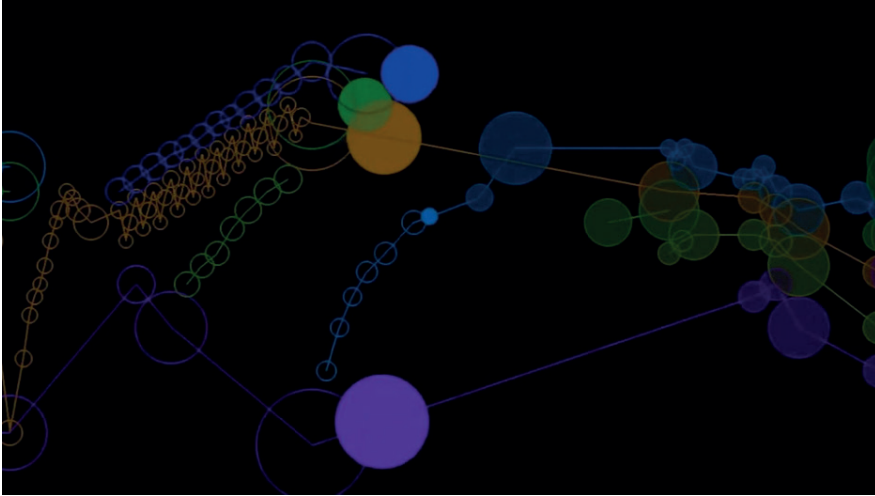
Fig. 1 – Still frame from Malinowski's first animated score, visualizing Debussy's *First Arabesque* (see note 55)

in a more simplified form which mostly disregard key, bar lines, etc. Other information such as volume or which instrument is playing is signaled through the color and shape of the nodes.

As a result of this very rigid structure, most of the process can be automatized (the software takes information from a MIDI file as basis for its visualization). There are however many musical elements which are not unambiguously transposed into visuals: tone, phrasing, and even which layer should a note occupy based on its perceived role as a melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic element. All of these require a translator's interpretive process, and result in an artifact that is not merely an automatized transposition of audio information into a visual medium. Recounting his first actual visualization,[55] Malinowski remarks: "Though I didn't realize it at the time, what I'd begun doing was *embodying aspects of my perception of the music in the animation*."[56]

On this note, his own considerations on the *Music Animation Machine* in relation to other media are illuminating. The comparison to dance is particularly interesting. On one hand he states that, strictly speaking, his

55 musanim, "Debussy, First Arabesque," YouTube, animated score, uploaded on April 8, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fElE-LFep9w.
56 Malinowski, "What am I doing?"

animations have little to do with forms like ballet. This should not be surprising, given that it represents the opposite paradigm to the notational one at the core of Malinowski's entire project. On the other hand, however, he remarks that there are in fact similarities with the process of creating a choreography, even if only metaphorical ones:

> I was, in a way, "choreographing"—not choreographing the animation, but choreographing the audience's attention—ideally, helping them attend to the things they'd attend to if the[y] "knew what to look for."[57]

It is remarkable that Malinowski manages to look at the more subjective dance paradigm through the lens of aiding the spectator's understanding of the music, somehow blending the two aspects together in his animated scores.

Music Visualization and Rhythm Games

While technically a music visualization software, I argued that Malinowski's *Music Animation Machine* constitutes a special case by virtue of the role his own subjective interpretation plays in the production process. In contrast with this balance of rigid framework and personal sensibility, I want to briefly touch upon entirely or mostly automated audio visualizers.

Generally speaking, the high number of software that allow for music visualization fall somewhere between entertainment and educational purposes. On one side, the default media player installed on most PCs since the early 1990s, *Windows Media Player* (1991), provides a basic counterpart to the music by transposing it in real time into abstract visuals. This was initially done for the purpose of showcasing the technical capabilities of the operating system but has since become an almost archetypical example of a distinct digital aesthetic. Despite the absolute degree of automation, some visualizations of *Windows Media Player* (and similar software) process the audio input algorithms in such a way as to create a sort of choreography. As touched upon earlier in this paper, the crucial element to intermedial translation isn't the production process itself but how the resulting artifact is interpreted by the viewer. As a consequence of all the visual noise, these audio representations don't provide the viewer with an easily accessible notation, and rather tend towards the choreographic paradigm.

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57 Malinowski, "What am I doing?"

Fig. 2 – Still frame from a video of Debussy's *First Arabesque* with *Synthesia* visualizations. Rousseau, "Debussy - Arabesque No. 1," YouTube, uploaded on May 28, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVYH-7QGE-A.

On the opposite end, *Synthesia* (2006) is one of many software developed specifically for the purpose of teaching music by offering alternative visual notation. Similarly to Malinowski's *Music Animation Machine*, it draws information directly from a MIDI file, but its visualization is severely limited. It is conceived as a piano keyboard trainer, which is why the information displayed is narrowed down to the basic elements of pitch and timing, and the visualization itself is tied to a virtual keyboard rather than an expressive presentation of the music. Consistent with the software's main function, the resulting artifacts can be clearly described as embodying the notational paradigm. Despite the limited aesthetic tools, performances of piano pieces accompanied by the *Synthesia* visualization of the corresponding MIDI files represents a fairly popular genre of YouTube videos which attract an audience that enjoys the visuals beyond their educational purpose.

A third example is offered by rhythm games, a subgenre of action video games, usually music-themed or dance-themed, in which the player is required to perform a long series of rhythmic inputs with relatively precise timing. The peculiar nature of these software provides interesting insights into one way to visualize music effectively. The soundtrack accompanying each level is an indispensable frame of reference that makes the execution and memorization of tasks significantly easier and more enjoyable. Because

Figure 3 – "Note Highway" from *Guitar Hero* (left) and its 3D adaptation in *Beat Saber* (right).

the goal of rhythm games is to guide the player into performing specific actions, their music visualization must be not only extremely precise but also immediately readable by any type of audience. Each significant musical element that is supposed to coincide with a user input has to also be accompanied by a clearly defined visual element. Similarly to a conductor's gesture, these elements can be said to interpret the music, while at the same time they act as cues for the player. This synthesis of different roles played by the soundtrack in relation to the gameplay is fairly common in video games.[58]

The way the visualization is displayed in games such as the *Guitar Hero* series shares many similarities with Malinowski's as well as other alternative forms of musical notation.[59] In the case of rhythm games, differences in pitch are sometimes disregarded, or rather simplified (for example, by grouping all possible notes in four or five different inputs), while the rhythmic aspect is standardized and made easier to read. The visualization consists of the so called "note highway":[60] a vertical scrolling bar on which colored circles flow downward until they intersect a horizontal line at the

58 "As the music and gameplay come together in games, these simultaneous synchronous domains of play converge to create a complex nexus." Tim Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 6. See also Kiri Miller, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Roger Moseley, *Keys to Play: Music as a Ludic Medium from Apollo to Nintendo* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

59 James Tobias also points out similarities between rhythm games, audio visualizers, and the wider category of visual music: "The popular *Guitar Hero* series and the automatic frequency and rhythm analyzer, which come standard with digital music players, are not the end of the line; indeed, they are more simply statements of the meanings of 'visual music' as a problem of everyday hermeneutics for or stylization of uses of time as material." Tobias, *Sync*, 83.

60 Originally developed by game developer Konami for *GuitarFreaks* (1998).

bottom, which signals the player the exact timing for the corresponding input. This visualization proves to be effective and has been replicated in a variety of musical games and minigames. This same visual solution also informs educational software such as the already mentioned *Synthesia*.

In all these cases the reading as translation is made possible by the extremely tight synchronization, which in turn results from the automatic nature of the visualization process. Despite the lack of, or the limited nature of, subjective inputs in the translation process, I have argued that these animated videos can nonetheless be read as instances of intermedial translation by the audience, as long as the visuals are perceived to interpret the soundtrack or vice versa.

Casual Creators

Having presented a few examples of mostly automated music visualization, the next step is to look at instances where a partly automated process is employed by individual users to create their own intermedial translation of pre-existing musical pieces. The mention of rhythm games in particular can serve as an ideal starting point to introduce the notion of *casual creators*. This term refers to a class of software which Katherine Compton defines as follows:

> Casual creators are interactive systems that encourage and privilege fast, confident, and pleasurable exploration of a rich possibility space; leading the user to experience feelings of creativity, both in a sense of ownership of what they make, and of their participation in an environment of creativity.[61]

The core element is the promotion of a creative process founded on the playful exploration of an interesting artifact rather than creation out of nothing. The process itself depends on meaningful choices made by the user but is also partially assisted by the casual creator, so that it "produces artifacts within a limited-yet-meaningful domain space, enabling automation and support, both passive (encoded into the domain model and system constraints) and active (responding to user actions)."[62] In doing so, the user is provided with a framework that makes the creative process less demand-

61 Compton, "Casual Creators," 6.
62 Compton, 6.

ing and therefore generally more enjoyable compared to the workflow enabled by professional artistic tools.

In the present section I am interested in exploring the intersection of casual creators and visual music. In particular, I wish to examine what happens when the process of creating artifacts through a casual creator is intrinsically linked to a musical piece, chosen at the beginning of the creative process itself as accompaniment for the final product. Because a casual creator is usually embodied by a virtual or metaphorical environment which is subsequently explored by the user, I suggest that, whenever music is involved, the exploratory process of interacting with this environment also becomes an exploration of the musical artifact as well.

Whenever they are equipped with an in-game level editor, rhythm games can be repurposed as casual creators, as they typically present a degree of automatization in their visualization of music even when they allow users to create their own charts. While technically outside of the category of rhythm games, many of the same characteristics are also shared by genres such as auto-run platformers (games where the player character keeps moving forwards). As a general rule, in fact, any time the gameplay requires the player to execute actions with a timing that is not tied to random elements—which means it can be designed to be rhythmical—the soundtrack can be employed as a way to elevate the experience, becoming integral to the player's interaction with the game. This is what Donnelly defines as "music-led asynchrony," one of four types of music synchronization in video games as he classifies them in his research.[63]

For instance, in *Geometry Dash* (classified as a musical platforming game) music syncing is the norm in both main levels as well as user-generated ones. The game launched in 2013 as a mobile-only game. In each level, the player controls the vertical movement of the character as it moves automatically at constant speed from left to right. Once again, the notational paradigm plays an important role. What differentiates *Geometry Dash* from other auto-run and rhythm games with in-game editors mostly boils down to the surprisingly wide variety of aesthetic choices available to the user, which results in visually unique experiences for players and spectators. Over the years, the addition of more and more editing tools, as well

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63 "With games that are timebound, music can often appear to set the time for gameplay." Kevin J. Donnelly, "The triple lock of synchronization," in *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music*, ed. Melanie Fritsch and Tim Summers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 104.
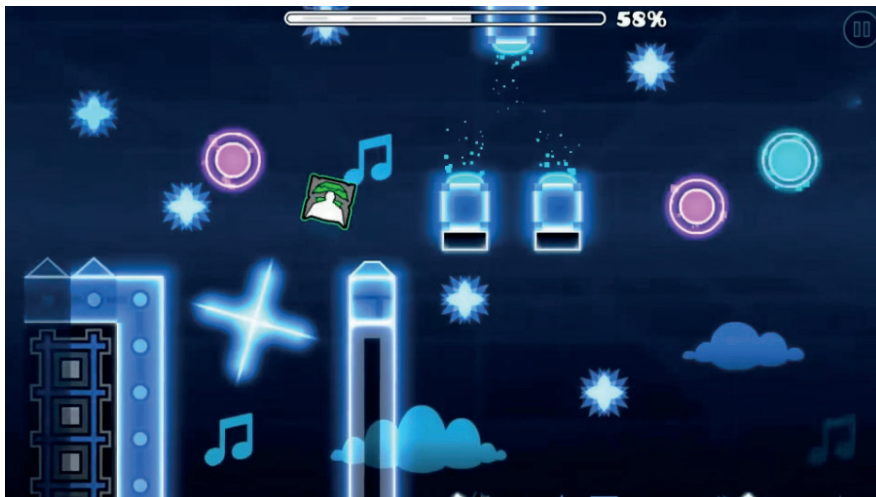
Fig. 4 – Music visualization in *Geometry Dash*. Still frame.

as the ability to customize backgrounds, empowered *Geometry Dash* level creators to complement gameplay with their personal interpretation of the musical pieces they employed as soundtrack.

When designing levels, the choice of which and how many musical elements to sync with a player's action and the leniency in terms of the timing window for each input all entail gameplay decision alongside the process of visualizing music. I argue that these constraints act as limitations as well as guidelines: in other words, they reduce the possibility space, which is a typical aspect of casual creators. This in turn supports the user's creativity by offering a framework of relatively clear directions.[64] Furthermore, syncing each visual element is not as straightforward in *Geometry Dash* as it is in traditional rhythm games, because of the nature of the game itself: each obstacle does not correspond to a single input, which results in less tight synchronization from the player perspective.[65] However, because most levels

64 Because of its tight relation to gameplay, music synchronization in rhythm games can be said to display a heightened version of what Donnelly describes about film music: "Points of synchronization constitute something of a repose, a default position of normality that furnishes moments of comfort in a potentially threatening environment that can be overwrought with sound and image stimuli." Donnelly, *Occult Aesthetics*, 73.

65 It is important to note that synchronization, however important in rhythm games, is only one aspect of the video game player's relation with game music. "Constructed by the gamers' listening activity, the sonic experience of a game is conditioned by an individu-

are also recorded in video form as they are completed, the constant speed of both backgrounds and foreground objects in combination with the music creates audiovisual artifacts that can easily be interpreted as instances of intermedial translation by the audience. Through this process of recording gameplay and sharing it online, games like *Geometry Dash* become alternative tools for the creation of abstract animated music videos.[66]

These artifacts can be categorized as a particular type of animation, usually referred to as "machinima." Johnson and Petit, who co-wrote one of the few books dedicated to this discipline, define it as "the process of capturing and constructing images within virtual environments to tell a story through iconic representation in various forms and genres."[67] While technically machinima refers to movies made with any kind of real-time computer graphics engine, the term is usually restricted to animation created within video games world. In doing so, machinima artists sidestep the intended purpose of games and turn them into tools for cinematic production. While not mentioning virtual filmmaking directly, Compton also comments on this same process through the lens of casual creators:

> A few systems were not intended as casual creators (e.g. traditional games or professional creativity tools), but were picked up by users who played counter to the expectations of the system, hacked in new features, and adapted these systems into being casual creators.[68]

A demonstration of the wide variety of games that can be used to achieve loosely abstract non-narrative animation is provided by content creator Mark Robbins, who runs the YouTube channel DoodleChaos. His catalog of videos comprises mostly music synced animation made through vari-

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al's acquired knowledge (from a historical, intermedial, and videoludic perspective) as well as his or her perception, and involvement with the audiovisual components of the games." Guillaume Roux-Girard, "Sound and Videoludic Experience," in *The Oxford Handbook of Interactive Audio*, ed. Karen Collins, Bill Kapralos, Holly Tessler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 143.

66 Music then plays a role in every step of the process, as a guideline in level creation, as a gameplay mechanic for the player, and as a soundtrack for the viewer. On the latter aspect, see also Sandra K. Marshall and Annabel J. Cohen, "Effects of Musical Soundtracks on Attitudes Toward Animated Geometric Figures," Music Perception 6, no. 1 (1988): 95–112.

67 Phylis Johnson and Donald Petit, *Machinima: The Art and Practice of Virtual Filmmaking* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012), 4.

68 Compton, "Casual Creators," 7.

ous games, including *MineCraft*,[69] *Planet Coaster*,[70] *TrackMania*,[71] as well as musical performances recreated in physics simulators.[72] All these different audiovisual works fit the category of machinima animations, each software acting as a casual creator in which the synchronization aspect constitutes a framework for the creative process. While Robbins's videos mostly aim to be entertaining rather than serious artistic statements, they nonetheless demonstrate the author's subjective interpretation of the music which accompanies them. In doing so, they also constitute instances of music remediation, communicating to an audience a unique perspective on already established musical artifacts. Because of the DIY character of these practices, the audiovisual works produced represent an invaluable source of information on how a large number (in comparison to the relatively narrow category of professional artists) of individuals express their own subjective experience of music through visual means.

Line Rider

Having looked at visualization software with different degrees of human involvement, as well as traditional games used as cinematic tools, it is now possible to examine a case that sits somewhere in between the two categories.

Line Rider was originally popularized as a game, published on flash games websites, despite lacking many of the core features that would define it as such (e.g., a clear goal, a score system, fail conditions and such). On the other hand, it has been *de facto* repurposed as a tool for the creation of animated music videos, even if it offers limited possibilities compared to actual graphic design and animation software. It is described as a "toy" by its author, highlighting the entertainment aspect. Technically it falls into the category of sandbox games, which greatly overlaps with casual creators. Compton recognizes it as a casual creator and describes it as follows:

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69 DoodleChaos [Mark Robbins], "I Synchronized my Minecraft World to Music," YouTube video, uploaded on September 8, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y88ezQ8b-pfE.

70 DoodleChaos, "Music Synchronized Roller Coaster (Front Seat POV)," YouTube video, uploaded on January 24, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElrDJO6XemA.

71 DoodleChaos, "Ride of the Valkyries – TrackMania," YouTube video, uploaded on January 11, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6fxsvQxV8g.

72 DoodleChaos, "Visualizing Piano with Bouncing Balls (Chopin – Nocturne op.9 No.2)," YouTube video, uploaded on May 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWwTI00B-HKI.

> *Line Rider*, a 2006 online Flash game by then-student Boštjan Čadež, is a casual creator where the user draws lines, which are then used as a sledding hill by a tiny physics simulated person on a sled. Users began creating intricate and wildly creative levels where the sledder's fall would synchronize with music, staging user-led contests and collecting and archiving levels.[73]

In the years after its release, *Line Rider* became quite popular by browser games standards. Alongside the many casual players, it also spawned a smaller committed community of creators who mastered the limited tools of the software turning it into what could arguably be considered a distinct artistic medium.[74] The first decade mostly saw *Line Rider* trackmakers learning to manipulate the physics engine, exploiting glitches, or drawing painstakingly intricate backgrounds for the rider to traverse, with the main goal to display their virtuosity in the context of a fairly competitive environment rather than expressing artistic intent.[75]

A big shift occurred around the mid-2010s, when the viral success of a few *Line Rider* videos accelerated the already growing tendency towards music synchronization within the community. These groundbreaking tracks are fairly different from each other: "Ragdoll,"[76] a short comedic driven music synced track created in 2016 by David Lu (aka Conundrumer) was one the first *Line Rider* tracks to employ relatively tight synchronization. The next year saw "This Will Destroy You,"[77] by Bevibel Harvey (aka Rabid Squirrel), a monumental hour-long track named after the self-titled album of a post-rock band, which demonstrated the medium's capacity for a wide range of emotional and artistic expression through the use of simple visual analogues that subjectively interpreted the soundtrack.[78] Finally, the same year,

73 Compton, "Casual Creators," 250–51.

74 This claim relies on what Elleström calls the "contextual qualifying aspect," which "involves forming media types on the grounds of historically and geographically determined practices, discourses and conventions. We tend to think about a media type as a cluster of media products that one begins to use in a certain way, or gain certain qualities, at a certain time and in a certain cultural and social context." Elleström, "The Modalities of Media II," 60.

75 See Line Rider Review, "A History of Line Rider [Lecture]," Youtube video, uploaded on Apr 22, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_kwIPDWSO8.

76 Conundrumer [David Lu], "Line Rider – Ragdoll," YouTube video, uploaded on February 14, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMgnZYpbM-M.

77 Rabid Squirrel/Bevibel Harvey, "This Will Destroy You: A Line Rider Feature Film," YouTube video, uploaded on July 23, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qasxqKScOfY.

78 While the specific tools are different, the basic process and underlying perceptual rules are similar to what has already been studied in relation to audiovisuality as a whole. For
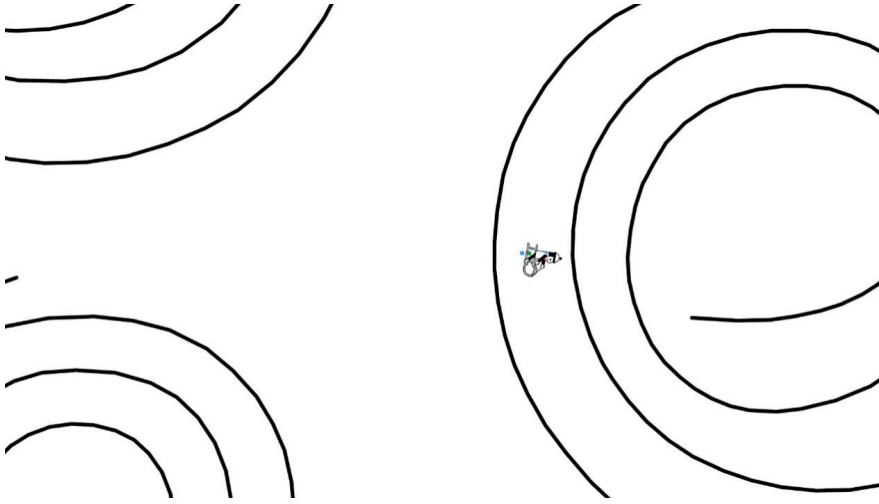
Fig. 5 – Still frame from Bevibel Harvey's *This Will Destroy You* (see note 77).

the already mentioned YouTube creator DoodleChaos published his first track, "Mountain King,"[79] a light-hearted visualization of Grieg's famous piece which quickly became the most viewed *Line Rider* video of all time.

While the previous technical virtuosity-driven tradition had produced works that were appraised based on parameters virtually inaccessible to anyone outside of the small *Line Rider* community itself, these innovative pieces focused on entertainment and artistic qualities which could be appreciated by a wider audience, building their visuals on relatively simple yet expressive graphic elements on top of tight music synchronization. In the following years, more and more trackmakers began following this new direction. From that point onward, music became *de facto* intrinsic to the *Line Rider* creative process. As I have argued earlier, in such cases the interaction with the casual creators also becomes a way to interpret the musical piece that guides the process. According to Compton:

example: "When sound and image on-screen are synchronized, we associate the two, perceiving them as a single entity, or at least as directly and intimately related. Once this takes place, other attributes of sound become attributed to the visual object too." Donnelly, *Occult Aesthetics*, 24–25.

79 DoodleChaos, "Line Rider – Mountain King," YouTube video, uploaded on October 7, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIz3klPET3o.

> The experience of a casual creator is in using the tool as a probe to explore the possibility space, and understanding one's movement through that space by engaging with the artifact itself, not just an abstraction in the user's mind.[80]

The two-dimensional infinite white canvas that constitutes *Line Rider*'s virtual environment therefore represents the visual counterpart that allows for a unique way of interpreting musical artifacts. In other words, whenever it is used as a tool to express music visually, the exploration of the *Line Rider* engine also becomes an exploration, through its visual translation, of the music piece itself. This notion is at the core of my understanding of practices of intermedial translation within casual creators as instances of embodied cognition, and, on account of the shared nature of the resulting audiovisual works, as instances of music remediation as well.

Line Rider videos follow the same general rules that determine what is or is not perceived as synchronization between music and image. Donnelly describes a similar process in film music:

> Indeed, the relationship of music and image often directly follows the principle of analogy... Sound and image analogues take the form of rhythm, gesture, and movement. For instance, a broad turn of camera movement can often synchronize with a palpable sweep of music.[81]

When compared to other media and software, it is however possible to point out some of the specificities of *Line Rider* as a tool for the creation of music animated videos. The open-ended nature of *Line Rider*, compared to rhythm games, as well as the fundamental role played by the already mentioned character, allows for a level of freedom that tends to push away from a strictly notational paradigm, suggesting instead a proximity to the opposite one: dance.

The avatar, known within the *Line Rider* community as Bosh (a shortened version of *Line Rider* creator's name, Boštjan Čadež), represents the single moving object exploring the digital canvas and through this movement tends to embody the trackmaker's subjective interpretation of the musical piece. *Line Rider*'s choreographies are necessarily a much more stylized and minimalistic form of dance, but the fact that its emotional range relies almost entirely on a single character's movement in a virtual space

80 Compton, "Casual Creators," 67.
81 Donnelly, *Occult Aesthetics*, 36.

does point to a similar mode of expression, the main difference being that the emphasis falls on Bosh's overall position in relation to the track lines, rather than the individual gestures of a dancer. *Line Rider*'s main approach to intermedial translation is in fact focused more on the overall movement than codified elements. Despite relying on a computer simulation, it is not built on top of mathematical structures which underly both music and visuals; instead, it interprets the emotional content of the soundtrack. As a consequence, the correlation between visual elements and their musical counterpart is often much less rigid and sometimes unexpected. For example, the character's speed is rarely made to correspond to the overall tempo of the music piece. The synchronization is achieved through highlighting strong beats with sudden changes of direction or interactions between the rider and track lines. Bosh's speed, on the other hand, typically correlates with emotional intensity rather than purely musical parameters. This emphasis on movement resonates with any cinematic production, but it is particularly significant in a software like *Line Rider* which entirely relies on the spatialization of music.

Another peculiarity comes from its status as a physics simulator, however limited in its capabilities. The tension and release dynamic that regulates most musical artifacts is in a way built into the *Line Rider* software itself. Laws that govern momentum and, most importantly, gravity are exploited to become expressive tools: Bosh is often made to fall on the downbeat, capitalizing on deeply ingrained and pseudo-synesthetic analogies that already found their way into language.

Its nature as a physics engine also poses a few questions, namely about its relation to traditional animation. On one hand, the artifacts produced with it are unambiguously categorized as animations, and whether it be considered machinima or not depends on how narrow of a definition is used. On the other hand, it would be extremely disingenuous to consider *Line Rider* an animation software *tout court*. The two fundamental elements—i.e., the character and the track lines—cannot be manipulated independently of each other, and simple black lines are the only drawing tool available. These constitute unnecessary constraints from the perspective of animation software, while they are warranted in the context of a casual creator.

The same limitations also make *Line Rider* videos a very effective and accessible form of intermedial translation. More than traditional animated films, *Line Rider* visualization can support and magnify musical predictability. Centering the entire sequence on a single character focuses the audience's attention, and its nature as a physics engine makes it possible to an-

ticipate their movements on the canvas; this allows the *Line Rider* spectator to "see" downbeats and accents in advance rather than passively following potentially unrelated images in a frame-by-frame animation. Gravity can be, and often is, used to create tension and expectations, which are then resolved by synchronizing the impact with a track line, mimicking the accompanying rhythm.

Conclusion

The main goal of my research has been to explore and further develop the notion of *intermedial translation* as an analytical tool with which to gain new insights into the analysis of audiovisual works, in particular ones that remediate music through synchronized visuals. In order to do so, I began by examining the history and use of the term *intermedial translation*, situating it at the intersection of intermedial studies and translation studies. Therefore, I first employed Elleström's modality model to clarify the differences entailed by translation between different media compared to verbal-based translation; then critiqued his notion of *media translation*, adopting a functional approach to translation as a way to discuss and refine the analytical tools developed thus far. Finally, I clarified how this perspective can be adapted to audiovisual analysis by engaging with literature on synchronicity/synchronization. Having developed and refined the notion of intermedial translation using sources from intermedial studies, translation studies, and audiovisuality, I put to use these theoretical tools by examining software and practices that result in musically animated videos. In particular, using *Line Rider* as my main case study, I have explored how the specifics of its visuals translate the chosen soundtrack, and how the resulting animated video differs from other forms of animation.

I have argued so far that the musical component plays a fundamental role in shaping the language of many audiovisual works, whether aimed at education, entertainment, or artistic expression, created through casual creators. As a source text in a process of translation, the soundtrack acts as a framework that guides both the creative process as well as the perception of the resulting audiovisual artifact. As I have mentioned earlier, this relation is not unidirectional: whenever an already existing composition is repurposed and displayed as soundtrack in an audiovisual object, the piece itself represents an instance of music remediation. By converting the soundtrack into visuals, each animated video contributes a new interpretation to the

history of the musical artifact it mediates, thus affecting the collective understanding of that particular piece. Together with the many other software and techniques with which audiovisual works are created, *Line Rider* situates itself in the complex network of constant music remediation, which operates through any type of audiovisual production and consumption, either through traditional channels or more extensively mediated by social media.

Further research into how these online communities and practices actually come to be and how they relate to the wider collective media consumption would open up possibilities for a more in-depth analysis than what I have produced so far and seems to be the logical next step. On the other hand, the notion of intermedial translation developed in this article is not medium-specific, and my own application to various categories of software is in fact primarily aimed at demonstrating its versatile nature as an analytical tool. Therefore, its implementation into other fields of studies also represents a way to further test this approach and hopefully achieve new insights through the type of analysis it makes possible.

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Abstract

In this article I discuss the notion of intermedial translation in the context of audiovisual works. I begin by presenting Lars Elleström's modality model as it provides the larger framework under which I then specify the scope of intermedial translation. After confronting different interpretation of the concept, I present my main contribution, which links this theoretical notion to the practice of music synchronization. I argue that the resulting approach provides a unique tool for the analysis of audiovisual artefacts. In order to further clarify this analytical perspective and prove its usefulness, I then proceed to apply it to artifacts created through a variety of software, ranging from music visualizers to video games. A look into 2006 Flash game *Line Rider* and the online community that spawned around it completes the article as my main case study.

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Yuval Sharon's *Twilight: Gods* (2020-21): Site-Specific Reimaginations of Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung**

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Twilight: Gods, conceived and directed by Yuval Sharon, was a drive-through opera that presented an hour-long reimagination of Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. I use "was" to underscore its ontology: it existed for its first staging in the Detroit Opera House Parking Center in October 2020 and was subsequently performed in Chicago's Millennium Lakeside Parking Garage from April to May of 2021 before drawing to a close. Both productions were co-commissioned by Michigan Opera Theatre (now called Detroit Opera) and Lyric Opera of Chicago. In this massively abbreviated reimagination, the adventurous director-producer Sharon adapted six scenes from the opera, the lyrics were translated into African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), and a drastically reduced orchestra performed different musical arrangements for every scene. Choosing a parking garage as a performance space was motivated by pandemic-related concerns but also shaped by creative thinking about operatic performance during lockdown. The event invited audiences to reflect on an experience utterly unlike canonical works as usually produced by large

opera companies. My account is grounded in recordings made in-house that Sharon shared with me.[1]

As the new artistic director of Detroit Opera, Sharon was quick to introduce the radical artistic visions he has been cultivating with his experimental opera company, The Industry, into his very first project in Detroit and Chicago, signaling the ascendency of a creative dialogue occurring in today's operatic ecosystem.[2] At The Industry, Sharon is known for taking opera off anything resembling a traditional proscenium stage and resituating it in alternative public spaces and unconventional sites: moving cars, a train station, and the LA State Historic Park. Not only did *Twilight: Gods* aptly meet pandemic-era restrictions by adapting to the necessary social distancing measures, but it was also "a very Yuval Sharon production" in the words of João Pedro Cachopo, with the pandemic serving as "an opportunity, or pretext" for Sharon's bold endeavor.[3]

Sharon staged a *deus-ex-machina* solution in the parking complex (pun intended) by transforming it into a theater and choreographing car movements through the multiple levels, evoking what David J. Levin calls the "geographization" of circling up and down in Wagner's *Ring*.[4] The performers' voices and instrumental music were broadcast through FM channels for audiences to hear via their car radios (this ensured they stayed completely socially distanced).[5] Spectators watched each of the six selected scenes as they drove up each level of the garage, and were asked to tune in to a different radio frequency every time, an action that further marked the transit between scenes. In so doing, the creative team simultaneously captured the

1 Insights gained from the Detroit production were drawn from an in-house videotaping that Yuval Sharon shared with me, which was not disseminated to the public, while the Chicago production was made available on YouTube for a limited period of time.

2 The Industry describes itself as "an experimental company that expands the operatic form" as shown on its webpage. See The Industry, website, accessed October 11, 2023, https://theindustryla.org.

3 Yuval Sharon, Zoom Resvés Opera - Session with Yuval Sharon, interview by João Pedro Cachopo and Luis Soldado (December 6, 2020). See Centro de Estudos de Sociologia e Estética Musical, "Resvés Ópera #2," YouTube video, uploaded on June 01, 2021, https://youtu.be/xMw3jJZ84_0?si=xlIqLKWcxxP3vZxM.

4 See Detroit Opera House, "In Conversation: On Wagner's *Ring*," YouTube video, uploaded on October 15, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9alnILH_ChY.

5 Detroit Opera House released a five-minute orientation video in which Sharon explains to audiences the logistics of the performance. See Detroit Opera House, "Twilight: Gods, Drive-Thru Opera Instructional Video," YouTube video, uploaded on October 13, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0A5VvivlPLw.

apocalyptic moment back in 2020 where we were all forced to be "atom-iz[ed] … in a [technological] bubble" *and* enabled yet another instantiation of Wagner's phantasmagoria of the invisible orchestra.[6]

Both productions boasted an acclaimed and racially diverse cast: Christine Goerke as Brünnhilde; Sean Panikkar, tenor of South Asian descent, as Siegfried; African-American bass Morris Robinson as Hagen; and celebrated mezzo-soprano Catherine Martin as Waltraute. Detroit Opera collaborated with poet Marsha Music, Detroit native and the daughter of pre-Motown record producer Joe Von Battle. Besides performing the role of Erda/Narrator, Music wrote and performed new poetry, which added references to what was, in 2020, a newly pandemic-stricken landscape of detritus culled from Wagner's opera. The Lyric Opera of Chicago for their part collaborated with local interdisciplinary artist avery r. young who not only played The Norns/Narrator but also composed new texts centering issues of systemic racism in the present-day US.

Both performances *and* productions of *Twilight: Gods* in Detroit and Chicago demand an extended investigation into the technological and ideological dimensions of site-specific reimaginations. But first, it is critical to contextualize them within the broader genealogy of site-specific and drive-through operas, and in particular Sharon's projects with The Industry. With these key set-ups in place, I call into question the notion of immersion as an essential part of the operatic experience, and put forth re-enchantment as an alternative phenomenological model, which captures the sense of play underlying site-specific operas. Building on Carolyn Abbate's concept of "ludic distance," I posit that re-enchantment is derived from our hyper-awareness of the material dimensions of hybrid media and technologies fleshed out before us. An intriguing moment of white noise in the Epilogue, I illustrate, simultaneously generates visceral pleasure in audiences and provokes reflections on the *technological* nature of the performance itself.[7] Moving on then to explicitly ideological considerations, I pose questions

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6 Detroit Opera House, "In Conversation."

7 David Levin discussed the "unsettling" possibilities that operatic stagings bring to opera, an already "unsettled" genre. I am borrowing his term in my article to illuminate how site-specific operas, far from replicating the operatic narrative, generates even more competing perceptions and interpretations in both the performance and production. See David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Also cited in Megan Steigerwald Ille, "Bringing Down the House: Situating and Mediating Opera in the Twenty-First Century" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2018), 6.

about the progressive aspirations of the creative team through a close examination of Scene 4 ("Siegfried's Funeral March"). Similarly troubling questions ensue from examining the ethics and politics of collaboration with the two Black poets who wielded significant creative agency in the opera.

The Drive-Through Opera: Experiencing the "Third Space"

Instead of approaching *Twilight: Gods* as driven by *either* the individual director's vision to "decolonize" opera *or* the pandemic alone, one must examine the broader phenomenon of drive-through opera and situate *Twilight: Gods* alongside Sharon's prior body of unconventional works. Only then can we better understand how site-specific opera engenders a novel mode of spectatorship evoking the concept of "third space," defined by Edward Soja as "a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange," which encompasses "a multiplicity of *real-and-imagined* places" that might be "incompatible [and] uncombinable."[8]

Since the beginning of the pandemic, several opera companies, like the Deutsche Oper Berlin and Opera Santa Barbara, have been staging performances in garages; thus, *Twilight: Gods* was neither radical nor novel in this regard.[9] But those endeavors were largely understood as temporary accommodations to the constraints of the moment, which preserved the basic mode of spectatorship.[10] Sharon's reimagination, in contrast, went beyond mere logistics. He not only undid staging conventions but wrote his own abbreviated English libretto. Furthermore, the creative team reorchestrated the work anew and collaborated with local artists Marsha Music and avery r. young in the Detroit and Chicago productions, respectively. Though the

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8   Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Malden: Blackwell, 1996), 5–6. Soja provides a thorough summary of the theorizations and debates of "thirdspace" put forth by notable thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, the former focusing on "lived spaces of representation" while the latter foregrounding "the trialectics of *space, knowledge, and power*" in his notion of heterotopia (15). See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27.

9   In June 2020, the Deutsche Oper Berlin deployed their opera house's car park to stage Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, albeit a ninety-minute rendition with a significantly reduced orchestral force. And in December 2020, Opera Santa Barbara staged *Carmen* as a "Live Drive-In" experience at the Ventura County Fairgrounds.

10   The singers still performed on elevated stages, and audiences still sat either on chairs or in cars.

Götterdämmerung libretto was radically cut down, whenever Sharon did use a scene from the original, the text might have been slightly shortened but generally matched its Wagnerian source: a brief tasting menu drawn from a gargantuan original.

Sharon's Productions & Characters	Original Scene from *Götterdämmerung*
Prologue	Newly generated text and poetry by Marsha Music Erda (Detroit); The Norns (Chicago) and avery r. young
Scene 1 ("Waltraute's Story") Waltraute	Act I Scene 3
Scene 2 ("Generations of Hatred") Alberich, Hagen	Act II Scene 2
Scene 3 ("Siegfried's Death") Siegfried, Three Rheinmaidens	Act III Scene 1-2
Scene 4 ("Siegfried's Funeral March") Supernumeraries, Erda (Detroit); The Norns (Chicago)	Act III Scene 2; Newly generated text and poetry by Marsha Music and avery r. young
Scene 5 ("Brünnhilde's Immolation") Brünnhilde	Act III Scene 3

A brief walk-through of Sharon's abbreviated narrative ensues: Erda/The Norns opened the Prologue, appearing on a filmed video played outside the parking garage as they boiled down the *Ring*'s backstory in AAVE within a few minutes. They continued their narration through the interscene audio feed, functioning like a soundtrack as audiences drove up to the next level. Scene 1, drastically shortened from the original, depicted Waltraute delivering a monologue on her disillusioned father, Wotan, who awaited the destruction of his empire. While Wagner portrays Waltraute begging her sister Brünnhilde to return the ring to the Rhinemaidens, Brünnhilde did not perform here since each singer could only appear once, and Christine Goerke, who played Brünnhilde, must sing in the final Immolation scene. Scene 2 was taken verbatim from the original, featuring Alberich persuading his son, Hagen, in his dreams to help him claim the ring by killing Siegfried. Scene 3 portrayed Hagen stabbing Siegfried to death, followed by the obsessive repetitions of Siegfried's Death motif before dovetailing into Scene 4, the highlight of the opera. Marsha Music and avery r. young,

who played Erda and The Norns respectively, engaged in a live narration that adapted Wagner's *Ring* to the US context today. New musical content was also presented here: a Motown-style spectacular lightshow orchestrated and arranged by Ed Windels while accompanied by dancing stagehands. Scene 5 depicted Brünnhilde riding off into the funeral pyre in a Ford Mustang convertible (in the Detroit production), which she addressed—faithful to the original libretto—as "Grane, my horse."

As discerned from my brief account, while all theaters, as architectural spaces and as artistic genres, involve "third space," this particular performance event was much more complex and layered. Not only did we have the parking garage space, but there was also the imagined past Germanic landscape of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, the nineteenth-century past of Wagner, and traditional theater staging. A certain fantasy appeal came with the idea of performing an opera in a Detroit parking garage, given the city's reputation as the "Motor City" of times long ago, though it remains debatable whether both productions managed to forge "deeper connections" with local communities as Sharon promised.[11]

On Re-Enchantment: Fleshing out Media

Situating both productions alongside other site-specific operas produced by The Industry illuminates broader trends in today's experimental opera scene.[12] The drive-through nature of *Twilight: Gods* and the mediated lis-

11 A nuanced consideration of access and equity must account for the financial situations of Black communities in Detroit and Chicago. In Detroit's case, since the 1960s, overseas industrial competition and local socioethnic tensions have led the city into rapid de-industrial decline and widespread unemployment, with its local Black community hit the hardest. As David Morris asserts, underneath the mass consumption of Detroit always hid inequalities fueled by "American ideologies of expansionism and consumerism by elites." These inequalities, alongside issues of access, are cast into sharper relief in *Twilight: Gods* as one considers the disproportionate gap between a high proportion of Black actors represented among its performers and the low attendance of the opera by the local Black communities. This is likely attributed to the ticket prices, which are financially oriented toward a middle-class consumer who possesses a car. See Yuval Sharon, "Opera Through the Lens of the Black and Jewish Communities," *The Detroit Jewish News*, April 27, 2022, https://detroitopera.org/opera-through-the-lens-of-the-black-and-jewish-communities/; David Z. Morris, "Cars with the Boom: Identity and Territory in American Postwar Automobile Sound," in "Shifting Gears," special issue, *Technology and Culture* 55, no. 2 (2014): 333.

12 Site-specific operas produced by The Industry have drawn much attention from scholars such as Megan Steigerwald Ille and Jelena Novak. More recent literature on *Invisible Cities*

tening experience combine aspects of *Hopscotch* (2015) and *Invisible Cities* (2013). Both operas were directed by Sharon, who then contributed his artistic vision to *Twilight: Gods*.[13] While audience members in *Twilight: Gods* listened through their car's FM radio, audiences in *Invisible Cities* donned on wireless headphones as they roamed through Los Angeles' historic Union Station.[14] *Hopscotch*, which came two years after *Invisible Cities*, shared more similarities with *Twilight: Gods*. Billed as a "Mobile Opera for 24 Cars," it seated audiences in limousines as they were driven across LA to witness singers perform in each locale, at times singing in the same car as them. The orchestra was often heard through the car's FM radio but sometimes instrumentalists performed inside the car. In both mobile operas, everyday non-artistic, "invisible" activities were reconfigured into new modes of performative engagements and technical play.[15]

These site-specific performances have led historians to propose new operatic phenomenologies, positing heightened immersion on the part of audiences. As there is no stage, no fixed viewpoint, and no proscenium arch to tell audiences how to orientate themselves, a more intense and attentive engagement is said to ensue as the producers and some scholars suggest. But I want to challenge this perspective, first by outlining scholarship that addresses certain phenomenological and sociological aspects of site-spe-

and *Sweet Land* can be found respectively in Megan Steigerwald Ille, "The Operatic Ear: Mediating Aurality," *Sound Stage Screen* 1, no. 1 (2021): 119–43, and Jelena Novak, "*Sweet Land*, a New Opera by The Industry," *Sound Stage Screen* 1, no. 1 (2021): 275–83.

13 Upon seeing the drive-through productions generate rave reviews from audiences, James Darrah, the new artistic director of Long Beach Opera, followed suit and conceived a drive-in production of Philip Glass's *Les Enfants terribles* in May 2021 with added English narration.

14 Audiences of both operas experienced what James Wierzbicki calls "wrapped" listening, which he defines as a form of listening that "we likely take for granted when we encounter them in our everyday lives but which we tend to celebrate when they are artificially re-created by stereophonic audio systems." See James Wierzbicki, "Rapt/Wrapped Listening: The Aesthetics of 'Surround Sound'," *Sound Stage Screen* 1, no. 2 (2021): 102–3.

15 In *Hopscotch*, audiences chose one of the three routes, each of which took them all across LA like a typical road trip. The windshield became the cinematic frame through which audiences viewed the performance, and automobility served as the means for them to enjoy the performance. In *Twilight: Gods*, audiences followed the path *choreographed* by the parking complex and were instructed to tune in to different radio channels as they ascended through the levels, though the creative team could have just broadcast the whole event on one frequency. Clearly, the act of retuning served as a form of techno-magical caesura by using irrational rituals to play on spectators' habits, leading them to willingly suspend disbelief while caught up in technical play. More in Sharon, "Resvés Ópera #2."

cific opera. Wagner's own vision of immersive acoustics (manifested in the design of his Bayreuth *Festspielhaus*) is ridden in practice with paradoxes, which have been analyzed by Gundula Kreuzer.[16] Then, we come to a final question: does recognizing the futility of technological illusion generate disenchantment or "re-enchantment" in the genre of site-specific opera?

The promotional language of *Twilight: Gods* is saturated with references to seamlessness in the operatic experience. The performance event was described as a "part immersive installation," which "connects Wagner's mythological world with the here-and-now of our city and our time"—a formulation that seems to allow no gap (no dropped call, no missed connection) between the fictional world of the opera and the physical site of the performance.[17] For some critics, this is taken as a given and a plus for all site-specific opera: for instance, Megan Steigerwald Ille foregrounds the immersive and interactive aspects of site-specific opera in discussing The Industry's 2015 mobile opera *Hopscotch*. She suggests that the marriage of the opera's fictional world with the physical site of performance "validated [the] audience members' feelings" that they are actively participating in the operatic diegesis.[18] Audience co-creation of an identifiable, shared meaning is seen as contributing to a heightened sense of immersion, which is enabled, as she sees it, by how *Hopscotch* prioritizes the visual over the aural in storytelling. By inviting audiences to "engage with space first, and sound second,"[19] site-specific opera positions sound as secondary to the visual spectacle, and this hypothesized prioritization is critical to an immersive force.

However, does immersion inevitably enable illusion (or vice versa)? Is sight indeed prioritized over sound? And how exactly does the alternative site construct new layers of "unsettling" possibilities, triggering perceptions and interpretations that are inspired by the non-theatrical environment?

We might start by reimagining "site," seeing the site not as a simple ge-

16 See Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nine-teenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

17 "TWILIGHT: GODS," Detroit Opera, official website, uploaded on October 17, 2020, https://detroitopera.org/season-schedule/twilight-gods/.

18 In discussing The Industry's *Hopscotch*, Steigerwald Ille posited that the "physical spaces—which seem to exist simultaneously within past 'movie worlds' and the reality of an urban city—validated audience members' feelings that they themselves are also part of a quasi-cinematic experience." See Steigerwald Ille, "Live in the Limo: Remediating Voice and Performing Spectatorship in Twenty-First-Century Opera," *The Opera Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2021): 12.

19 Steigerwald Ille, "Live in the Limo," 13.

ospatial given—man-made structures plus landscaping with specific GPS coordinates, lying in wait—but as a physical locus that itself, weirdly and unpredictably gains an event-character by going from place to phenomenon through a dynamic interface with media, technology, bodies, objects, and the human imagination. This reimagination of "site" makes room for a noisy media ecology that embraces emerging meanings and serendipitous, incongruous experiences not obviously immanent to the site itself, perhaps not even enabled or made easier by it, nor foreseen in the original creative plan. We enliven site-specific opera by paying attention to the unscripted—technological glitches and random accidents—which should all be reconceived as generative processes leading to a re-enchantment that is, specifically, not predicated on immersion.

Bayreuth Encore

In order to untangle immersion, illusion, enchantment, and the accidental, we do need to make a brief detour, and consider the theater where the immersive experience of opera has conventionally been said to originate: Wagner's Bayreuth. The Bayreuth *Festspielhaus* manifested Wagner's vision of ideal acoustics that resulted in immersive listening, speaking to a genealogy of acoustic thought dominating nineteenth-century listening habits. Innovations famously included hiding the orchestra pit, so audiences could be completely absorbed by the stage action, and arranging the orchestra on descending steps, which shapes the sound in uncanny ways, generating an immersive acoustics.[20] Consider one of scores of cross-sections of the Bayreuth stage published since 1876: this one is from 1904 (see figure 1). These innovations are now legend: the orchestra pit was completely covered over such that audiences were unable to see the orchestra—the human labor of sound production—nor even the reading lights on the music stands of the musicians. In this way, the audiences' attention was (or, so as the theory goes) fixated on the stage.

This theory has received support from scholars including Nina Eidsheim and Megan Steigerwald who affirm that Wagner's Bayreuth contributes to an immersive listening experience. Eidsheim asserts that the

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20 See more in Meredith C. Ward, "The 'New Listening': Richard Wagner, Nineteenth-Century Opera Culture, and Cinema Theatres," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 43, no. 1 (2016): 88–106.

psychoacoustics of a well-designed concert hall gives rise to the "feeling of being immersed in a sound." Steigerwald argues that site-specific productions simultaneously participate in the genealogy of immersive listening associated with Wagner's Bayreuth *and* enact notions of estrangement in performance.[21]
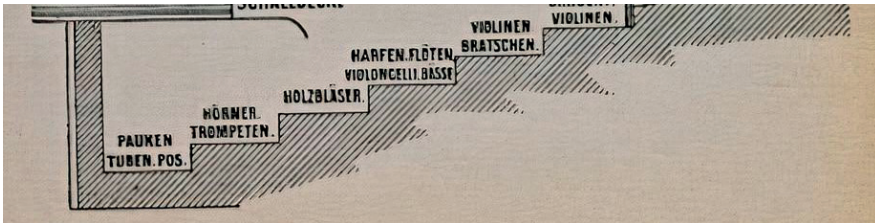
Fig. 1 – Cross-sectional view of the hidden orchestral pit in Wagner's *Festspielhaus*. Wolfgang Golther, *Bayreuth* (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1904), 80.

But was the theory correct? Drawing on Gundula Kreuzer's work, I expose an inherent paradox illuminating an underlying tension between theory and practice, which makes us re-consider the whole myth of immersive listening and its application to site-specific opera.[22] While Wagner resorted to strategic architectural maneuvers that aimed at an illusory, immersive experience for audiences, Kreuzer has dismantled his edifice. In *Curtain, Gong, Steam*, she exposes the ultimate *failure* of Wagner's illusionist agenda. Exploring contemporary theatrical illusionist technologies like steam (intended to veil both the artificiality of stage representation and its own nature as an industrial product), she argues that the multisensorial nature of Wagnerian technologies could never overcome its own material realities.[23] The hissing sounds created by the steam engine that sprouted out the mists and vapors, as well as the oily, metallic odor given off, shatter the

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21   See Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 58–94; Steigerwald Ille, "Bringing Down the House," 73–116.

22   See Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam*.

23   Gundula Kreuzer, "Steam," in *Curtain, Gong, Steam*, 162–214.

illusionist agenda that Wagner painstakingly strove for: the mechanicality of technology is always evident.[24]

Kreuzer posits a failure of the Wagnerian immersive agenda and describes a layered tension between the theory and practice of his technologies of immersion. As she indicates, on the one hand, he pushed for the return to nature in his operas, and on the other hand, he inadvertently depended on the very technologies (steam engines, stage machines, sophisticated props, architectural affordances) to summon "nature" to the stage. Furthermore, while he relished advanced operatic technologies, he had to conceal the technological mechanism so that the "phantasmagoria" would not lose its ability to delude.[25] Kreuzer makes us realize that the sense of smell—but more radically, also the sense of hearing—can be disenchanting senses "exposing technology" at work, always bringing the subject back to the consciousness of his or her own body in space, in time, and in history.

Parking Garage Surroundings

The conundrum of Bayreuth is relevant to site-specific opera, but not in the way we might first assume. Kreuzer makes an association between technological "reveals" and disenchantment. But in *Twilight: Gods*, technological "reveals" can engender, instead of flat-out disappointment, a sense of awe. Yes, the pursuit of technological illusion is futile—due to technology's very inability to overcome itself—but in Sharon's version, a technological "reveal" makes space for re-enchantment.

In site-specific stagings like *Twilight: Gods*, re-enchantment is not about being immersed in and transfixed by a fictional stage world, but about the cultivation of an alternative model of spectatorship—what Carolyn Abbate calls "ludic distance"—which is characterized by a simultaneous absorption in and detachment from the singular experienced performance.[26] Enchant-

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24 Kreuzer further makes us question the various nineteenth-century personal accounts of audiences who attended Wagner's music dramas and remarked on their hypnotic experiences. How much is fictionalized or romanticized?

25 More on Wagnerian phantasmagorias, the earliest "wonders of technology," in Theodor W. Adorno, "Phantasmagoria," in *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, new edition (London: Verso, 2005), 74–85. Adorno posits that the deliberate concealment of labor and the source of production gives rise to illusion and the experience of magic.

26 Carolyn Abbate, "Wagner, Cinema, and Redemptive Glee," *The Opera Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (2005): 602.

ment is derived not despite but *because of* our hyperawareness of the material underpinnings of the hybrid media and technologies laid bare before us,[27] thus gesturing to the ontological notion that we experience awe precisely because we are reassured by constant affirmations of the real-ness of the world.

To begin with, the very nature of the drive-through operatic experience abounds in contradictions. Immersive? Far from it. Viewing the performance from inside a car insulates audiences from the live action itself. Proximity between audiences and performers, and the enveloping lighting design—these are pro-immersive elements. But being confined within one's car and constrained by technologically mediated listening—live sound outside your window, plus simultaneous radio broadcast, plus the growl of the internal combustion engines surrounding you—push the opposite way, leading to a barricaded, distant experience. The listening experience even provokes acousmatic anxiety—where is the mouth that is singing? That one there, or over there? Is it live or is it lip-synched?

The experience of an audiovisual gap attests to the broader phenomenon of operas that involve mediated listening such as *Invisible Cities*.[28] But rather than engender "distance" or "disconnect[ion]," as Eidsheim claims, this phenomenological experience takes on the form of distracted pleasure, which holds true even before the start of the performance event.[29] In what follows, I draw on the 2020 video recording to illustrate key insights. I will be using "was" to describe the event, and while my verb tenses necessarily shift during my analysis—and I refer to an opera (a "work") with an ostensible permanence—the ephemeral reality of the event should not be forgotten.

Multiple objects of interest competed for audiences' attention the moment they trailed into the parking garage. An apocalyptic mood set in right away, contributed by static blocks of indecipherable pitches existing purely as timbre. Attention was soon after diverted to other masked audiences entering the garage and security staffs who were maintaining site safety. This apoc-

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27 Estela Ibáñez-García exemplifies how "witnessing the workings of illusion strengthens its grip on us" in her extended examination of Ingmar Bergman's *The Magic Flute* (1975). She argues that the unveiling of the artwork's artificiality, far from hindering audiences' engagement with film, enhances "engrossment with its magic." See Estela Ibáñez-García, "Displaying the Magician's Art: Theatrical Illusion in Ingmar Bergman's *The Magic Flute* (1975)," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 33, no. 3 (2021): 197, 211.

28 While attending the performance of *Invisible Cities*, Eidsheim asserts that she heard sounds she did not see when she was plugged into "the omnisonorous sound world" of the headphones. See Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 84.

29 Eidsheim, 58–59.

alyptic mood extended beyond the diegetic world to the real world outside, which could further be thought of as belonging to the operatic experience itself.[30] This perspective is echoed by musicologist Nicholas Stevens who drove all the way to Detroit to watch the opera. Making sure to avoid contact with anyone along the way, he characterized his road trip experience as deeply isolating and ominous.[31] This gestures to the idea that an audience experience that extends beyond traditional performance spaces makes one particularly prone to a form of perceptual awakening. One's sensory horizon is expanded by *feeling* the space and continually being enchanted by the idiosyncrasies of the new site.[32] Therefore, getting past opera's illusionist agenda and refocusing on the interactions among various materials expands the notion that audiences, performers, stagehands, and the site itself are collaborative, co-constitutive media of this new operatic fabric.

Once the cars entered the garage, audiences found themselves enveloped by the purplish and cyanish hues of the interior (see figure 2), which subjected them on the one hand to the hypnotic effect of the lighting, but, on the other, heightened their cognizance of its mechanism as the production of technological labor was laid in plain sight before them. This included the technologists' sophisticated maneuvering of professional gadgets and the physical operations of stagehands. Throughout the performance, black-clad stagehands were conspicuously visible, responsible for moving scenery while in plain sight and facilitating the opera, evoking the role of *kuroko* (stagehands) in Japanese Kabuki theater who are similarly visible in black costumes. While they do not directly participate in the stage action, these

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30 Katherine Ellis echoed this view in reference to open-air opera, positing that it "was not just site-specific in the sense of performance environment, but in that of audience experience. It was another entertainment alongside processions, street dancing, and festive banquets. As such it was more of an outing than an event. The journey, lead-up, and return were as important as the event itself" More in Katherine Ellis, "Open-Air Opera and Southern French Difference at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," in *Operatic Geographies: The Place of Opera and the Opera House*, ed. Suzanne Aspden (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 192.

31 Sharon, "Resvés Ópera #2." This brings to mind Eidsheim's discussion of her 2013 experience at Union Station in LA for *Invisible Cities*: "multiple layers of the city are already invoked and activated for and by audience members before and after their arrival." Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 82.

32 Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan addresses the gap between one's assumptions of a place, which is built upon "abstract knowledge" about it, and one's experience of it, which "takes longer to acquire" for it comprises "a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms." More in Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 183–4.

Fig. 2 – Panning shot of cars entering the parking complex right before Scene 1 ("Waltraute's Story"). We heard a static chord played by a synthesized keyboard, and saw visible stagehands facilitating the event.

figures recur throughout and remain quite visible.[33] As drivers ascended to the next level of the garage, more stagehands and technologists appeared, making no attempt to conceal the operations of changing scenery and ensuring safety.

Throughout the evening, the stagehands gradually took on more active roles, culminating in Scene 4 ("Siegfried's Funeral March") where they became the star performers in a celebratory light show seen through a thick mist (see figure 3). The march began more or less as in Wagner's original, albeit with reduced orchestration. But then, there's a sudden shift, a fundamental recomposition amounting to an entirely new piece: a quasi-1960s Motown episode, generating a strong groove through the rich blend of wind and percussion instruments articulating rapid passing notes, chromaticism, and climactic punctuations on important beats. Slowly weaving through the cars, the stagehands shone their flashlights on graffiti on the walls, illuminating the names of dead gods. They broke into a synchronized dance, with their flashlights as props: orange, white, and purple cones of light flashed through the space.

33 It must be noted, though, that the use of *Kuroko*-like figures is not unprecedented. Patrice Chéreau also used them in his 1976 production of the *Ring*, but Sharon deployed them in much more radical ways in *Twilight: Gods*.

Fig. 3 – Lightshow in Scene 4 ('Siegfried's Funeral March") where car headlights, candles, and flashlights emitting various hues constituted the overall visual fabric of the opera. ©Mitty Carter/Michigan Opera Theatre.

The stagehands morphed into supernumeraries, into a kind of Detroit Techno ballet troupe. They inhabited the story world and were no longer merely arranging that world's props and scenery. Audiences, likewise, were no longer passive viewers, but "co-creators" within the operatic setting as they "perform[ed] 'double-duty'"—as both audiences and facilitators of the performance.[34] Phenomenologically speaking, this scene seemed tailor-made to illustrate Kreuzer's point—audiences were forced to confront the technology of the performance. The well-lit garage generated a plethora of opportunities for serendipitous performer-audience co-creation of spectacle, which ran alongside the operatic performance. In the process, the mode of reception shifted to the third-person, which allowed one to oversee the event from a distanced perspective. But beyond that, the distracted pleasure engendered by the oscillating interplay between the fictional world

34 Keren Zaiontz, "Ambulatory Audiences and Animate Sites: Staging the Spectator in Site-Specific Performance," in *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice*, ed. Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 168. Zaiontz's notion of audiences as "doubled subjects" co-creating the performance is also cited in Steigerwald Ille, "Live in the Limo."

and the technological labor of the performance resonates with what Abbate calls "ludic distance," which enables audiences

> to be aware of and susceptible to representations of a magical world, and to sensual music, in a state of mixed absorption and distraction that is not necessarily inimical to (or disdainful of) that world or that music. And it is not that we are "absorbed" in the work and its fictions and "distracted" by the singers or the performance. It is also possible, and no small pleasure, to be "absorbed" by the performers or the materiality of the performance, becoming "distracted" by the very process of getting caught up in the fiction. … It's in effect a state of delight in technology, in the sense that how things are made, and the means and media and errors through which they come to be, are essentially technological amusements.[35]

This phenomenological model effectively captures the sense of play underlying the performance marked by its media plenitude, leading to the oversaturation of the senses and a greater freedom in choosing what to focus on. Unlike in a typical operatic setting, which strives for immersion by concealing the source of light in the illusion, pulling spectators away from the here-and-now in the dark to the brightly lit onstage spectacle, in *Twilight: Gods*, the spectacular lightshow put up by the stagehands, cars, and candles *fleshed out* before our eyes what immersion is all about: a visual illusion invoked and sustained by illumination. When the operating mechanisms lie naked in front of audiences, revealing their workings, part of the magic is inadvertently lost. But it is a habit of thought to equate the technological "reveal" with the removal of fantasy or enchantment. Wonder is not diminished; instead, it is elevated in such moments, which in turn generate more questions. Admiration is provoked by simply being aware that *something ordinary can become extraordinary*. And that results in a heightened sense of wonder.

Beyond Wonder: Ineffable White Noise

Another way of considering this phenomenological model is to say we look *at* the medium instead of *through* it. This same effect became overwhelming in the Epilogue, when site determines sounds as much as *sounds create or evoke site*. The ending had Christine Goerke perform Brünnhilde's Immo-

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35 Abbate, "Wagner, Cinema, and Redemptive Glee": 602–3.

Fig. 4 – Final scene where Christine Goerke performs Brünnhilde's Immolation scene on the rooftop, among the crushed shells of burnt-out cars. ©Mitty Carter/Michigan Opera Theatre.

lation scene on the rooftop level, among the shells of burnt-out car wrecks, departing afterwards in a custom-built white Ford Mustang convertible (see figure 4). Then, Erda's voice entered, accompanied by the continuous hissing of white noise over the FM radio as she concluded the opera as follows:

> And here today are hallowed halls
> That must come down, 'tis time to fall
> Constructed of a filthy sod
> of hate and greed, those lesser gods
> Tis time to see them all be gone
> Their twilights given way to dawn
> And generations bound and trussed
> Be loosed and freed and lifted thus
> The twilight of old gods is soon
> The time of *Götterdämmerung* [36]

And it's exactly here that we heard technology's unruly operations loud and

36 Michigan Opera Theatre, "TWILIGHT: GODS TEXT AND TRANSLATION," 2020, https://detroitopera.org/app/uploads/2020/10/Twilight-Gods-Text-and-Translation-101620-UPDATE-2.pdf.

clear; they were embodied in white noise broadcasted with and through the musical performance, effectively undermining the operatic plenitude and estranging audiences from Wagner's monumentality at the end of the *Ring*.[37] While audiences were expecting a spectacular finale, the wrecked cars, smoke, and white noise evoked a dystopian Motor City/Valhalla. This is an example of what Melle Kromhout calls the "*noise resonance of sound media*"—fluctuating shades of white noise now becoming the main musical event, eventually overtaking the performance itself.[38]

What was both unsettling and intriguing here was not the music, but the recorded white noise that spilled into the diegetic world of opera, pushing one to ponder what exactly this was. Several audiences singled out this anxiety-inducing moment, reminded of the uncanny buzzes they heard in garages when spatial interference disrupted their radio signal. This might be true here. Audiences were driving up to the top level and tuning in to a new channel, which might have generated the static. Or it could have been the scratchy sound of a stylus running through the groove of a vinyl record. If so, the noise would intentionally render a sense of pastness and its associated intimacies. This striking evocation of sonic references to the media of Motown stimulated audiences to look back on and be reminded of Detroit's Motown history.

On a more fundamental level, audiences were listening *to* the acoustic traces of technological mediation as they journeyed through time and space, crashing into a musical performance that asked them to hear, listen, reflect, and remember the *technological* nature of the audible white

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37   This notion of an ephemeral flaw being documented in a permanent form via a wrong medium, which enables one to reflect on issues of production and the efficacy of sound, is stimulated by Carolyn Abbate's push for scholars to be more attentive to pure materiality and the physicality of performance, as a way into philosophical provocations of various kinds. Resisting reading-as-cryptography in which demystification or identification becomes "the default condition for humanists engaged with works and texts," Abbate instead focuses on "the textures and the physicality they convey" and advocates for scholars to shift their attention from closed interpretation to open-ended expressive possibilities. More in Carolyn Abbate, "Overlooking the Ephemeral," *New Literary History* 48, no. 1 (2017): 79–80.

38   Melle Jan Kromhout, *The Logic of Filtering: How Noise Shapes the Sound of Recorded Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 13; italics in the original. This also reminds us of Eidsheim's experience at *Invisible Cities*. She describes hearing the performer's voice "with more strength and presence from the headphone signal than from the acoustic transmission," and further elaborated, "I finally understood that acoustics offers more to us than delivering optimal sound and optimizing sound. I learned that acoustic and spatial specificity also take part in giving form to the figure of sound." See Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 58–59.

noise—a sonic counterpart to Kreuzer's steam—betraying its own materiality by exposing the channels through which audiences consumed the operatic performance.[39] In the process, audiences were made acutely aware not only that they were receptors of operatic stimuli but also that they derived visceral pleasure from this distracting interplay of acoustic materialities where performance constituted only *one* aspect of the experience. This awareness effectively undermines the claims of immersion often associated with site-specific performances.

In understanding the visceral pleasure associated with such "noisy" moments, one need look no further than stagings in traditional theaters, particularly moments when noises happen both on and off stage, the former belonging to the operatic diegesis while the latter accidentally and distractingly reveals the inner clockwork. Despite the presence of extraneous noises, a certain moving appeal is derived. The sudden intensification of auditory attention in response demonstrates a sharp transition from what James Wierzbicki calls "wrapped" to "rapt" listening, the former referring to an everyday mode of listening one "likely take[s] for granted" while the latter has "nothing at all to do with the content or quality of the music, or the sonic phenomenon, at hand" but "only with the intensity with which the listener relates, psychologically, to the sonic stimulation."[40] White noise and accidentally distracting moments in operas jolt audiences into a "rapt" state, which enables them to embrace sound's multiple potentialities.

White noise gestures to an "unsettling" site of meaning-making: it simultaneously represents acoustic surplus and resistance to interpretation.[41] On the one hand, this drastic moment forces a point-blank confrontation with what's *there*—the graininess, distortions, and randomness of sounds, having no time for meaning. On the other hand, it encourages one to listen *elsewhere*—searching for meaning lying "beyond the frame or behind the technology"—as one tries imposing one's own spatial subjectivities and

39 This view resonates with Jonathan Sterne's discussion of listening practices that telegraph operators adopted in the 1850s. The operators discovered that they could "discern messages" more efficiently by listening to the "noise that began as a by-product of the machine's printing process," which gradually, over time, became "its most important aspect." See Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 147.

40 Wierzbicki, "Rapt/Wrapped Listening," 102.

41 Here again, I am borrowing David Levin's use of the term "unsettling." See Levin, *Unsettling Opera*.

fantasies onto the site.[42] Ephemeral associations transport the audience to a kind of "third space" that co-exists with the performance unfolding in the here-and-now.

Staging opera outside of the familiar grandeur of the theater in the anxiety-inducing space of a garage cultivated a heightened receptivity to the spatial experience of a specific time and place, opening up new worlds of meaning. The dingy top level of the parking garage, accompanied by the hum of dystopian white noise and crackle of burning cars, created the effect of immediacy, calling forth the atmosphere of apocalypse so characteristic of 2020 that was otherwise inaccessible in one's everyday life. Through exposing the material heterogeneity involved, white noise brought together both real and imaginary spaces that coexisted and extended beyond the borders of sound itself.

Furthermore, white noise unveiled the disparity between what one *saw* (Christine Goerke leaving in a Mustang and instrumentalists playing away) and what one *heard* (buzzing white noise), creating an uncanny collision of senses. In a single acoustic moment, listeners temporarily inhabited two sites at once: the real, physical site that occupied their vision, and a phantasmic one triggered by audible information, each jostling for attention.[43] This sensory disjunction makes one question the literalness of *site* in site-specific performance: how much of one's experience is rooted *in* site, *about* site, and *beyond* site? It might be freeing to pursue a notion of site that transcends the physicality—and one's assumptions—of place. This is a critical point to bear in mind for it goes against the immersive argument. The parking garage could even be reconceived as an instrument capable of producing its *own* idiosyncratic sounds and sound effects apart from the score, which directly constitutes the phenomenal reality of the performance. But far from being epiphenomenal to the performance event, white noise took on immense efficacy here by making one hyperaware of the material basis and agency of the medium of the very music one heard.

42 Holly Rogers, "The Audiovisual Eerie: Transmediating Thresholds in the Work of David Lynch," in *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, ed. Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2020), 265.

43 This disorienting sensation speaks more broadly to other technologically mediated site-specific performances as well, as observed in Eidsheim's experience at the performance of *Invisible Cities*. She described feeling "two simultaneous acoustic worlds rub up against each other," one occupied by the physical acoustic space, and the other provided by the headphones. See Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 89.

Motown Meeting Opera

While *Twilight: Gods* as a performance event engenders re-enchantment in audiences, both productions of the opera, which involved the *performance of a collaborative effort*, raise some thorny questions concerning racial politics and representation, thus demanding a more nuanced analysis. Present-day scholarship has tended to uncritically conflate the progressive intents of a performance with its overall effect or deliver a full-on neoliberal critique, which is then used as the chief basis for evaluating the opera's merits. However, I believe that it is possible to deliver thoughtful critiques and simultaneously recognize the aesthetic merits of the performance *and* production. A just evaluation of an artwork's overall significance is a balancing act that inevitably involves confronting difficult contradictions like this one.

Sincere efforts were made to create space for artistic collaborations with Black singers and writers, as observed in the predominantly Black casting for Alberich (Donnie Ray Albert), Hagen (Morris Robinson), and in the Detroit production, two of the Rhinemaidens (Olivia Johnson, Kaswanna Kanyinda).[44] Detroit poet Marsha Music and Chicagoan interdisciplinary artist avery r. young wielded creative agency in both productions as they not only composed new poetry, but also recited them as the narrator and Erda/The Norns during the performance.[45] Techno music broadcasted in the interscene audio feed and the Motown funeral scene are intended to invoke a collective cultural memory among local audiences who grew up with these familiar sounds. There is, however, a caveat that must be stated at once. No matter how well-intentioned the "hope" for inclusivity and the thought and labor that went into that goal, it is an open question whether, in the end, the productions succeeded in this regard—whether they truly fulfilled the ethical, redemptive terms they set for themselves.

First, it is key to contextualize *Twilight: Gods* within the broader discourse of opera's problematic relationship with race, as observed in the "lack of [B]lack authorial voices and failure to represent [B]lack subjectivity," as Ryan Ebright posits.[46] According to Naomi André, Black voices in

44 Siegfried is played by tenor Sean Panikkar who is of South Asian descent. Goerke and Martin, who play Brünnhilde and Waltraute respectively, are white.

45 The character Erda of course does not appear in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, having exited the *Ring* in *Siegfried* Act 3.

46 To illustrate, Ryan Ebright elaborated that in the Pulitzer's history, "jazz" is at times used as "a ghettoizing designation," which speaks to people's perception of Black music as a

opera have always been a rich but historically marginalized entity existing alongside the dominant "all-white and segregated opera scene" in the US up to the 1950s. This "shadow culture" is reflected in the scarcity of operas that fully center the Black experience.[47]

In this regard, though *Twilight: Gods* is not a fully-fledged Black opera but a reimagination of Wagner's opera, the collaboration with Black artists (Marsha Music, avery r. young) who wielded actual creative agency in both productions might, at first blush, seem like a socially progressive act. This might even be interpreted as an attempt to wrestle with Wagner's problematic legacy and opera's racist history at large.[48] While the collaboration with Black artists, musical crossover efforts, and inclusive casting practice speak to the creative team's progressive aims, one must be mindful of superficial displays of equality and not simply embrace the sharing of space—optically and musically speaking—as an automatic signifier of "progressiveness." It is therefore critical to interrogate *how* the sound of Motown was materialized in Scene 4 ("Siegfried's Funeral March"), *who* were presenting and *re*presenting it, and *what* it did to Wagner's original leitmotif and the opera overall. Doing so demonstrates how whiteness structured elements in the productions while going unseen. Scrutinizing the politics of collaboration with Black artists through an ethics of listening will illuminate how racial politics underpinned the display culture of both productions. Here, engaging with Matthew Morrison's Blacksound is crucial.[49]

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lower art form than art music. More in Ryan Ebright, "Anthony Davis's Revolutionary Opera: 'X'," *The New Yorker*, May 22, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/anthony-daviss-revolutionary-opera-x.

47 Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 24. Notable examples of Black operas in the 20th century include William Grant Still's *Troubled Island* (1949) and Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha* (1972). More recent Black operas include Daniel Schnyder's *Charlie Parker's Yardbird* (2015), Nkeiru Okoye's *Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom* (2014), Daniel Sonenberg's *The Summer King* (2017) on baseball legend Josh Gibson, Terence Blanchard's *Champion* (2013) on American boxer Emile Griffith, and Anthony Davis's *The Central Park Five* (2019). See Ebright, "Anthony Davis's Revolutionary Opera: 'X'."

48 See Ebright.

49 See Matthew D. Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 781–823. Though Morrison's work does not feature prominently in opera studies, his concept of Blacksound nonetheless proves extremely valuable in analyzing site-specific performances like *Twilight: Gods* in the context of today's neoliberal era, particularly as we consider where the boundary is between honoring the specificity of a site and unwittingly playing into commodified expectations.

Let's first focus on *how* Motown was presented before analyzing *what* it did to Wagner's original motives. The instantaneous shift from the leitmotif of Siegfried's death to the spectacular Motown lightshow, which eventually became the triumphant highlight of the opera, speaks to the performance of Blacksound. While Scene 4 reflects the creative team's desire to tap into legendary 1960s Black music, when Motown is being packaged *by* an all-white creative team as aesthetically accessible *to* an elite audience, the political stakes demand further investigation. Reducing Detroit musicality to audible stereotypes of Motown deprived a more meaningful engagement with Black musical traditions. Moreover, the episode did not cohere well within the overall framework for it had no bearing on the characters or drama beyond the *display* of Black musical tradition, thus striking one as simplistic. As observed in my transcribed score (see figure 5), the music started out with Wagner's motif verbatim followed by a series of repetitions with slight modification. Then, suddenly, it switched to a Motown episode that was completely distinct from Wagner's leitmotif, showing no attempt to transform or destabilize the original music within its frame. Instead, what we heard was the convenient *merger* between Wagner and Motown, each musical element kept separate from each other.

This mode of musical collaboration where Black popular music merely "serve[d] as a resource that add[ed] to art music" is premised on "fitting" Black music into the dominant Western paradigm.[50] The unwieldy integration into the largely undisturbed Western operatic framework simply celebrated a juxtaposition of discontinuous musical styles,[51] hence perpetuating what Robinson calls "sovereign values" and resistance against "aesthetic assimilation."[52] The lack of creative friction between Wagner's opera and

50 Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 8.

51 Integrating Black culture in a Western operatic frame recalls Peter Sellars' 1987 production of *Don Giovanni*, which is set in a racially mixed American ghetto. Though vastly different representation of Black culture are presented—Sharon's *Twilight: Gods* adopts a celebratory approach towards Motown music while Sellars' *Don Giovanni* resorts to derogatory stereotypes of the Black community—it is nonetheless productive to place both "updated" productions alongside each other in illuminating the irresolvable clash between Western art music and the reductive employment of Black culture.

52 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 7. This perspective is echoed by Steigerwald Ille who examined how recent operatic experiments tend to partake in a "process of revisionism," which aims to "re-inscribe" and "re-contextualize" the canonic framework and hierarchies instead of eliminating or destabilizing them. This falls back to commodified expectations without actually freeing them from convention—in short, being anomalous but not unexpected. More

Transition from Scene 3 ("Siegfried's Death") to Scene 4 ("Siegfried's Funeral March"): Wagner's motif

Motown Funeral March Variation I

Motown Funeral March Variation II

Motown Funeral March Variation III

Fig. 5. My transcription of Scene 3 ("Siegfried's Death") to Scene 4 ("Siegfried's Funeral March"). Note how the transition begins with Wagner's motif, then evolves into something else completely.

Black musical culture in Sharon's production rejects the possibility of a mutually transformative encounter, thus undermining the progressive agenda the creative team initially set out to achieve.

One must also consider *who* wrote this music and for *whom*? Instead of collaborating with a Detroit-based composer as one would expect, the creative team worked with Lewis Pesacov from Los Angeles, who also performed the music in this scene. The use of recorded audio reflected a further instance of erasing Black bodies in performance. Choosing to engage with Motown music but *not* collaborating with Black composers and musicians bespeaks the exploitative act of cultural ventriloquism—literally and metaphorically speaking—which does not do justice to the Detroit production and its progressive intent.

Besides examining the framing and materialization of Motown, one must also consider the ideology and ethical implications of employing pop music, a musical practice that includes Black commercial enterprises. Simon Frith draws attention to the easy accessibility of pop music, defining it as a "slippery concept" as it is "so familiar, so easily used."[53] This is manifested in practices of "voracious borrowing and adaptation," which generate "'pop' versions" of all musical genres.[54] In short, "anything can also be popped."[55] This *usefulness* of pop music, which defines its core sensibility, paradoxically somewhat makes it a non-entity as Frith describes:

> Here pop becomes not an inclusive category but a residual one: it is what's left when all the other forms of popular music are stripped away … From this perspective pop is defined as much by what it isn't as by what it is.[56]

This "residual" feature of pop makes it prone to commodification today. Frequently viewed as "music accessible to a general public" and "designed to appeal to everyone," pop can be perceived as a marker of "authenticity" by the audiences of *Twilight: Gods*.[57] The creative team might have thought

in Megan Steigerwald Ille, "Negotiating Convention: Pop-Ups and Populism at the San Francisco Opera," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 14, no. 4 (2020): 421.

53 Simon Frith, "Pop Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Will Straw, John Street, and Simon Frith (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 94.

54 Jacqueline Warwick, "Pop," in *Grove Music Online*, n.d., accessed December 13, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2259112.

55 Frith, "Pop Music," 97.

56 Frith, 95.

57 Frith, 94, 95.

that "updating" the opera's soundworld with local traditions by deploying Motown could be a novel way to "struck an emotional chord with the public," thus demonstrating its racially progressive stance.[58]

However, I would argue that the use of Motown music is far from progressive; in fact, their venture is motivated by its intrinsic *use value*. True enough, Motown is *already* a commodified musical practice that is *use-ful*. But to freely "draw and quote and sample" from an originally Black commercial enterprise as if it were a "social storehouse?"[59] The creative team's appropriation of select Motown signifiers reflects an urge to *own*, *use*, and *exploit* Black music. In summoning *imagined aspects* of Black aesthetics, they were attempting to muster Detroit/Blacksound for the entertainment and edification of an elite, mostly white audience in Detroit and Chicago.[60] More importantly, the spectacular scene speaks to a certain dangerous "conflation of affect with efficacy" in the words of Dylan Robinson, where audiences *felt* that they had directly participated in social activism by experiencing the contagious performance.[61] This perspective resonates with Abbate, who posits that "physically experienced musical sound can create, in the listener, a somatic illusion that he or she has already acted and resisted, producing phantom engagement and unearned virtue."[62] Likewise, in *Twilight: Gods*, feeling uplifted by the spectacular Motown performance is *not* equivalent to participating in any sort of antiracist act or committing

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58 Frith, 94.

59 Frith, 106.

60 This commodified musical procedure is brought into sharper relief when viewed alongside Wayne Shorter and Esperanza Spalding's jazz opera, *Iphigenia* (2021). Though *Twilight: Gods* constitutes an operatic reimagination while *Iphigenia* is a newly composed opera, both draw on Black musical elements, albeit in vastly different ways. Rather than resort to the (predictable and obvious) integration of jazz *elements*, Spalding engages with improvisatory performance and, in so doing, breaks free from the shackles of the Western notation system and operatic conventions. Her introduction of jazz's improvisatory culture successfully decolonizes the art form through defamiliarization, which makes audiences hear each musical culture anew. More in ArtsEmerson, "After the Curtain Call: (Iphigenia)", live conversation with Carolyn Abbate et al. (Emerson Paramount Center, Robert J. Orchard Stage, November 15, 2021), YouTube video uploaded on November 23, 2021, https://youtu.be/FCMujjYfpoo?si=Wvzs-5h6ML6YPbXS.

61 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 218.

62 Carolyn Abbate, "Certain Loves for Opera," *Representations* 154, no. 1 (2021): 63. Drawing on Benjamin Walton's research, Abbate asserts that some audiences who attended the premiere of Gioachino Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* in 1829 believed that they already played a part in a revolution just by watching the opera. See Benjamin Walton, "Looking for the Revolution in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 15, no. 2 (2003): 127–51.

to social justice. Worse, conflating affective *feeling* with *doing* can foreclose real change.

The Ethics and Politics of Collaboration with Local Artists: avery r. young and Marsha Music

Sharon's restaging of *Twilight: Gods* in Chicago, six months after the Detroit production, brought about transformative changes to the new production, which generated a different reception and thus underscored an important principle in site-specific staging: it is not just the site that changes operatic content, but also the passage of time. This renewed emphasis on the ephemerality and contingency of performance therefore makes the timeline of an opera as important as the cities it circulates in. The lens of time demonstrates how the move from Detroit to Chicago resulted in evolving conceptions and new collaborations. Temporal breaks *between* performances are fertile zones of creativity providing the much-needed contemplative space for creative teams to implement new changes as necessary, after having taken into account reviews from the public and pondered over potential collaborative endeavors with local artists. Surprising results often ensue from this improvisatory approach to opera-making, as is evident in the evolution of *Twilight: Gods*.

As the production traveled to Chicago, Marsha Music no longer appeared. Instead, Chicago-based artist avery r. young stepped in to play The Norns/narrator. He sang, chanted, and recited a sizable amount of new text he wrote, which significantly reduced the proportion of Wagner's original libretto that had been used in Music's composed verses. The airtime difference was stark: Music's opening pre-recorded narration of the *Ring*'s backstory merely took up four minutes while young's spanned ten, a significant expansion considering that the production was only an hour long. Their presentation of contemporary events also varied greatly: Music merely alluded to the troubled times we were living in, while young made explicit references to racial injustice. As Amy Stebbins posits, contemporary libretti remain "an under-theorized object of study."[63] Following her lead, I separately examine the libretti of Music and young, particularly the ways in

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63 Amy Stebbins, "Dramaturgical Oper(a n)Ations: De-Internationalization in Contemporary Opera Libretti," in *Theatre and Internationalization: Perspectives from Australia, Germany, and Beyond*, ed. Ulrike Garde and John R. Severn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 131.

which they were performed, to exemplify how the meaning of a production is contingent on the vagaries of its reception.

Marsha Music, who wrote narrative verses for the Detroit production, attempted to situate Wagner's narrative in contemporary terms. She composed poetry that described the dark times of 2020:

> And we can see today so much disarray and strife
> Killing and conflict as a way of life
> And the darkness and plague that's upon our days
> and the violence that rules and the chaos that reigns
> There are warring souls and so much arrogance
> Conflict and killing and great pestilence
> To pandemic and plague, the world has succumbed
> The end of days - it *now* has come
> Jealousy, envy and skies fire red
> And discarding and lying and defiling the bed
> And courting then ghosting and boldfaced lies
> And bragging and boasting, and making hearts cry

These innovations—featuring a Black female performer, surrounding assorted detritus from an antique Wagnerian opera with new poetic language and contemporary allusions, grounding *Twilight: Gods* generally in the context of both an ongoing pandemic and racial reckonings that were coeval with it—in sheer heterotopical accretion did not make the Detroit production progressive or antiracist. As André, Karen Bryan, and Eric Saylor caution, foregrounding Black artists on the operatic stage can *still* "lead to new and equally limiting obstacles" as it is not always easily discernible that there is a "division between minstrelsy and opera performances by [B]lack artists."[64] I would argue that this conundrum is exemplified by the Detroit production, and facing up to it means being attentive to how Music self-fashioned herself, which raises complicated questions about assump-

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64 Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor, "Introduction: Representing Blackness on the Operatic Stage," in *Blackness in Opera*, ed. Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 3–4. Further thought-provoking questions are raised in the introduction to *Blackness in Opera*. The authors ask whether white members of the creative team can portray "authentic" Black characters or if this is fundamentally impossible due to their lack of an "authentically Black" experience. And does collaborating with Black musicians or engaging in the "careful study and presentation of Black culture" make any difference?

tions drawn between an artist's racial identity and authenticity in representing Blackness or the Black experience.

In character as Erda, Marsha Music opened the show by delivering the *Ring*'s backstory in AAVE, boiling down the first three operas into four minutes. Here are her first lines:

> I am Erda, mother of earth, an oracle – a queen – for what it's worth. I know past and future 'cause I'm clairvoyant. I'm primordial, mystical – and a little flamboyant. … I'm a real live goddess, a stone matriarch […] Now Wotan has a wife – no, he's not all mine. I've been his side goddess for a very long time.

She continues riffing on the *Ring* plot throughout the show via interscene audio feeds.

Here we reach some extraordinarily complex questions, uneasy ones, maybe some unanswerable ones. Music's participation, it seems clear, reflected the creative team's hopes and desires for resonating with local Black audiences, a wish that opera, morphed and re-sited, might embrace a diversity of listeners. And yet, her interludes could be seen as belonging to the same category as the marked performance in the Motown Funeral March: firmly, loudly set apart from conventional operatic sounds, antique libretto language, or Wagnerian instrumentation or rhythm, just as the parking structure site for *Twilight: Gods* screams to audiences that they are not where opera usually happens. Is Music's performance and poetry not also serving as an unassimilated "resource?" Or, in fact, does her involvement in the production, and the creative control she has over her narration make her portrayal, grounded as it is in her voice, presence, and agency, authentic and thus beyond reproach? How do we re-analyze *Twilight: Gods* in light of Wayne Brown's integral role as one of the only Black presidents and CEOs of a US opera company?

Complex entanglements of race, gender, and sexuality come into play here. The Erda of myth, the white Nordic goddess, is radically challenged in Music's performance. Old-fashioned expectations about Erda's appearance—expectations we assume were carried into the garage by the largely white audiences that populated the performances in Detroit—are swatted away when Erda is represented as a commanding Black woman. And Music's version of Erda, with her ironic wisdom and physical gravitas, seems to bypass yet another racialized expectation: what Kira Thurman—in referring to Grace Bumbry—calls "modern German notions of the primeval

otherness of [B]lack female sexuality."[65] And yet again, has Music indeed escaped stereotyping? Marsha Music wrote the words "side Goddess" and "real, live Goddess"—but was it a wind that blew during production, a particular costume choice, or a directorial fiat, that pushed things back over the border, to a racialized, exoticized Erda/Music?

Yet, there are facts on the ground: we know from documents connected to the Detroit production that Marsha Music actually had full creative control over all aspects of her performance. Besides writing her own poetry, she made her own costume and chose her own style of presentation.[66] Moreover, Wayne Brown, also a Black Detroiter like Music, was heavily involved in shepherding the production from its initial conception to the final performance, so he was clearly aware of her artistic decisions and the conversations occurring among the creative team.[67] As Music revealed in a forum post, wrestling with what "sound" she should go for was the key subject of the many conversations she had with Sharon prior to the performance.[68] Sharon's insistence on Music narrating in her "Detroit voice" resonates with Music's own aim "to sound 'Detroit'—but not sitcom jivey." Thus, she acknowledged "put[ting] some gumption (as [her] mother would say), into the narration," which might have accounted for the eventual presentation.[69]

With this in mind, we then ask, could it be possible that our perception of Music's role and expressive choices speaks *less* about her than about our stereotypes of Black femininity from a white gaze?[70] Put another way, perceiving Music's performance as exotic and hypersexual might perhaps

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65 Kira Thurman, "Black Venus, White Bayreuth: Race, Sexuality, and the Depoliticization of Wagner in Postwar West Germany," *German Studies Review* 35, no. 3 (2012): 614.

66 Marsha Music revealed that she consciously imitated the late Jessye Norman to present herself in a spectacular way. See Marsha Music, "Twilight: Gods, a Drive-Thru Opera, Watched from Cars, in a Parking Garage," *Detroitisit*, February 23, 2021, https://detroitisit.com/twilight-gods-drive-thru-opera-covid/.

67 Marsha Music discussed Wayne Brown's heavy involvement in the project, such as "inventor[ying] the physical assets of MOT," suggesting "the parking garage as a possible performance space," and together with Sharon, "greet[ing] each carload of folks through their closed windows" on the day of the performance. See Music, "Twilight: Gods."

68 See Music, "Twilight: Gods."

69 Music, "Twilight: Gods."

70 Reflections on this question might benefit from Eidsheim's observation of the opera world's unforgiving attitude towards pronunciation. She posits that it is through strict adherence to the "established aesthetic, technical, and stylistic conventions" that "a voice is recognized as a 'classical voice.'" See Nina Sun Eidsheim, "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 644.

be attributed to our *own* assumptions about what opera performers *should* sound like (conditioned by our sustained exposure to established conventions of operatic timbre), which leads us to view any deviations unfavorably. But this view does *not* preclude the possibility that Music might also be resorting to a kind of self-conscious *typecasting*, which Eidsheim defines as the notion of having her "personal appearance and demeanor lend [herself] to a particular kind of role."[71] In discussing her own performance, Music said she aimed to present "a sort of timeless tableaux" from her "earth-mother rocking-chair … next to an old lamp and a victrola."[72] This revealing remark and Music's description of herself as a "primordial Detroiter" affirms the possibility that she was self-fashioning to fit a certain stereotypical role.[73]

The Chicago production, which was received more successfully, exemplifies how six months' lag has contributed significantly to the project's evolution. young's libretto wove together many localized allusions and narrative modalities resonating strongly with local audiences, further attesting to the creative possibilities engendered by artistic collaborations in site-specific productions. He animated his libretto with rich dramaturgical possibilities, invoking what Stebbins calls its "*transmedial* character,"[74] which builds "*experiences across and between the borders where multiple media platforms coalesce.*"[75] Joining forces with technology, young transformed his libretto into transcendent lyrics by "expand[ing] and enrich[ing] the canonical storyworld with new, culturally/socially relevant meanings."[76]

young's unmistakable foregrounding of the US history of racial violence is evident right from the Prologue. He alluded to lynching and captivity in repeated references to "rope" while literally holding on to a thick rope in both hands as he prophesied the destiny of the world:

71 Eidsheim, "Marian Anderson," 661.

72 Music, "Twilight: Gods."

73 Marsha Music, "Marsha Music: The Detroitist," official website, accessed October 1, 2022, https://marshamusic.wordpress.com.

74 Stebbins, "Dramaturgical Oper(a n)Ations," 131.

75 Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, "Introduction: Transmedia Studies—Where Now?" in *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, ed. Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (New York: Routledge, 2019), 6. Italics in the original.

76 Paola Brembilla, "Transmedia Music: The Values of Music as a Transmedia Asset," in Freeman and Rampazzo Gambarato, *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, 86.

> We are the Norns
> And our hands hold rope
> We are the Norns
> And our hands hold the rope of destiny
> On this Stony Island,
> We with rope tell you a story
> Of how a Princess of Valhalla
> Burnt all of the gods down.

What grounded his allusion in time and place is his translation of Brünnhilde's rock from Wagner's libretto to "Stony Island," which refers to Stony Island Avenue, the main road running through Chicago's predominantly Black South Side. These vivid spatiotemporal indicators echo Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, which refers to "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed."[77] This sense of "connectedness" likely resonated with audiences who were experiencing *Twilight: Gods* in 2020–2021 America, a land overflowing with racism and xenophobia. By introducing the rope as a chronotope in the Prologue, young made it a literal and thematic concept, which accrued greater symbolic charge as it was intermixed with other objects later in his narration.

As young progressed, his allusions gained in speed and intensity, accompanied by the scratched visual surface filmed in black-and-white video with superimposed verses presented in all caps as shown below:

> Her prayed
> Siegfried knows a river
> LIKE HIM KNOW ROPE
> LIKE HIM KNOW TREE

77 Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84. Bakhtin draws attention to how the chronotope transforms into phenomenological reality through the coming together of time, space, narrative, and history: "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope" (84). For Bakhtin, the chronotope is "a formally constitutive category of literature." I am borrowing this term here to extend its application beyond Bakhtin's original formulation.

Like him know how much dead
Make a bough break
LIKE HIM KNOW CAROL
LIKE HIM KNOW KAREN
LIKE HIM KNOW WHISTLES
LIKE HIM KNOW SKITTLES
LIKE HIM KNOW HANDS BEHIND HIM BACK
LIKE HIM KNOW CUFFS ROUND HIM WRISTS
Like him know how much skin
Concrete can chew
Like him know the weight of the patella bone
On him cervical vertebra
Whoa, I swear on the bodies at the fore of the Tallahatchie
Siegfried ain't no stranger to a river
SIEGFRIED KNOWS RIVERS
And SIEGFRIED KNOWS RINGS
SIEGFRIED KNOWS RIVERS and RINGS
Like him know no
NO COLOREDS
NO JUSTICE
NO BAIL
No body but him body
Stuck in them illustrious image of him
MAGIC RIVER-RINGS

young used Siegfried's death to draw connections to actual incidents of anti-Black violence, most notably the murders of George Floyd (1973–2020) and Emmett Till (1941–1955). The aesthetic immediacy of monochrome film simultaneously evoked the dark history of the Jim Crow era and reflexively alluded to the constructedness of race itself by blurring the boundary between Black and white.

Objects in Wagner's mythic *Ring* transformed themselves into a patchwork of racist allusions through young's dynamic delivery. The rope chronotope introduced in the Prologue started establishing polysemy relationships with related objects like the tree, bough, and river. The mixture of multiple temporal reference points further reflects an attempt to interrogate our present-day happenings *through* Wagner's opera. Disturbing vignettes of contemporary racist incidents abound in young's narration, including Derek Chauvin's killing of George Floyd near Chicago Avenue in

Minneapolis ("Like him know the weight of the patella bone/On him cervical vertebra"), and the death of fourteen-year-old Black Chicagoan Emmett Till whose body was found in the Tallahatchie River in 1955 after violating Jim Crow law ("Whoa, I swear on the bodies at the fore of the Tallahatchie/Siegfried ain't no stranger to a river"). A passing reference to Martin Luther King's Chicago residence was also made in young's eulogy ("As for Hagen/Him bare-chested in a wave cap on a couch/In a 3rd floor apartment/Off the corner of 16th and Hamlin") for this was where King led the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s, which remains today the most ambitious civil rights campaign in US history. Taking an anecdotal turn in his eulogy to Siegfried, young recounted a tragic memory of his friend Twan who was killed at nineteen years old in Chicago:

> Lord, you know that the first body I seen
> Laying in the intersection was the body of a good friend
> We called him Twan
> The same nineteen I was
> All still but runny
> Broken marionette
> Watchin him own breath exit him body
> Off the corner of North Avenue and Central
> All the trucks and cars him body paused
> Right before my eyes
> My friend Twan turned into dead
> A crossin' guard haltin' traffic

The juxtaposition of various performance modalities (anecdote, sermon, narration), media (video, live narration, text) and highly localized allusions provocatively *fleshed out* the libretto's "ephemeral and invisible materiality," which significantly reshaped audiences' understanding.[78] The unique treatment of the libretto as creative material not only contributed to a chronotopic experience, but also served as a reminder that it can be approached from multiple angles: musical text, historical document, anecdote, poetry, and literature.

But we are still left with this conundrum: both Music and young had

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78 Salomé Voegelin, "Sound Words and Sonic Fictions: Writing the Ephemeral," in *The Routledge Companion to Sounding Art*, ed. Marcel Cobussen, Vincent Meelberg, and Barry Truax (New York: Routledge, 2017), 61.

actual creative agency in both productions. How do we analyze, hear, understand, or salute the agency of the two Black poets who contributed to both productions in such radically different ways? More pointedly, how do we reconcile Music's role as Erda with young's rendition of The Norns? Collaborating with both artists was undoubtedly a key strategy for the creative team to "de-politicize" Wagner's problematic legacy.[79] Despite their best intentions and hopes, they had found uneven success through such collaborations. young's virtuosic performance effectively destabilized Wagner's original libretto by coming up with a powerful counter-narrative deeply rooted in—and inseparable from—Chicago's history. Music, however, risked falling back on historical stereotypes of Black women, thus undercutting the creative team's progressive intentions. Far from displaying irreconcilable differences, these artistic departures could instead be reconceived as windows into the hold of passing time on an opera's evolving conception, which eventually resulted in a different reception.

Conclusion

My close engagement with *Twilight: Gods* generated a new understanding of re-enchantment in site-specific opera. Rejecting immersion, I turn to the embrace of mixed media, materialities, and serendipities emerging from unscripted encounters and imaginative associations engendered by the performance in the here-and-now. In scrutinizing the reimagination of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* in Detroit and Chicago, I argue that despite the creative team's hopes for a racially inclusive future in opera, it has not fully succeeded in meeting the redemptive terms it has set for itself. Though young's virtuosic transmedial performance resonated with local audiences, Music's hypersexualized performance of Erda, and the commodified packaging of Motown in Scene 4, gesture toward a display culture more interested in optical and musical representation than in reflecting true diversity of creative Black voices.

79 I am borrowing Kira Thurman's term "de-politicize" to refer to the motivations driving Wieland Wagner's decision to cast Black American soprano Grace Bumbry as Venus in Bayreuth's 1961 production of *Tannhäuser*. Bumbry's erotic and exotic portrayal of Venus prompted Thurman to be wary of "the problems and paradoxes of dislodging a cultural institution from its racist past by relying on historical stereotypes of Black people." Kira Thurman, *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 13.

Instead of thinking that visible and audible representations are identical to, signify, or even contribute to social progress and antiracism, opera companies must continue working towards *prioritizing* voices from the Black community, and towards opposing the desire for display culture, a desire that always comes at the expense of true aesthetic esteem. To produce an opera with an American perspective on American music, we must fully acknowledge and center Black music and engagement in *all* stages and phases of the conception, production, performance, and reception, as well as account for diversity among its singers, designers, composers, performers, and board. Only then can the process of creative collaboration truly reflect the successful decolonization of opera.

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Abstract

Yuval Sharon's *Twilight: Gods* is a drive-through opera that presents a contemporary vernacular reimagination of Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. To handle pandemic-related concerns, it was staged in the Detroit Opera House Parking Center in October 2020 and subsequently in Chicago's Millennium Lakeside Parking Garage in April 2021. Rejecting the model of immersion, my article puts forth re-enchantment as a phenomenological model of arts consumption, which captures the sense of play underlying site-specific opera. I build on Carolyn Abbate's notion of "ludic distance" in positing that re-enchantment is derived not despite, but *because of* our hyperawareness of the creative tensions present in the hybrid media and technologies fleshed out before us. Moving on then to explicitly ideological—and ethical—considerations, I investigate the racial politics underpinning the opera's display culture. Employing Matthew Morrison's Blacksound, I examine Scene 4 ("Siegfried's Funeral March") to reveal an attempt to muster Detroit/Blacksound in the commodified packaging of Black signifiers for the edification of an elite, mostly white audience. A musical collaboration premised on "fitting" Black music into the dominant Western paradigm perpetuates musical essentialism. Similarly problematic questions ensue from examining the ethics and politics of collaboration with the two Black poets who contributed to the productions in uneven ways. It is an open question whether, in the end, the creative team has succeeded in fulfilling the redemptive terms it has set for itself. I conclude by stimulating further questions and reflections on what a socially progressive and anti-Racist opera would look and sound like in twenty-first-century America.

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The Creative Turn in Arts Scholarship
edited by Giorgio Biancorosso and Emilio Sala

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."[1] 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,

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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 im 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.[2]

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."[3]

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

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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.[4] It would take a long time for the institutions to grasp the significance of the state that

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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."[5]

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).[6] 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.[7] 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.[8] 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)."[9] These are individuals whose theoretical legacy has endured more than their music.[10] 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."[11]

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.[12]

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.[13] 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."[14] 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."[15] 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.[16]

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*,[17] 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*.[18] 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

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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.[19] 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."[20]

"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."[21] 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."[22]

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-

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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."[23] 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."[24]

23 Michal Grover-Friedlander, "Being in the Dark," below.
24 Grover-Friedlander.

The Recomposing of the World: In conversation with Steven Feld on the occasion of the release of *La recherche comme composition* (2023)[1]

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

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1 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 *re*composition, 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 Scaldaferri, 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 60th 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, exoticizing, 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).[1] 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

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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/compilers 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/compilers 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.[2] 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.

2 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.[3] 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?[4] 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[1]

> *"[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.[2] Even

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1 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.

2 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.[3] 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.

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

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),[4] 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.[5] Kinosh-

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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* 摂州合邦辻 (Gappo and His Daughter Tsuji, 2023) and *Kanjincho* 勧進帳 (The Subscription List, 2023).[6] 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.

    6 *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.[7] 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.[8] 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

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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 17th to mid-19th 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.[9] That is "not a form of body movement but a form of thinking process,"[10] 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."[11] 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-*

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.[12] We can find similar discussions in Japan, too.[13] If we understand the dramaturg as a "fulcrum of collaborative practices"[14] or a "careful articulator of improbable encounters and as a cartographer of that improbability,"[15] 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.[16]

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

16 *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).[17]*

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

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17 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).[18]

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.[19] 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.[20]*

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

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20 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.[21]

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.*

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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 *Sannin 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.

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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 19th century or the 20th 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 16th, 17th 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 song-writer, 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*,[1] 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.[2] 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…"[3]

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."[4]

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…."[5] 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-

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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."[6]

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?[7]

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

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7 Michal Grover-Friedlander, "Listening to Choreography," *Choreographic Practices* 14, no. 1 (2023): 9–25, 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."[8] 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."[9]

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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Alexina B., Contemporary Opera as Consolation

Rosa Fernández

Review-Essay of the opera *Alexina B.* Music by Raquel García-Tomás, libretto by Irène Gayraud, stage direction by Marta Pazos. Gran Teatre del Liceu, Barcelona, March 2023.

With stage direction by Marta Pazos and libretto by Irène Gayraud, composer Raquel García-Tomás' opera *Alexina B.* tells the striking story of the eponymous Alexina B., the first recognized intersex person, based on her handwritten memoirs *Mes Souvenirs*, discovered after her death in 1868. *Alexina B.* opened at the Gran Teatre del Liceu on 18 March 2023 to great critical and audience acclaim and has since become one of the most successful Spanish operas of recent years, despite being a contemporary work. This article analyses the key parameters that connect music and stage in *Alexina B.* within the framework of the new operatic paradigm in contemporary music.

Raquel García-Tomás's Musical Career

Born in Barcelona in 1984, Raquel García-Tomás is an interdisciplinary musical composer and creator. She earned a bachelor's degree in music in the specialty of composition at the Catalonia College of Music before completing a master's and doctoral program at the Royal College of Music in London, where she resided for six years. There she gained a deeper understanding of the various aspects of interdisciplinary creation, a focus that has since defined her approach to composition. Raquel García-Tomás has garnered several awards in recognition of the talent of her purely personal language, which combines a distinct vision of the music of the past with her own writing infused with electronics and the use of audiovisual media.

This way of conceiving composition is evident in works such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (2014; for piano, electronics, and video) or in *Estudio sonomecánico* Nº 1 (2018; for ensemble, electronics, and video). Her awards include the National Music Award of Spain in 2020 for her opera buffa *Je suis narcissiste*, which played in Madrid, Barcelona, and Seville. García-Tomás's work has been performed at the National Music Auditorium in Madrid, L'Auditori in Barcelona, the Palau de la Música Catalana, the Palau de la Música in Valencia, and in auditoriums and concert halls across Europe, Latin America, and Japan.

Raquel García-Tomás is the first female composer to première an opera at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in the twenty-first century and the second to do so since it was founded in 1847, after the première of Matilde Salvador's *Vinatea* in 1974. The composer has been drawn to opera and the various genres of theatre music since her beginnings, putting her own spin on a recreation of *La serva padrona* in 2010, *DIDO Reloaded* in 2013, and *Go, ÆNEAS, Go!* in 2014, the latter two being collective works. In 2015 she tackled the consequences of gentrification with the chamber opera *Displace*. Composer Joan Magrané wrote the first act, while García-Tomás wrote the second one. The aforementioned *Je suis narcissiste* reflects humorously on the trivialization and anaesthetization of post-industrial societies—a work with a dramatic and aesthetic approach that is very different from *Alexina B.*, with stage direction also by Marta Pazos. *Per precaució* (2020) is a micro-opera for soprano and harp that explores the problem of loneliness in the elderly over just 20 minutes.[1]

García-Tomás' music is characterized by its luminous aesthetics, which is particularly evident in her post-pandemic oeuvre, such as *Sonic Canvas* for orchestra, or *Suite of Myself* for orchestra and choir (both from 2021); it also features an interdisciplinary conception of composition, combining traditional music genres (whether classical, jazz, cinematographic, etc.) with urban sounds, electronics, and contemporary audiovisual forms; finally, it is defined by a vintage musical aesthetic and a peculiar articulation of old and new musical codes through her use of rhythmic, harmonic, and timbre modulations. Her *métier* is also known for the original use of microtextures that play off broad chords—i.e., the use of repetition of melodic motifs laid down on liquid harmonies; this repetition is however fully per-

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1 *Per Precaució* is one of the six micro-operas that are part of the *Sis solos soles* project co-produced by the Liceu and Òpera de Butxaca i Nova Creació, consisting of six monodramas for female voice and solo instrumentalist.

sonal and immune to the rhythmic/melodic schemes of current minimalism. In short, Tomás is known for creating her own code that immediately reaches the listener's perception.

The Opera "Alexina B."

Composer Raquel García-Tomás and stage director Marta Pazos bring to the present the complex tale of Alexina B., transferring to the stage the intense beauty and overwhelming tragedy of feelings trapped in a body which was, at the time, unacceptable. Taking the form of a *literaturoper*, the libretto, by French writer Irène Gayraud, faithfully conveys the memoirs left by Abel Barbin (formerly known as Herculine Barbin or Alexina B.) which make for an exceptional legacy both for their narrative quality and for being the first autobiographical text written by an intersex person, that we know of.

Alexina B. is based on the life of Herculine Adélaïde Barbin, known as Alexina B. Born in 1838, she committed suicide on 2 February 1868 in a Parisian attic, leaving as her only legacy *Mes Souvenirs*, the echo of her female and male voices, unrecognized and unrecognizable by a society that saw no room for her. The libretto allows for a plethora of interpretations, as if it were a palimpsest about Barbin's life: it is the story of her tragic fate; an inordinate story of impossible love and of the oppression of a normative society. It is, more than anything, a heartrending attempt to define a person from, rather than in spite of, their own sexuality.

Alexina B. is a work of approximately 140 minutes, divided into three acts and 22 scenes. To build the opera, the three creators considered the nature of the story; Alexina, as Abel Barbin, writes her memoirs in the mid-nineteenth century, in a well-educated tone for the constraints of that time, which were both moral and religious. However, these memoirs also reveal the diversity of people whose behavior went outside the stereotypes for the era. Alexina coexists with characters who understand her and others who condemn her; however, the social machine operates monolithically in only one direction and, as with many other operas, it acts like a destruction factor for the person living on the outskirts of society.

Plot

Alexina B. is educated at a girls' convent, where she meets Léa, her first intimate friend. Later, she works as a governess at a reputed boarding school,

where she begins a bewildering love affair with Sara, the daughter of the Principal, Madame P.

After spending their first night together, and since the model of loving relationships was exclusively heteronormative, Alexina begins to present as a man, and changes her name to Abel, a name given by Sara. Upon telling the boarding school confessor of her love for Sara, Alexina is cast out and shamed. Alexina suffers from excruciating abdominal pains, which had already appeared in childhood and eventually became unbearable. After visiting a physician, she is left with a shocking diagnosis: she is a hermaphrodite. To find a place in society that dignifies her love for Sara, Alexina embarks on a struggle to be recognized as a man at the Civil Registry. This is how he puts it to Monsignor in his hometown, who understands and supports him, and to his mother, who accepts that decision and who tells him that, man or woman, he will always be "*mon enfant.*" Alexina/Abel decides to go through a harrowing medical examination for a court to declare him officially as male. There was no other way out for his situation in that time. Following his official sex change, Abel leaves Sara to prevent any dishonor from falling on her

and the boarding school. He starts working on the Paris Railways but is unable to adapt to his new identity. Abel knows nothing of the world of men and is reduced to solitude. He ultimately kills himself, leaving only his memoirs behind, symbolized in the last words of the opera "*le monde a fait de moi une femme; puis l'amour et mon désir on fait de moi un homme mais je ne veux aucun de ces noms! Je suis un ange immortel, immateriel, un angel lumineux dans l'espace sans bornes.*"

Fig. 1 – Alexina B. and Sara. Scene 6, *La construction de l'amour.*
Gran Teatre del Liceu, ©A Bofill

The figure of *Alexina B.*

It is Michael Foucault who recovered the memoirs in 1978—minus the parts removed by Tardieu, the physician who guarded them—and published them as *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B.* in France as part of the Gallimard collection entitled *Les vies parallèles*, directed by himself. In the prologue to the North American edition, he broadened his reflections on this autobiographical account of Alexina. Foucault's theories in this section were heavily criticized years later by Judith Butler, who focused much of the discussion on the consideration of the terms "bodies and pleasures" and on the consideration of their being historical or ahistorical.[2] It could be roughly said that Barbin's body, once a scientific battleground, is now one for theorists of contemporary culture and sexualities.

Of all the theoretical approaches and from our point of view, the opera is most closely tied to the vision of Herculine that Foucault gives in the 1980 introduction to the English translation of her text, with his affirmation that before falling into the webs of the apparatus of sexuality, Alexina lived in a "world of feelings—enthusiasm, pleasure, sorrow, warmth, sweetness, bitterness—where the identity of the partners and above all the enigmatic character around whom everything centered, had no importance."[3] In fact, Gayraud's libretto embraces what all these positions have in common about the significance of sexual assignment for Alexina, particularly as regards the thought "sexuality is always situated within matrices of power."[4] This statement is valid for both Butler's and Foucault's theses. Alexina's character remains open to all the social, normative, theoretical, vital, biological, and ethical conundrums that give meaning to the question of the contemporary being, with the same burden of certainty or uncertainty that it brings with it.

2 See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990). See also André Duarte and Maria Rita César, "Foucault y Butler en torno a Herculine: ¿Qué significa resistir al dispositivo de la sexualidad?" *Reflexiones Marginales* 54 (2019): 10–20, https://revista.reflexionesmarginales.com/foucault-y-butler-en-torno-a-herculine-que-significa-resistir-al-dispositivo-de-la-sexualidad/. French sociologist Éric Fassin has also taken a theoretical stance on the lived-body experience of Alexina B.; see his "Postface" to Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin, dite Alexina B.* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

3 Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin. Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon, 1980), xiii.

4 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 97.

The Inclusion Imperative: Other Forms of Sexuality in Opera

The gender roles shown in the world of opera have changed radically in the twenty-first century, as feminine stereotypes are being left behind—e.g., the ideal (represented by Isolde, or Rusalka), the victim (Violanta, Lucia di Lammermoor), the sacrificial (Tosca, Santuzza), the vestal virgins (Lakmé, Blanche de la Force) and women of ill-repute who are redeemed by death (Violetta), by marriage (Zdenka), by faith (Suor Angelica) or by the conjugal good above love (Tatiana). None of these scripts would fit into the understanding of today's world. Thus, among the many lines of thought considering the immenseness of the sexual condition of the contemporary being, gender studies help focus more precisely on the broad meaning of the new presence, vindictive of the new identities that have risen to the musical scene, expressed outside binary identification parameters (man/woman; love/hate; surrender/greed, etc.) Unconventional sexual identity as a construct and human inquiry is one of the paths that contemporary opera explores, as you'd expect from an art form that expresses itself through visual art, text, music, and audiovisual material. The next paragraphs explore the twenty-first century operas that have expanded the normative canon, to contextualize on the one hand the common road travelled by Alexina B. and some of the most socially committed operas of today, and at the same time to underline to what extent this road is still untraveled.

For example, one opera that breaks with the standardized sexual imperative is *Lessons in Love and Violence,* which focuses on the romantic relationship between the English King Edward II and his lover Piers Gaveston, a work by George Benjamin which premièred at Covent Garden in London in 2018. The tagging, directed by Katie Mitchell, brings to the forefront references to Francis Bacon, another gay Briton, so the work unfolds like a huge palimpsest. Peter Eötvös's *Angels in America* (Paris, Théatre du Châtelet, 2004) is about two troubled couples, one gay, one straight, and, like García-Tomás' opera, also uses amplification for the voices and is of similar length. The same denouncement of compulsorily repressed male homosexuality is the theme of the opera *Brokeback Mountain* by composer Charles Wuorinen, premièred at the Teatro Real in Madrid in 2014 with a libretto by Annie Proulx, who also wrote the novel on which it is based. Composed for a large orchestra, the composer chooses a small instrumental ensemble for the two main characters' pieces, who are also caught up in an impossible love story—a similar format to the one used by Raquel García-Tomás in

Alexina B. Before Night Falls is a two-act opera by Cuban composer Jorge Martín, premièred at Fort Worth Opera (Texas) in 2010, which follows the life of writer Reinaldo Arenas, who was exiled by the Cuban regime for being gay.[5] *Orlando*, Virginia Wolf's novel about the eponymous gender-fluid character, was brought to the opera in 2019 by Olga Neuwirth, the first woman to have a premiere at the Vienna State Opera, in which she also places an angel on the stage.

Confronting this same question but from a different perspective is the opera *Three Way*, written for eight soloists and orchestra by American composer Robert Paterson. Premièred in 2017, the opera explores different experiences of sexuality, love, and desire in contemporary society in three acts: in the first, the bond between a woman and her android lover; in the third, a party without sexual taboos; and in the second, the relationship between a dominatrix and her client. Indeed, Georg Friedrich Haas, who has already crossed all the conventions of the historical context, and is now considered one of the greatest composers of our times, has narrated his sadomasochistic sexual experiences and the non-conventional relationship of domination and submission with his wife Mollena Williams in *The Artist & the Pervert*, and is virtually one of the only current composers who has spoken openly about how a non-normative sexual condition influences the life of a musician, a theme that has been sidelined from the music of the twenty-first century.

In terms of precursors to *Alexina B.*, Paula M. Kimper's opera *Patience and Sarah* narrates the same-sex love between two women, focusing not on the denouncement but on the joy of a relationship between women. It premièred at New York's Lincoln Center in 1998 with a libretto by Wende Persons to great acclaim. The courtship between the protagonists, two nineteenth-century women, is put into music with an express desire for lyricism and musical introspection in pursuit of beauty (something which García-Tomás accomplishes in a different way). It received unanimous praise, with the *New York Times* lauding it with some of the best reviews of the decade, commending the work's musical affirmation of the transcendental beauty of life and love.[6] Unfortunately, neither the Italian nor the Spanish press reported on this work. Bringing to the opera the biography of two nine-

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5 Arenas' autobiography was also adapted into a film in 2000 by director Julian Schnabel, starring Javier Bardem.

6 Anthony Tommasini, "Festival Review/Opera—Romance Colored by Danger and Ecstasy," *New York Times*, July 10, 1998.

teenth-century women, the emphasis on the beauty of the voices as a direct translation of the personality of the protagonists, and the musical form linked to the great aria, connect with the deeply personal version of *Alexina B.* A piece far removed from Raquel García-Tomás's opera that deals with inter-sexuality is the queer opera buffa *Papaguenes* (2021), a transgressive version of *The Magic Flute* in which the characters of Papageno and Papagena are dissolved into one. Finally, the score written by American composer Laura Kaminsky *As One* cannot be ignored in this section. Premièred in Brooklyn in 2014, it has been performed in more than fifty opera houses. It portrays the life of Hanna, a transgender person, from her early years as a man (baritone voice) until becoming Hanna the woman (mezzo voice, the same vocal register as Alexina/Abel). It shares with *Alexina B.* the moving of the action through flash backs and flash forwards and the use of a small orchestra. In a more abstract sense and moving away from the stage, Sylvano Bussotti's 1999 guitar solo *Ermafrodito* is a dreamlike and evocative piece that, although related to the world of Alexina, does not strictly depict it since Alexina was not a hermaphrodite person, despite being referred to as such.

Alexina B.: The Poetics of Reparation

> *Only modern art, art after the death of art,*
> *being unable to be anything but self-conscious,*
> *is in a position to inhabit beauty freely.*
> Rafael Argullol[7]

Alexina B. tells the tragedy of a misunderstood being, the ordeal that an intersex person goes through in a hostile society. But above all, it narrates Alexina's love and how she lived it. Alexina's memoirs exude as much intelligence as goodness, as much honesty as desire to affirm her identity. It is that desire for historical reparation for the figure of Alexina as she was that led Marta Pazos to build a set full of delicacy and Raquel García-Tomás to compose music that soars above life, taking Alexina and twenty-first century listeners to ultimately raise above that medical table and especially the

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7   "Sólo el arte moderno, el arte posterior a la 'muerte del arte,' al no ser, o al no poder ser, otra cosa que *autoconsciente*, está en condiciones de habitar libremente la belleza." Rafael Argullol, "Introducción. El arte después de la 'muerte del arte,'" in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *La actualidad de lo bello. El arte como juego, símbolo y fiesta*, trans. Antonio Gómez Ramos (Barcelona: Ediciones Paidós, 1991), 17; orig. ed. *Die Aktualität des Schönen* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1977). English translation mine.

bed in which she dies. Pazos or García-Tomás' previous works did not have beauty as a constructive imperative, beauty as a creative horizon to which not only the character, but the entire audience must tend; nor did they in their previous collaboration, *Je Suis Narcissiste*. *Alexina B.* is a new quest for sounds and sets that poetically free the figure of Herculine Barbin and make amends for her. Alexina's understanding of the world and her problems are not the same as for these creators, who have full ownership over their careers and decisions. It is not the same as for the many women inhabiting the intellectual or artistic world of the twenty-first century, but it was and still is the framework (and the prison) for many other people. Making amends for Alexina in her own language was a premise that was desired by the creators. Hence the impulse of beauty, delicacy, and exquisiteness that permeates the whole opera.

The Sound World Of "Alexina B."

Alexina B. is written for five singers (two sopranos, two mezzos, and one countertenor), a female choir of ten, an ensemble (flute, piccolo, and alto flute; oboe and English horn; clarinet and bass clarinet; bassoon; horn; string; harp and piano, the latter two omnipresent throughout the score) and pre-recorded electronics.

Short note on the vocals in *Alexina B.*: a cantabile contemporaneity

> That "*something can be held in our hesitant stay*"
> *– this is what art has always been and still is today.*
> Hans-Georg Gadamer[8]

Alexina's libretto is extremely extensive, so it can be said that the whole opera is made up of words—words that take shape through singing, with only a few moments being spoken or recited. Singing is thus the dramaturgical dimension that builds not only the characters, but their memories, their desires, and their projections. In *Alexina B.*, no adornment, embellishment, or effect of the voice prevents this decisive communication of the text, which is clearly heard in both the solo characters and the female choir. This has to do with García-Tomás' particular way of composing. She defines

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8 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays,* trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 53.

herself as a test ground for vocal experimentation; she sings what she composes and in the same way, composes what she sings, which gives her music a ground of absolute identification between the voice of the character and the composer.

Raquel García-Tomás conceived the roles of Alexina/Abel for a single singer, with a score that could accurately reflect a female character who adopts the masculine identity after a night of passion with her lover Sara—this versatility made possible by the mezzo voice. She also built the entire vocal spectrum in female registers, with Alexina's girlhood milieu also being mezzos, as well as her first childhood love at the boarding school, Léa, and the student at the boarding school, incarnated by the same soloist, while the sopranos are Sara, Alexina's lover, and the characters of the police officer, Madame P., Alexina's mother, and Sister Marie-des-Anges, all four interpreted by the same singer. The only male voice is that of a countertenor who interprets six characters: the three doctors, the Abbot, Monsignor, and the judge.

In *Alexina B.,* the attractiveness of singing goes beyond its aesthetic appeal; its beauty, purposefully slowed down and drawn out, especially in the big arias and in the long duet in scene 8, not only expresses the tangible world, but also reflects the entire utopian universe that these characters bring with them, which their repressive society prevents from revealing. *Alexina B.* brings to the stage Plato's life-giving principles of truth, beauty, and goodness, which in a luminous way pierce the entire opera.

With electronics, Raquel García-Tomás virtually enlarges the physical spaces and builds emotional ones, outlining the characters' state of consciousness and helping to emotionally entangle the character and the audience in specific situations (the storms Alexina is caught up in, the gasps, the heartbeats, the sounds of the forest, or the echoes of the convent). It is this intention to provide greater resonance that justify the voices being amplified, with two purposes; on the one hand, a purely musical one: to create echoes, resonances or to help the lines be heard better when sung, spoken, sighed, or whispered; and on the other, a symbolic aim: to transport to the present, to every seat and to every twenty-first century spectator, all the events that defined Alexina's life.

Musical approach to *Alexina B.*

On a global level, the score is presented as a broad unique form, in which all the scenes are formally closed yet connected to each other through el-

ements that, like creative sediments, reappear in the scenic, literary, and musical dramaturgy at different levels of significance.

In this work, the ascensionality of the character of Alexina/Abel is approached by García-Tomás through a succession of lines in *anabasis* in constant transformation and regeneration, such as the one developed through a harmonious rhythm that always moves forward in scene 8, a symbol of the ascensional transport of both protagonists to the world of love through their first sexual relationship. The following paragraphs describe "what the music and *libretto* narrate," as a palimpsest of the next chapter, "what the stage shows," taking into account that were conceived at the same time by the three creators and that they go closely together. It was decided to discuss them separately so as not to mix the levels of significance that go hand in hand in the opera.

The soundscape we are introduced to in the *Ouverture*, with a storm in D minor in descending harmonic progression, is echoed in the scenes *Abel* and *L'orage*, with a similar approach but now a little more serious, heavier, more otherworldly. In the *Ouverture*, the children's choir—with which we relive Alexina's first years as an intern at the girls' convent—appears singing a popular French Renaissance song, *Compagnons de la Marjolaine*,

Fig. 2 – Alexina B., Sara, and the children. Scene 5, *La forêt*. Gran Teatre del Liceu, ©A Bofill

which will reappear in other scenes, rearranged and always starting from the next verses in different stanzas, thus signifying the advance of time.

Abel's tragic end is pre-empted in a flash forward in scene 2, so as not to lead the opera to the eye of the storm; the three authors thus commit themselves to the figure of Alexina by taking her to that immortal, immaterial place in which she longed to live through a risky scenic journey of death towards the light. This scene therefore forms an isolated part, connected through electronics with the previous scene with the sounds of rain and bass frequencies and with the next, with the resonant sounds that also linger with the listener. It is interesting to consider how the composer dramatically treats the reading of the suicide letter in this scene. The policeman lists the reasons why Abel commits suicide in a *declamato*; the composer strikes a balance between the aseptic, declarative tone of an official doing his duty and the emotionality in narrating Abel's fatal destiny through an expressive song, hence the vocal style. Another aspect that the song brings to the listener's attention in this scene is the interruption in the second part by the doctor, Dr Goujon, who is excited to have found a rare *specimen* in his medical examination. García-Tomás wanted to recreate through this piece the mentality of a character who has found in an intersex person a mere object of scientific scrutiny.

Scene 3, Alexina's grand introduction aria, combines singing and recital. It contains some of the melodic and expressive motifs that define the score (such as the quick motif in the *adieu*). In that same constructive approach of interconnecting materials, in scene 4, *L'internat*, the children's song *Compagnons de la Marjolaine* reappears with a different orchestration, other strings harmonics combined with a canonical score in the choir and over other parts of the poem, because it is no longer the girls who sing it but the young pupils at the boarding school where Alexina moves as a governess. The composer portrays the character of Madame P., the Principal of the boarding school and Sara's mother, in a modal sound environment, which on the one hand draws from French impressionism and on the other from a certain archaic sound, mimicking the archaicness you'd expect of a rural woman educated within the constraints of the nineteenth century. The abbot is expressed with a darker and harsher harmony, which contrasts with the first words that open the relationship between Sara and Alexina, "votre coeur est généreux," on a sonorous echo of Franz Liszt's *Sposalizio* from *Années de pèlerinage*. This moment contrasts widely with the musical portrayal of Alexina/Abel's farewell letter to Sara in scene 17, which is much more lyrical, open, and volatile, greatly contrasting with the judge's aseptic,

inhumanly neutral reading in scene 19, *Le Tribunal*. Scene 5, *La construction de l'amour*, features a waltz sound, created *ex professo* by the composer, to depict this turning point in Alexina's life, while at the same time there is an echo of the popular song used in the previous scenes 1 and 4, now differently, lengthier, and stopping at a perfect fifth interval that will later be the starting point of the choir in scene 8, the first night of love-making. As a metaphor for a relationship that evolves from friendship to love, the waltz also grows harmoniously and in intervals until asserting itself and washing over the orchestra.

This orchestral atmosphere is transformed when the protagonists enter the forest, *La forêt*, in a symbolic entrance connected with the mysticism of San Juan and with the medieval literature that recreates the lovers' *locus amoenus*. The orchestral motives expand progressively, the simplest preceding chords (triads, quadriads) are filled with tensions and a sense of greater tension is created: friendship has transcended to the deep dimension of that forbidden love; echoes of Liszt's *Sposalizio*, orchestrated differently (and with a tempo and dynamics that here no longer belong to the original work but to the story of Alexina), accompany their first kiss, in the universe of the enigma. Sara begins her big aria in the next scene paralyzed by fear (represented by repeated *staccato* notes); this anguish is transformed little by little until reaching firm conviction from the moment that first kiss becomes present in the *libretto* and in the music. The key scene in the opera is N. 8, *Première nuit*, as it represents a transcendental change for both, because a new world opens up in them and because from this first physical encounter, Alexine, as he was called, begins to refer to himself as a man. Formally, it has two large sections. The first part begins with a very simple harmonic-rhythmic ascension progression with very pure sounds as an analogy of the two characters, until Alexina affirms her desire to be Sara's lover, partner, and husband, at which point the sounds devised for the forest scene return, thus functioning not as a *leitmotif* but as sediments that rise to the surface in key moments. Their unwavering decision is fixed through a moment held musically by penetrating the sound universe of the chords E major and A minor, which, following the constructive logic of this work, reappear from before and are introduced by adding instrumental layers. The expressive aim of both creators at this time in the scene is to convey to the audience, through the exquisite beauty of the singing, the beauty of existing in a non-normative body such as Alexina's, which is desired, as it is, by Sara. The scene culminates in a long and daring moment with amplified electronics breathings, which are used with the two-fold intention of mak-

ing those whispers of that first night, reprehended by the whole of society at that time, be heard from the uppermost circles of the theatre in a symbolic reparation that comes in the twenty-first century to humanize the experience and place it outside the singing, giving it an element of physicality, of tangibility.

The next scene is set to an E—alternately minor and Phrygian—composition, which, in that iconic perfect fifth interval, introduces a part of the medieval responsory *Favus distillans* by Hildegard von Bingen, whose text permeates the lived experience with symbolism and places us in the physical space, since the moment occurs in a religious boarding school. This pure interval pushes Madame P.'s entrance into that same E note with which she made her appearance in scene 4, *L'internat*, now becoming more and more chromatic and dark, like the voice of morality; normative morality makes its appearance also through the girls' choir, which acts as a reprobating conscience. *Doutes*, which closes the first act, brings back the sounds of the forest on the word *Dieu*, in a kind of palimpsest that tears Alexina between her pious and loving identity. That suffering thought is swift and memories appear in it, including people from his childhood such as his dear Léa, and his doubts about how to act with Sara and society. These doubts are transferred to the score in a few rhapsodic microsections; finally, his solitude is expressed through an *a cappella* song inspired by Hildegard's chants sung by the choir at the beginning of scene 12 in an anticlimactic piece that emphasizes Alexina's solitude, which reaches act II in the same melodic outline. The girls' choir acts as an off-stage narrator, almost unreal, insistently referring to Alexina in third person, singing the same text sung before by Alexina and emphasized by the electronics. Alexina enters *in media res*, confessing her love for Sara. The girls' singing turns into shouting, hurling insults, like the echo of the abbot's words upon hearing her confession.

Pain as sound and stage material is the all-consuming focus of scene 12, in which the use of electronics, with long whistling sounds and the orchestral *arrabbiato*, accompanies Alexina's *adieu*, with the same melodic motif with which she bids farewell to the boarding school. The pain-induced hallucinations continue, the characters involved in Alexina's life such as Madame P. and Sara become involved in the pain, agitated; a double bass repeating a deep, constant E introduces the cool calm of the doctor in the next scene, *L'examen médical*. In this medical examination, there are no harmonies accompanying the singing, Alexina is alone with her amplified breathing, and it starts from the girls observing, as happens often in medical examinations of intersex people, next to the deep, dragged sound of the

previous scene that gradually takes over the entire orchestra. This scene of pain is concentrated in the vocal quartet, divided into two parts: first, Alexina and the doctor on the one hand and after, Sara and her mother, on the other, together with electronics-like girls' whispers and the soloist, the inner voice, underscoring the question "*quelle est la cause de son mal?*" That core of physical pain, suffered by Alexina, moves to a virtual terrain, towards a storm of nature made up of electronics together with a series of descending scales in the orchestra.

The passage of time is the subject of scene 14, *L'été*, in which Alexina's concerns about the future as well as her decision to go through with the affirmation are the theme of the duet with Monseigneur, with archaic sounds (here Alexina has gone back to her village). A slightly baroque counterpoint accompanies the entire text in which Alexina tells the priest of her desire to marry Sara. There, she is not musically alone; she is accompanied by the second theme from Liszt's *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude* (from the piano cycle *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*), a leisurely and calm piece. Scene 15 begins with a duet with her mother, in a melancholic atmosphere in which she recites her new reality; the first theme of the *Bénédiction de Dieu*, a more passionate and romantic melody, can be heard, as befits this other aesthetic intention of the composer. The mother's big aria displays a wide lyrical intensity, where previous elements appear, evocative of her childhood and culminating with an affirmation of delicate beauty over the words "*tu es mon enfant*." With the support of Monsigneur and her mother, Alexina faces her last medical exam while she is alive. To portray the coldness with which she is treated and the objectification of her body, Raquel García-Tomás uses a *sprechgesang* for the doctor, alternated with repetitive and serious singing.

Electronics, recreating a garden, introduce Sara in scene 17, *La lettre*, in which Alexina tells her of her situation; instrumental echoes of the first Sara from scene 4, then unaware of the burning heat of love, reappear. The musical narrative has two different parts, as we move from the happy declaration of love to the realization that it is impossible. Abel's determination to become bound by marriage sounds over a brief rendition of the *Sposalizio*, always orchestrated differently. The last scene of this act, *Les adieux* is also the last duo by the protagonists, who will never meet again. Their intense encounter reuses materials that had appeared in previous scenes, (7, 9—with Madame P.—and particularly scene 8—the lovers farewell), being only accompanied by the sounds of the garden, which opens and closes the scene with electronics and a use of strings that are slightly resonant of Salvatore

Sciarrino. Alexina, as Abel, is the sole character in the whole of Act III, in which he is hurtling towards the void. The ending (scene 20, *Abel*) is particularly striking, with the overture and its storm reappearing in a certain way in the form of echoes of Alexina's childhood. Abel is built on a new sound environment, a deeper and darker G minor, over the strings in D minor that colored Alexina's character as a child in the first scene. Abel's solitude in a hostile world is translated into an emphasized chant that ends in an anguished chant over thunderstorm sounds, just before a grand orchestral *tutti* which brings rain and sets the stage for the next scene, *L'orage*. Hildegard's *Ave Maria* is cited here and a canon is built with the help of the electronics accompanying Soeur Marie des Anges and Alexina Enfant's duet.

The opera ends with *Je suis un ange*, a scene in which Abel, loudly amplified, tenderly recalls his loved ones and then remarks, in a solo with electronics, how impossible it has been to live as a man in this world, he who had been brought up as a woman. His farewell ascends towards that transcendence desired by Alexina, with a deeply stylized instrumental use with a transparent texture.

Conductor Ernest Martínez Izquierdo also plays a decisive role in this musical rendering of the characters, transferring to the pit the clean and crystalline environment composed by García-Tomás and holding all the singing lines of the score with the intelligence and understanding necessary to undertake this work that is so difficult to qualify.

Staging "Alexina B."

Stage director Marta Pazos has been one of the most influential figures in the renewal of Spanish theater and opera in recent years. Her unmistakable aesthetic and her particular way of working, underpinned by concepts from eco-feminism,[9] have led this Galicia-born artist to become a pioneer in the contemporary Spanish operatic scene. Pazos had already worked with García-Tomás on the opera *Je suis narcissiste* (2019), in which she brought to life melodramatic characters and buffos, shaped both by vibrant colors and *joie de vivre*. In an opera as radically different as *Alexina B.*, her hallmarks endure, tinged by the demands of such a powerful story and with

9 The director has been developing her own understanding of eco-feminism in her work for years, which roughly leads her to consciously put life at the center and legitimize this as a way of rethinking how the craft is formulated, treating an artistic project as a living project.

so many connotations for the contemporary world. In fact, her previous works like *Othello* already centered around deprived characters, as well as themes of homoerotic sexuality, like in *Safo*; *Alexina B.* is the culmination of this work.

Pazos approaches the sets of *Alexina B.* from a meticulous hermeneutic analysis of the libretto, treating all the elements of the scene as a whole, not from a naturalistic perspective, but from a highly symbolic one. This allows her to maximize the expressive possibilities of the story and provide greater resonance to the text, the cornerstone of this opera. Her scenic conception aims to put the listener in the emotional state of the characters, especially Alexina, in the most objective way possible, alongside memories and characters brought back from the past to accompany and highlight her loneliness. Everything happens in two complementary, non-antagonistic planes of reality/abstraction, a way of working that the director had already put into practice in her previous opera *A amnesia de Clío* (2019), by composer Fernando Buide, in which an abstract and mythological character, Clio, interacts with real-life characters, such as George W. Bush and Angela Merkel. Pazos carefully studies the possible scenic criteria, since she has to recreate physical places—the doctor's office, the boarding school, Abel's room or the courtroom—, those moments that alter Alexina's consciousness, real and virtual spaces/times—the passage of time, the beach or the forest—and endlessly open mental spaces—her childhood as her happy place, in which she forged her understanding of the world. In the scenic creation of these environments as "structures of the open," the original curtains rethought by Pazos and the video projections by García-Tomás play a crucial role. To remain faithful to the libretto, the sets depict a real dimension (events, people, and places) and a virtual one (people from the past, split realities, and the passage of time). Thus, the stage acts as a multi-resonant space, which aims to connect the meaning of the words with each viewer's imagination: what meaning it has for each person, the actions, memories, projections for the future, and the characters' dreams. From this dramaturgic *desideratum*, the Galician director builds her work from "desire" as a constructive methodology that gives meaning to the minimal objects that appear on the stage, to the lights, movements, and above all to the symbols, doing away with literalness to go to the depths of dramatic significance. In this significance the dramaturgical symbology plays a special role, which goes beyond the scenic meaning of the objects and gestures and reaches other parameters such as movement (for example, in scene 12, *la douleur*, the journey that Alexina makes in the scene follows the golden ratio).

Fig. 3 – Alexina B. Scene 11, *La loi*. Gran Teatre del Liceu, ©A Bofill

Pazos approaches stage design from her training as a painter, so the study of set design art is one of the main characteristics when it comes to understanding her visual language. Notable is the use of color, which, like another character, crosses the stage, endowing it with multiple meanings. Here it is the color green which appears on all scenic levels. With it, both indoor, institutional places (such as the boarding school or a medical office) and outdoor spaces take shape, an opening metaphor in the boarding school garden or the forest. Color must speak and manifest, must raise the temperature of the action or succumb to the tearing of feelings. Thus, green lichen chisels the narrative of the opera as something that permeates the entire narrative.

The characters that belong to the system are also wrapped in this hue; not so the characters belonging to the world of freedom, such as Alexina, or Sara, dressed in red terracotta, conveying love, sparks. The word *structure* has a special scenic significance. Alexina is someone who is crushed by the wheels of power: the clergy, the normative family, the law, and medicine. That is why the space is a structure, which closes in as the story unfolds. The visual narrative not only reflects what the characters experience but also resizes them beyond the strict logic of the temporal discourse (for example,

Fig. 4 – Alexina as an angel. Scene 1, Ouverture. Gran Teatre del Liceu, ©A Bofill

in the pain scene, which paralyzes Alexina, Marta Pazos' directing introduces actions that are desynchronized, going from the present to the past, symbolizing a mind that cannot think clearly).

The border is a space often explored by Pazos; in *Alexina B.*, the border becomes porous with back-and-forth paths and the metamorphosis takes the stage as a metaphor of transformation (Alexina as Abel in view of the audience, Alexina the ghost, the embodiment of pain and suffering, and Alexina the angel, immaterial, immortal). This concept of the border is intimately linked with that of enlargement of the scenic significance, which in *Alexina B.* unfolds in an allegorical direction. A clear example occurs in the scene *Les adieux*, in which Alexina and Sara bid their final farewell. Pazos sets this sad moment on a carnival day in the forest, with the symbolic meaning of the mask and its consequent display of the occult. All the girls' costumes have one thing in common: they are all about transformation (Pierrot, Red Riding Hood, a butterfly, Alice, and so on). This broadening of meanings continues in the next scene, *Le tribunal*, in which the girls no longer represent these luminous and innocent childhood beings but the mute and accusatory witnesses, socially conditioned by the morality of the time.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the role played by the girls' choir in the visual construction of this opera; their gestures and the choreography of the movements work in all possible directions: as angels, off-stage narrators, dark bullies, Alexina's peers, and friends. Pazos places them on different planes, real and virtual, forming part not only of the unfolding of the story, but of the unraveled consciousness of the protagonist's world.

Travel to the Center of the Debate: Too Much or Too Little?

> *The decisive question is this: how far can we go without betraying the past and what must we keep without betraying the future?*
> Erich Itor Khan[10]

The "contemporary opera / opera of the contemporary" dichotomy triggers a multitude of questions. What is the musical language in which contemporaneity must speak? Should it be extremely radical in all its dimensions? In this piece, the delicacy of the libretto and the exquisiteness of the sets and music were widely praised; for a few, it was a missed opportunity, citing a lack of radical ambition. An opera that breaks the molds of the accepted society, from the very core of this society—as is an opera house like the Grand Teatre del Liceu—is explained only through the conditions of self-criticism that the art of the present assumes as part of its responsibility in the twenty-first century, which makes opera houses the place where the works that are part of the social transformation—and aporically of the eternity of history—enter. With *Alexina B.,* the Liceu departs from a single meaning of what an opera house usually means, no longer proposed as a space of memory but as a space of restlessness, of the future.

Alexina B. opens, once again, the debate of what contemporaneity is and how it is constituted; musicology rethinks it from its side, too. The work of art does not come to resolve social conflicts, but to raise them, to legitimize the debate and to reformulate in its own field what art is supposed to do (the eternal Benjaminian reformulation of the anaesthetization of politics or the politicization of art). It is along this line that the musical and visual perspectives of *Alexina B.* connect. Art can work in addition to the value *per se* but *has* a value *per se*: it speaks from the unique, specific, and autonomous languages of its creators. Instrumentalizing the art of today (beyond the

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10   Quoted in Juan Manuel Viana, "Erich Itor Kahn (1905–1956)", *Scherzo* (April 2023), 80.

debate on *art pour l'art* in its different formations) is one of the widespread trends in twenty-first century stagings inherited from epic theater. *Alexina B.* is in no way immune to this, it is no stranger to constituting an opera of a political nature. Yes, it criticizes without raising its voice, without silencing it; this work is not the result of the creators' desire to turn it into a projectile that impacts the viewer, but it does try to redeem consciousness.

Alexina B. is also a testimony of the present times; in its reception, it has also been a seismogram of the social processes of reception. It would be perverse to value only the ethical legitimacy or social functionality of a work of art; in this case, we should remember the imperative with which Karl Kraus conceived the function of art, which was not to put order into chaos, but rather quite the opposite. This article does not come to solve the unsolvable, but only to expose the key factors with which a necessary work like *Alexina B.* is part of today's world.

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Book Reviews

Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Staging Voice*. New York: Routledge, 2022. 129 pp. ISBN 978-1-032-03427-0.

Pieter Verstraete

Among scholars of opera, music theater, voice, and film, Michal Grover-Friedlander is widely known for her academic prose ever since her *Vocal Apparitions* (2005) came out.[1] In that seminal work, she focused on inter-medial questions of opera projected and reflected in the medium of film. Her subsequent book, *Operatic Afterlives* (2011),[2] concentrated further on methodological questions around the haunting presence of the voice within the history of film. Her now third book, *Staging Voice* (2022) is more personal, even deeply personal: it brings together some of her dramaturgical thoughts on staging voice around three productions she directed with TA OPERA ZUTA (TOZ) of which she is also artistic manager, an ensemble of performers and scholars that grew out of Tel Aviv University's School of Music.

Despite being "only" 130 pages long, this book took Michal Grover-Friedlander admittedly a long time to write as it is the culmination of her decades of exploration. But that concentration of thought makes it a must-read for those interested in practice-based research within experimental opera today, particularly for those with a knack for theory informing practice or the other way around. With great passion for the voice in all its performative manifestations, Grover-Friedlander seamlessly interweaves practice-based research and theoretical reflection on performance of con-

1 Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

2 Grover-Friedlander, *Operatic Afterlives* (New York: Zone Books, 2011).

temporary opera. The book is then really meant to elucidate the interested reader on some of her operational ideas on voice in relation to three note-worthy scores: Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Der Jasager* (1930), Valerie Whittington and Evelyn Ficarra's *The Empress's Feet* (1995), and Erik Satie's *Socrate* (1919). The intended reader is also situated somewhere between production and research: a perfect match for aspiring dramaturgs and directors of new, small-scale opera and music theater. But musicologists and theater scholars might appreciate the inspirational prose too.

The book consists of one comprehensive introduction and three short chapters, each reflecting on one of the works. If one looks for a main thesis that brings all the parts together it is that voice as medium deserves to be the foundation of staging opera, which Grover-Friedlander claims to have original ontological status in the operatic realm. That, in itself, is rather odd, thinking of the myriad forms of musico-dramatic genres in Western culture that have given the singing voice center stage, too. But there is something to be said about restoring the voice as a central place from which all other aspects of performance emanate. Within the very heterogeneous history of musico-dramatic forms, however, Grover-Friedlander is only interested in contemporary operatic stagings, and then only within the practice of fringe opera. Her argument begs a wider cultural-historical question, though: did opera lose sight (or ears) for the voice, altogether? And is *bel canto* the only tradition that conceives opera primarily through its singing voices?

She hints at this when she discusses how contemporary opera is now more involved with altering "surface elements" by transposing characters, environments, as well as plot to different times and places, updating the original libretti, usually with the employment of new, visual and digital technologies. Even when directors recreate opera stagings approximately to how they were originally staged, Grover-Friedlander seems to suggest that they gloss over the fundamental force of voice in the *here* and *now*. This could be historically placed within opera's general urge for re-theatricalization (in an emphasis on spectacle) since the 1980s, away from its operatic opulence or what Michelle Duncan once called the "operatic scandal" (2004) which the singing voice embodies.[3] But when Grover-Friedlander opens this crucial paradox to other contemporary art forms, she makes the rather peculiar observation that "the position of the singing voice at cen-

3 Michelle Duncan, "The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body: Voice, Presence, Performativity," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3 (2004): 283–306.

tre stage has been overturned by post-dramatic theatre and performance art" (4), mainly due to its reconfigurations of presence, immediacy, and self-identity. German-based scholarship after Hans-Thies Lehmann's writings on the postdramatic have actually argued that postdramatic theater, in line with the ideas of ephemerality in performance art, has brought the voice as both affective intensity and compositional material back to the center.[4] If anything, postdramatic remediations of the voice, be it unsettled by technology or by new ways of embodiment in practices of "composed theater," have only made the call for a renewed emphasis on the voice in opera urgent again, while also the very notion of "opera" has undergone significant redefinitions.

There is, however, a third way, according to Grover-Friedlander, namely staging opera as an investment in the voice as such, away from traditional opera that is first and foremost "a metaphysics of the voice, an ontology as well as an ideology" (4). This insight offers the key to unlock the case studies she discusses in the subsequent chapters, that all in their own respect had broken with the past. As such, she calls for a general re-enchantment of the voice within the true sense of *bel canto*, as a "discovery of a world where meaning is entirely established through the singing voice's expressing itself" (2). It is a bit unclear, however, if she advocates for a nostalgia to a mythic source of opera in the voice as medium, which would also attest again to a certain metaphysics, ontology, and ideology of voice; or if she rather embraces the most recent redefinitions of opera within the post-operatic. She claims that her approach is close to Nicholas Till's writings on the matter of a self-critical "post-operatic" scene, which "accepts the constituents of opera but challenges the dramaturgical and ideological assumptions underpinning its forms."[5] In Till's own practice she finds affinity with how the audible can determine both the shape and the concept of the staging.

Grover-Friedlander's book refocuses then our attention "to heighten our awareness of voice and to intensify what singing comes to" (1). To evoke that acute attention and complexity, she first initiates her reader further into a kaleidoscopic introduction on the state of the art of voice studies with a keen eye for its purposes for opera staging and research. Her aim there is to "re-conceive voice" away from traditional opera's preoccupations with

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4 See, for example, David Roesner and Matthias Rebstock, eds., *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), or Jenny Schrödl, *Vokale Intensitäten. Zur Ästhetik der Stimme im postdramatischen Theater* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012).

5 Nicholas Till, "Stefano Gervasoni's *Pas si:* Staging a Music Theatre Work Based on a Text by Samuel Beckett," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 23, no. 2 (2013): 223.

virtuosity. Voice studies is, however, much broader than what the operatic can cover, which would need to encompass a longer history of also linguistic, physiological, neurological, pragmatic, communicative, affective, psychological, medial, political, and legal approaches,[6] intersecting with both sciences and humanities which is much further reaching than a general sociology and philosophy of voice in performance. Even a simple question "What is voice?" cannot be unanimously answered in these disciplines. It is a pity that Grover-Friedlander does not engage further with the plethora of approaches that current voice studies as part of Practice as Research (PaR) in the UK have established, despite her two full paragraphs on Thomaidis and Macpherson's defining book *Voice Studies*,[7] and many other sources in her very rich bibliography. Her own suggested framework of "modes of staging voice" actually overlaps with quite a few principles that the contributors in that volume have addressed, be it in other contexts. Her focus on *staging* rather than composing or listening is then rather an extension or deferral (re-referral?) that would enrich voice studies from the point of view of a discipline to which voice studies have generally taken somewhat distance, namely opera as the repertoire of highly conventionalized voice practices.

The difficulty with unravelling the complexity of staging voice, for all its in-betweenness and multiplicity, into any classification is that it gives a false promise of abstracting practice into general, structuralist principles that will always fall short of the lived experience. Grover-Friedlander distinguishes eleven of such modes: "all ears" in visually deprived stagings, composed staging, visual staging, choreography of voice, musicalizing matter, voice as object/matter/body, in betweenness, vulnerable/exposed voice, vocal disturbance, hollowed-out voice, voicelessness or vocal muteness. Some of them are heavily specific; others have larger bearings. She does caution the reader that her intention with these categories is only to demonstrate the huge potential of staging voice. She does not systematically engage further with them in her case studies to describe or "codify" her own directorial choices, which leaves the proposed framework somewhat hanging in mid-air. As a system, her qualifications obscure also what belongs to the staging and what to the production of voice on stage. No doubt,

6 See, for instance, Jody Kreiman and Diana Sidtis, *Foundations of Voice Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Voice Production and Perception* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

7 Kostantinos Thomaidis and Ben Macpherson, *Voice Studies: Critical Approaches to Process, Performance and Experience* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

voice as both mediality and materiality intersects both aspects of staging and production, and a phenomenological approach would make it hard to distinguish them. From the point of view of *making*, one could argue for a distinction, which makes the initial classification inevitably flawed. The suggestions speak, however, to both the maker's and reader's imagination— built on decades of experience, they are food for students and practitioners' thoughts to take them critically further.

Before leading the reader onto the actual chapters, she makes a remarkable comment on how her unique position as both musicologist and director makes this book the first of its kind. One needs to nuance that a bit, since most scholars of contemporary opera and music (in) theater who I have met also have that experience as practitioners. Grover-Friedlander refers to Till's staging of Stefano Gervasoni's *Pas si* as a theater scholar. David Levin's *Unsettling Opera* (2007) is mentioned, which brings in the perspective of the dramaturg-scholar. And David Roesner is also a gifted musician who brings in that applied perspective in both his pedagogy and scholarship of composed and theater music.

Grover-Friedlander does nuance her position a bit when she renames her directorial input as "voice choreography," which observes how "the initial translation of voice marks an entry into movement and a dispersal in space" (24). Her writings are then not clear directions of *do's and don'ts* for future practitioners but rather dramaturgical afterthoughts, interpretations of her own stagings and practice. The scholarly aspect in this book is, therefore, strong as it takes an integral part in the practice, before and after, to question the works in an infinite hermeneutic chain. It reminds me somehow of what Gotthold Ephraim Lessing did with his *Hamburg Dramaturgy*: it provides context of certain voice staging practices whilst advocating for their vitality in a Western European tradition that is in constant need for such revitalization. The locus of Grover-Friedlander's practice is Tel Aviv, which is perhaps an unexpected place for such staging experiments. Coming from the periphery, making high-art music theater in Hebrew translation, the book gives an insightful yet vulnerable account of the potential of staging voice as surprising realizations of works that also exist outside the canon. The three works she discusses are not operas in their fullest sense, though, since they rather carry such designations as school opera, monody, symphonic drama. Yet, they help Grover-Friedlander to look critically back to the medium of opera and its voices from outside the opera traditions, from the fringe of the fringe.

What follows is then a sustained reflection on voice stagings and direct-

ing. Chapter one focuses on Grover-Friedlander's directorial concept of the Brechtian Schuloper *Der Jasager* (*The Yes Sayer*, 1930) by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht,[8] which thematically concentrates around the idea of ambiguity integral to the Yes-saying or consent. The modes of *in betweenness*, *vulnerable or exposed voice*, and *voicelessness or vocal muteness* formed the basis of this staging. After a brief historical contextualization of the work (based on a Noh play) pointing to different artistic interpretations by Brecht and Weill on the notion of consent, Grover-Friedlander goes deeper into a musicological analysis of rhythm and harmonies. The analysis is meant to show how the play with voices and chorus produce gestures of a consent that is felt as both voluntary and coerced. This is then paired with a common tactic of music theater, namely the splitting of parts between two or more voices, also called "doubling," which is paired with moments of mute acting out what is sung. The latter becomes a gesture of a certain core muteness in the voice. This leads Grover-Friedlander to discuss the different notions of gesture with an emphasis on Weill's interpretation: "*gestus* is the social 'rendered' musically" (47). She then argues further for the nature of gestures of being between the musical and the visual, constantly morphing, as she also explored with bodily shadow-play-like gestures on the stage. She ends the chapter with a reflection on schematization and abstraction through repetition of gestures, causing estrangement. This was highlighted in the performance by the voiceless gestures of a mute acrobat figure giving a condensed compendium of all the gestures in the performance. Grover-Friedlander's prose is compelling and thought-provoking. She writes though as if the performances she directed write themselves on paper. It is as if she takes her own agency away and takes a Brechtian pause to reflect back on her work and its dramaturgical thought processes.

The second chapter reflects on her directorial choices in staging Ficarra and Whittington's *The Empress' Feet* (1995):[9] a fully a cappella opera that gives voice to feet, so to speak, "that makes feet sing" (57). The estrangement in this opera concentrates on sleepwalking feet in an origin story of foot-binding, which through singing voice their will to walk. This idea sparks the directorial idea to treat the stage as a self-enclosed space, trapping the listener between dream and nightmare, where "nothing exists that

8 The video of this production is available online: Ta Opera Zuta, "The Yes Sayer | Der Yasager | זכ רמואה," YouTube video, uploaded on April 15, 2016, https://youtu.be/CzjWlBVB-Bp8?si=RtOxeA1_KrsV8QWO.

9 Yoav Bezaleli, "Empress's Feet," YouTube video of the Ta Opera Zuta production, uploaded on January 28, 2015, https://youtu.be/1OYtN3fD9x0?si=rEEBJg8cdWZcEeyY.

is not derived from the voice" (59). After a short contextualization of the work and the meaning of sleepwalking through history (missing somehow the rather obvious political undertones), Grover-Friedlander looks closer into the score revealing its main compositional technique of units of music-and-text in a truncated way, as if "halted in the midst of a breath" (61). The socio-political content lies, however, totally within the aesthetic realm of the musical language that the score produces, where sleepwalking serves as a placeholder for dreams of freedom, and for a new ending of wish fulfillment on the part of the Empress figure carried home by beautiful feet. Grover-Friedlander shifts then from the old Chinese custom of foot-binding, as discussed by Julia Kristeva,[10] to the modification of the voice in the tradition of castrati (manifested in the voice of a countertenor). She ultimately links that to her modes of staging *voicelessness*, *soaring voice*, and *hollowed-out voice* through whispers performing the suppression of sleepwalking. The figure of the acrobat returns also in this performance in the air, soaring above the audience's heads, as if weightless, non-material, a figment of imagination. The countertenor is his material counterpart. And so is Grover-Friedlander's prose in this chapter with associative citations from Steven Connor and Kristeva:[11] her staging ideas are perhaps grounded in theory but take flight from the page.

The final third and longest chapter is dedicated to yet another remarkable staging by TOZ, Erik Satie's *Socrate* (1919). It is almost a mise en abyme for the entire book as it gives account of an extensive thought process. It also asks some metaphysical questions related to ancient philosophers about the intelligible realm of ideas and death: "Can music, or singing, be that ethereal body or evanescent material presenting the figure of the philosopher who cheerfully accepts such death? … But how to stage and express this relation of music and matter?" (81). For that, Grover-Friedlander choses the mode of *vocal disturbance* by inserting a Renaissance madrigal staged as self-referential sound in opposition to Socrates' image of a swan song. This somewhat hermetic work is contextualized historically before Grover-Friedlander unpacks its tripartite structure full of references to Socrates' *Symposium*, the myth of satyr Marsyas challenging Apollo, Plato's *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo* (depicting Socrates' death scene), and Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. Her dram-

10 See Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Burrows (London: Marion Boyars, 1977).

11 See Steven Connor, "Writing the White Voice," transcription of the talk given at the *Sound, Silence and the Arts* Symposium, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore, February 28, 2009), accessed December 1, 2023, http://stevenconnor.com/whitevoice.html.

aturgical explorations also include art historical reflections on Cubism and minimal whiteness, Satie's *musique d'ameublement*, versions of the piece by John Cage and Merce Cunningham in 1944 and 1969, sculptures by Constantin Brâncuşi from 1922, and paintings on the subject by Georges Braque and Jan Cox. It reads almost as a stream-of-consciousness befitting the abstract excursions of *Socrate*, which are about the intense relationship between philosophy and music as central to the modernist context when literature was exploring similar themes. In this work, the countertenor as disembodied voice returns to cast a man-in-woman's voice as "white voice," based again on an idea voiced by Connor by analogy of white light encompassing all possible frequencies: "it is, so to speak, *vocality itself*, without the distinguishing grain that would tie it to a particular space, time, or body."[12] Although this idea is very potent for Grover-Friedlander's desire for a pure, aesthetic staging, I cannot but help noticing the white-washing ideology behind this idea in a critical race frame, which Western/Eurocentric aesthetic debates have long ignored. So, this last chapter is perhaps the most contentious one, if one separates stagings of the voice from its potentially political meanings, in its particular time and place. The ending section on "Staging Socrates' death" is then particularly disappointing as the capstone of this book. It focuses on the insertion of a seventeenth century lament by Gibbons, *The Silver Swan*, to the philosopher's death scene, in an attempt to fill in what Satie left out. It ends with a dancer putting his hands into cooled, melting wax in water, transforming it into a death mask. What a strange and enigmatic gesture to end this book, as if it mutes or transfixes the very voice it wanted to sound through the staging.

Nevertheless, the comprehensive introduction makes up for the increasingly cryptic philosophical explorations as materials for staging equally enigmatic but visually stunning music theater productions for the ears. The theoretical framework of the modes of staging voice did offer some guidance in Michal Grover-Friedlander's dramaturgical thinking and staging ideas as artistic director-researcher. Her idea of voice choreographies also become more palpable towards the end. Even so, the book is unreflective of the time and place of the stagings in Tel Aviv and its audiences. It remains somewhat trapped in its own aesthetic and discursive confinements of modernist art music, leaving aside other more post-critical music theater forms, outside the opera scene, that are breaking through the proverbial fourth wall. The voice is likely indeed the medium that can cut right through it.

12 Connor, "Writing the White Voice." Italics mine.

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Performance Reviews

Kinoshita Kabuki, *Sakurahime Azuma no Bunsho* (The Scarlet Princess of Edo). Tokyo (Owlspot Theater) and Kyoto (ROHM Theater), February 2023.

Rina Tanaka

Tour Date and Venues:
Owl Spot (Tokyo, February 2-12, 2023), Toyohashi Arts Theater PLAT (Aichi, February 18-19, 2023), Rohm Theater Kyoto (Kyoto, February 22-23, 2023), Ryutopia Niigata City Performing Arts Center (Niigata, February 26, 2023), and Kurume City Plaza: Kurume-za (Fukuoka, March 4-5, 2023).
Review based on two performances, one in Tokyo on February 2, 2023, and the other in Kyoto on February 23, 2023.

Cast and Crew:
Supervisor: Yuichi Kinoshita
Hotetsu (Text director): Yuichi Kinoshita, Takatoshi Inagaki
Playwright/director: Toshiki Okada

Sound design: Masamitsu Araki
Set design: Michiko Inada
Lighting: Yukiko Yoshimoto
Sound: Toru Koda
Costume: Kyoko Fujitani
Hair & Make up: Rumi Hirose

Fight scene choreograph & Instructor for Kabuki gestures: Hashigo Nakamura
Stage direction: Nobuaki Oshika
Planned and produced by Kinoshita Kabuki/Jurai-sha
Performer:
Songha (Seigen/Tsurigane Gonsuke/Denroku)
Shizuka Ishibashi (Sakura-hime/Shiragiku-maru/Kurōhachi)
Mikio Taketani (Nagaura/Yamada Gunjibē/Jikutani Sōdoku)
Tomomitsu Adachi (Iruma Akugorō/Inanoya Hanbē/Tsunaemon)
Tomohiro Taniyama (Zangetsu/Gunsuke/Jindayū/Samurai)
Masakazu Morita (Awazu Shichirō/Ushijima Ganzō/Ariake Sentarō)
Yuri Itabashi (Matsui Gengo/Kohina/Kimbē)
Megumi Abe (Matsuwaka-maru/Ojū)
Riki Ishikura (Inanoya Hanjūrō/Hinin people/Dotesuke/Kanroku/Santa)
Masamitsu Araki

In February 2023, a unique contemporary kabuki theater, *Sakurahime Azuma no Bunsho* 桜姫東文章 (The Scarlet Princess of Edo, hereafter *Sakurahime*) celebrated its world premiere and the beginning of Japan tour at the Owlspot Theater, Tokyo. This was a highly challenging and inspiring collaboration of two prominent artists who have been working on classical and contemporary performing arts in Japan: Kinoshita Kabuki and Toshiki Okada.

Since being founded in 2006, Kinoshita Kabuki has attracted attention by the faithful and creative adaptation of classic Japanese performing arts (mainly kabuki) into contemporary Japanese theater. Each production was created under the co-leadership of Yuichi Kinoshita 木ノ下裕一, the leader of Kinoshita Kabuki, and a guest director coming from contemporary drama (Kunio Sugihara and Jun'nosuke Tada), choreography (Momoko Shirakami and Kitamari), and musical theater (Kōnosuke Itoi). Among these previous cases, the name of Toshiki Okada 岡田利規 might not be very surprising, when we consider that the playwright and director—known for having founded the theater company chelfitsch—recently focused on Japanese classics. Since his translation of six noh and kyogen plays in the tenth volume of *Japanese Literature Collection Natsuki Ikezawa Edition* 池澤夏樹＝個人編集 日本文学全集 (2016), Okada was acclaimed for his original plays highly inspired by the format of noh theater, including *NŌ THEATER* (2018, Münchner Kammerspiele) and *Miren no Yūrei to Kaibutsu* 未練の幽霊と怪物 (Unfulfilled Ghost and the Monster, 2021, KAAT Kanagawa Arts Theater).

This time, Kinoshita and Okada tackled a popular but complicated kabuki play, *Sakurahime Azuma no Bunsho*, originally written by Tsuruya Nanboku IV 四代目鶴屋南北 (1755–1829) and first performed in 1817 at the Kawarazaki-za theater in Edo (now Tokyo). Traditionally, a kabuki playwright would compose a new work by borrowing and recontextualizing preexisting popular materials of characters and stories. Nanboku notably excelled at writing intertextual works weaving more than one set of materials, exemplified by his combination of two different materials in *Sakurahime*: the "Sumidagawa-mono 隅田川物" (the Sumida River plays) about the story of the kidnapped and then murdered son of the Kyotoite noble clan, Yoshida, and the "Seigen-Sakurahime-mono 清玄桜姫物" (the plays about Seigen and Princess Sakura) about a Buddhist priest, Seigen, who loves a noble princess, Sakurahime, even after his death.

As a result, *Sakurahime* deals with a turbulent story about the princess of the prestigious Yoshida clan. She secretly gave birth to the child of the

man who raped her. His name is Tsurigane Gonsuke, a man who secretly killed her father and brother and stole the clan heirloom scroll. For the crime of adultery, Sakurahime falls into the lowest social class. Not only that, but she also accidentally kills Seigen, a Buddhist priest who knows and obsesses Sakurahime as a reincarnation of his beloved acolyte. The ghost of Seigen appears nightly to Sakurahime, who now works for Gonsuke as a courtesan, and tells her Gonsuke's secret. As soon as Sakurahime knows who her clan's enemy is, she kills Gonsuke and her own baby and gets her family's heirloom back. In the end, thanks to Sakurahime, the Yoshida clan has succeeded in its restoration.

Despite its popularity today—recently, the kabuki version (2021, Kabuki-za) starring Kataoka Nizaemon XV and Bandō Tamasaburō V caused a sensation, while Romanian stage director, Silviu Purcarete, presented a gender-reversed *Scarlet Princess* (2018, Sibiu International Festival)—, this play was long forgotten until its revival in 1927. Nevertheless, modern productions underwent revision and omitted scenes and lines to meet various constraints for staging. An attempt to examine existing incomplete copies of original scripts and edit them as close as possible to the complete text was presented in 1967 at the National Theater of Japan by kabuki scholar and director Masakatsu Gunji 郡司正勝. For Kinoshita Kabuki's version, as customary in their previous productions, Yuichi Kinoshita and Takatoshi Inagaki carefully examined the textual history of this kabuki play and restored scenes that had not been performed since the 1817 premiere. However, this is not the only feature of this controversial and difficult-to-digest theater production.

If someone was expecting to see the performance in a traditional kabuki style, they would definitely be at a loss for three hours in the audience seat. It might be hard to believe that this is *Sakurahime* up until the first five minutes. Instead, the stage is made of crumbling ruins with a swimming pool on it. The sun is shining through broken, frosted windows on the stage right. In a dilapidated atmosphere, it looks like a sunset. The ruin seems to be ready for some fashionable club event. Colorful clothes are displayed on the two sides of the stage. On the right of the swimming pool, a DJ (Masamitsu Araki 荒木優光) constantly improvises music made of ambient reggae tracks, noise, and sampled voices of dogs, cats, and babies to chill out. Performers in Japanese street fashion hang around on the stage.

During the next scene, one realizes that *Sakurahime* is going to be played as a play-within-a-play. At the beginning of each scene, Brechtian captions

are displayed on the wall at the back of the stage, showing the title and summary of the scene. The performers look at the captions and start playing the relative scene. Lines are spoken with a monotonous voice; movements are awkwardly enacted. What happens on stage is that the professional performers imitate something like a very poor theatrical performance by Japanese teenagers without any vocal or physical training. That makes the audience more aware of the performer's corporeality than the character in the drama.

This combination of the performer's clumsy body movement and flat utterance maintained an absolute distance which prevented them from impersonating the character and at times even added a critical perspective to the drama (though it greatly depends on each performer whether they can naturally embody this unique, chelfitsch-style performative corporeality). In this regard, Megumi Abe 安部萌 had a very strong presence on stage. Her swaying body in a sullen mood even while she is impersonating the character Ojū—who is treated like a man's property in the drama—shakes the main plot grounded on such sacrifices. While describing the protagonist Sakurahime as an independent woman living for her desires, this version of *Sakurahime* sheds light on the female subordinate characters such as Ojū or a stammering girl Kohina (Yuri Itabashi 板橋優里) and lets us think of what their past and present role in the play is.

The performers who don't play any role during a scene stay in the front of the stage, peacefully watching the performance. They seem to act like those kabuki audiences who insert the shouts of *yagō* 屋号 (the stage family names of kabuki actors) or specific phrases in praise of the performer at the right moment of each dramatic climax. However, such pseudo-audience shouts completely inappropriate funny words that sound closer to the proper ones ("Sylvania シルバニア!" "Tofu-ya 豆腐屋!")[1] and calls out slang expressions never heard in kabuki theater (for example, "Niko-ichi ニコイチ!"—"two as one" in Japanese language—for the romantic climax). The real audience watches this autopoietic closed world generated between the performers on the ruined stage.

[1] However, some words, especially for the scene of the Yoshida clan dispute, can function as a satire on the kabuki play. For example, the term "Sylvania" refers to Sylvanian Families, a set of well-known Japanese anthropomorphic animal figures for children to be played with in dollhouses, and possibly juxtaposes it with a theatrical dispute within the noble Yoshida clan in the play *Sakurahime*. Additionally, other words refer to the specific breeds of dogs, such as "Pomerania(n)" and "Dalmatia(n)." Together with hearing the music sampling from dog barks, these callouts sound ironic when interpreting the clan dispute as a sort of dogfight.

   In contrast to the absurd, nihilistic direction, there are battle scenes and dramatic climaxes too, as usual in previous Kinoshita Kabuki productions. In these scenes, the performers dedicate themselves to the imitation of traditional acting styles as kabuki actors did in their performance of the same play. This created cathartic moments. Strikingly, the last scene with Sakurahime (Shizuka Ishibashi 石橋静河) was a beautiful homage to kabuki. Songha 成河, as Seigen and Gonsuke in the performance, made the best use of Okada's unsteady performative form and the kabuki's formal expression to play his two rolesin a persuasively and convincingly manner, even for the contemporary audience.

Kinoshita Kabuki and Toshiki Okada are artists (or artist collectives) who have already established their own style and brand through several successful productions. If they keep going forward such paved roads, audiences can foresee their future productions. Therefore, I believe that such a collaboration would be truly successful in a situation where the established creation styles would no longer be the best solution and the unprecedented would appear from interactions between such heterogeneous styles. In this respect, I think Kinoshita Kabuki's *Sakurahime* succeeded, despite strong malaise remaining after the performance, especially for the following two points.

   This version of *Sakurahime* ends before the reconstruction of the Yoshida clan. Sakurahime dares to kill her man and child and get the heirloom back for her clan, just as in the kabuki play, but in another moment she throws the heirloom far away. In response to this climax moment, Ojū calls out "Hallelujah!" (In the performance in Kyoto, it was Ojū instead who threw the heirloom far away with the call out.) At first glance, I interpreted it as an attempt for two female characters who got pushed around in a patriarchal feudal worldview to strip away the heirloom—a symbol of the *Sakurahime* world—from the man's hands and get rid of it by themselves. However, the question remains: if Sakurahime wishes to abandon the clan, why did she kill Gonsuke and her child without hesitation following a patriarchal feudalistic principle? Of course, contemporary audiences who are uncomfortable with the pre-modern perspective cannot help but feel catharsis with this ending of liberation. Nevertheless, this interpretation can be applied to any other kabuki plays as well. Did Okada intend it to be a self-homage to the opera *Yūzuru* 夕鶴 (Twilight Crane, 2021, Tokyo Metropolitan Theater)?

   The same problem appeared during the Terakoya scene, which was revived for the first time in 200 years since the premiere. Riki Ishikura 石

倉来輝, who perfectly embodied the unsteady, chelfitsch-style movement, played the role of Hanjūrō, a son of the Yoshida clan's loyal vassal. Hanjūrō is soon killed by his brother as a substitute of Yoshida's other son. After Hanjūrō's death, Ishikura changes his clothes at the corner of the stage and quickly comes back on stage as another vassal who fakes Yoshida's son with Hanjūrō's chopped head. Meanwhile, he smoothly interrupts playing any role and says that the vassals' loyal acts are "certainly eccentric behavior often seen in kabuki." That self-mockery to what his role just performed in the sense of *bushidō*—the vassals' loyalty to the clan and Confucian seniority in a family—seems appropriate to add for performance today. The word "often" also implicitly explains this scene's intertextual composition that every Kabuki fan knows: The Terakoya scene in *Sakurahime is a parody of the famous kabuki play Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagami* 菅原伝授手習鑑 (Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy, 1746). Nevertheless, despite such rich implication, the lines rather objectify kabuki as something incomprehensible with a certain distance in the end than demonstrate a self-critical performative act somehow trying to communicate with the original play, which this production could have accomplished. Such a distance—or rather, a sense of abandoning understanding—pervading not only this scene but the whole performance generates an atmosphere of moratorium, which ultimately suspends and refuses to understand the Nanboku's play.

I don't want to complain about creative adaptations from the classics, at all. Considering even more radical examples such as Nicolas Stemann's *Die Dreigroschenoper* (2011) or *Faust I + II* (2010–11), their drastic, deconstructive adaptation came from carefully dredging and investigating the text with clinging to pursue reasons, why it had to be *Die Dreigroschenoper* or *Faust*, and why theater had to perform that play today. That added a critical perspective to each performance.

Did the nineteenth-century Nanboku play already have a dramaturgy that could work as criticism against the old moral code first after thoroughly watching the play from the beginning to the end? Who knows. In any case, what Nanboku wrote in *Sakurahime* was not entirely a kabuki play of loyalty. The vessels strived for the Yoshida clan, including Hanjūrō's sacrifice, but in vain. Sakurahime finally avenged her father's death, but she was persecuted as a murderer in the end. For me, that plot sounds more critical than what this version of *Sakurahime* highlighted as absurd and eccentric.

Additionally, *Sakurahime* was striking in its ambition to use improvised electronic music in place of kabuki's *geza* 下座 music. This attempted to add another musical layer of creative homage to *Sakurahime*. At least, its

glimpse was traceable in the performance in Kyoto. During the month-long tour from Tokyo to Fukuoka, this production was changing, especially in relation to music. Instead of a caption-driven Brechtian staging as it happened in Tokyo at the beginning of this tour production, DJ Araki's sound design led the development of the scenes almost at the tour's end. However, music and drama interplay could have gone further, as seen in Okada's *NŌ THEATER* and *Miren no Yūrei to Kaibutsu* 未練の幽霊と怪物 (both music composed by Kazuhisa Uchihashi), and *Super Premium Soft W Vanilla Rich* スーパープレミアムソフトWバニラリッチ (2014, Nationaltheater Mannheim, with Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier*).

The first 40 minutes was a dazzling, continuous accompaniment, with the flagrant music underlying everything that happened on the screen. It was a surprising yet relatively simple process. The young musicians were very motivated. They played with energy and enthusiasm, conscious of the extraordinary enterprise they were involved in. Anthony Gabriele, the conductor, confirmed the dynamic construction of the original score, with sudden bursts of violins and punctual sounds. He gave great importance to the rhythm of the performance, and the overall impression was one of consistency and power.

The legendary shower scene was the climax of the first part. In the film, we do not see the knife cutting through the flesh. Saul Bass, the author of the opening credits, claimed that he designed the shots of this scene, a fact that Hitchcock always denied. The novelty of the presentation resides in the fact that the music became a protagonist. It stood up front, and the screen was somehow "obliterated." There was a sense in which the images lost their centrality, and the music became an autonomous discourse. Herrmann's music is so powerful that it can live independently from the images it was conceived for.

The conductor's role was crucial. He managed to keep the orchestra together, and he also managed to maintain the synchronization with the film. This is not an easy task, and it requires a lot of preparation and rehearsal. The result was a performance that was both faithful to the original and at the same time innovative, in the sense that it gave a new life to a well-known work.

The audience was very attentive and participative. There was a sense of anticipation, and everybody was waiting for the famous scenes. The applause at the end was warm and prolonged, a sign that the performance had been appreciated.

In conclusion, this was a successful presentation, which confirmed the vitality of this kind of event. The combination of a classic film and a live orchestra is a winning formula, and it attracts a large and diverse audience. The young musicians of the Orchestra Sinfonica Giovanile di Milano proved to be up to the task, and they gave a memorable performance.

Looking at the audience, I had the impression from most of them—especially the younger audience, which was high in attendance—that it was the first time they had been to a "semi-traditional" concert. However, in engaging an audience that is familiar with each frame and note, "*Psycho* Live" presents itself as a performance of a repertoire opera (such as Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, or Verdi's *La traviata*, or Puccini's *Tosca*) where each spectator faces the following conflict: "If I know everything, how can I keep my attention alive?"

The film flows organically and at the same time the audience's expectations gain more and more sophisticated standards of evaluation, addressing the attention to the crossing intersections of the audiovisual system. First of all, you realize that you cannot create a breaking point between "music soundtrack" and "soundtrack" at all. "*Psycho* Live" reinforces the number of strings in the orchestra to create a louder volume for Herrmann's score (in comparison to the music recorded in the movie). This creates an imbalance with all the remaining sounds: voices, noises, which are not less determining for the peculiar reality effect of the film.

Take the example of the Love Scene in *Vertigo*. The famous music by Bernard Herrmann interprets the moments when Scottie (James Stewart) waits for the arrival of Judy/Madeleine (Kim Novak): her appearances—albeit wrapped in musical, Wagnerian notes—are underscored and, in a way, made more "real" by the simple sound of opening doors, first from the elevator and later from the bathroom. During the *Psycho* shower scene, the musical scratch of the strings colludes and harmonizes with the water noises and the screams, creating an equivalent of the brutal, deadly shock of Marion Crane (Janet Leigh).

If everything contributes to the audio-visual effect, the decision to emphasize the musical score because it is "written" and it is playable as "highbrow" music, looks ingenuous. During "*Psycho* Live," I frequently had the impression of losing the meaning of spoken words, of losing "something" of the logical plot, in favor of the music's emotional aura.

This version of *Psycho* reaches a spectacular impact, not based on surprise but on the accepted rules of a rite. We were seated for 90 minutes to celebrate the prominence of Western visuality. The last frame of the shower scene, with Janet Leigh stretching her right arm towards the audience looking for help, becomes "absolute" as were the faces of the Odessa protesters fighting against the Czarist soldiers in the famous shots from *Battleship Potemkin* by Sergej Ėjzenštejn. What we memorized as a scream (the 1925 movie was silent, yet the advertisements claimed that "an Ėjzenštejn movie

is like a scream") relives in the final, silent acceptance of the fate of poor Marion Crane, so intense has been the cross performance of live music— with all the uncertainties of the "possible"—and well known and beloved sound and frames.[2]

In "*Psycho* Live", as in every similar experiment with celebrated movies, the viewers have the great chance to predetermine most of their reactions, like when they press a title from the playlist on their smartphone and listen through earphones, walking or traveling or simply doing something "normal" which can become "special." It is totally different from the transformation of old movies into opera (the Cocteau trilogy) or the sonorization of Tod Browning's *Dracula*, both made by Philip Glass with his original music, performed live during the 1990s and presented at the same Auditorium of Milan.

Personally, I am developing a proposal conceived with a young musician from Melegnano (Milan), Matteo Monico. It is called "Hitchcock's Ballads," and it consists of the performance of the entire musical score reduced for piano. Imagine a concert, a true—I mean, traditional—concert. The pianist enters, gets the applause, sits at the piano, and plays all Herrmann's score for *Psycho*. There are no screen, no voices, no images at all. The task of visualizing the movie is left to the audience's memory. Playing music, the pianist evokes a plot. He knows *Psycho* as we know, as the public of "*Psycho* Live" does. But here the audience is provoked, since the risk margin—of getting ourselves lost—is much bigger. As a spectator, I can forget at which point the pianist entered: so, what I can do? Do I leave myself to the music? Wait for another signal? "There I am, this is the shower scene! Ok, so now the second half of the movie starts."

From the magnitude of "*Psycho* Live" to the intimacy of "Hitchcock's Ballads," the same music echoes in us. The more we feel the complexity of the matter, the more we are able to perform and interpret a movie, getting to the core of extreme issues. In front of a ubiquitous *Psycho*, the responsibility is to memorize our own *Psycho*, as do the rebels of *Fahrenheit 451* when they each learn, word by word, an entire book to contrast a dictatorship engaged in the erasing of written memory.

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2 A modern evaluation of Èjzenštejn's masterwork cannot ignore neither the role of the score written by Edmund Meisel nor the flamboyant gay identity of the Russian movie director.

Giacomo Agosti studied at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa. He has been teaching Visual Culture and Performing Arts at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts in Milano since 1989. During the years he has worked with artists in emotional and sensorial terms. His main focus fell upon three main themes: American music, stereoscopic vision (historical 3D), and Italian movies color. He presented sound installations based on operas (from main repertoire and otherwise) at Museo del 900, Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Museo Nazionale in Naples, and on Comacina Island (Lake of Como). In 2013, he stage-directed the first modern revival of Nicolas Dalayrac's *Les deux petits savoyards*, with the Milano Classica Orchestra conducted by Gianluca Capuano. In 2003, he founded the Association Il Nuovo Mondo, which promotes the music of the 20th century as well as exchanges with Chinese artists from overseas. He contributes to the website <artecrit.com>. He is currently completing a book titled *L'Isola delle sirene. Cultura omosessuale e musical americano da Busby Berkeley a Betty Grable* (Ricordi-LIM, "Le Sfere" series, forthcoming).