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Symposium Musicum: The Politics of Place in Music Theater

Elia Moretti

Introduction

This article presents an analysis of how an experimental music theater project could facilitate new opportunities for intercultural dialogue and offer alternative perspectives on the perception of a multicultural society. The project, entitled *Symposium Musicum*, concentrated on the interrelations between the Roma and non-Roma populations in the context of contemporary Slovakia,[1] as revealed through a process of listening. This process may be defined as a social sound practice, which may be understood as an attitude towards exploring sound in its social setting.[2] It is anticipated that this will result in the discovery of a material access to sound that goes beyond the concept of representation.

The text presents a comparable scope. This article illustrates how experimental music theater can facilitate a rethinking of agency in a context of majority/minority relations by means of the creation of temporary and geographical scales. The intention is to open up possibilities for intercultural dialogue in this way.

The text is structured into two principal sections. The initial section of the article examines the motivations and political implications of such experimental artistic practice, whereby listening becomes a form of agency. The second section presents an analysis of the case study, which has been organized into three parts. The initial phase of the research entailed undertaking

1 To avoid confusion between nationality and ethnicity, I will refer to these relations as "ethnic Slovaks–Slovak Roma" or "the majority–minority," "Roma and non-Roma," "Slovak Roma among non-Roma."

2 Additionally, the sounds referenced throughout the text have been published in the form of an LP following a re-editing process. The album, entitled *Symposium Musicum*, was released by the Slovak label *mappa* (MAP030, 2023).

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fieldwork in the Carpathian northeastern region of Slovakia. This required traversing several villages and towns on foot, equipped only with microphones and tents. The objective was to observe the ways in which the act of listening creates social interactions. The second phase of the project entailed the composition process, during which the experience gained from fieldwork was translated into an acousmatic composition. The third section concerns the performance that took place at the local bus station through the course of a whole day. The acousmatic composition was situated within the spaces of a bankrupt grocery store, traversing the entirety of the waiting room. An integral aspect of the performance was the exploration of the performative possibilities of sound. The individuals present at the bus station became integral to the performance, functioning as performers in their own right. The objective was to foster an environment conducive to intercultural dialogue.

I am currently engaged in the process of writing this text as one of the authors of the project that is the object of analysis. The other authors involved in the project were Marika Smreková, a Slovak theater maker who directed the *Community Festival of Contemporary Theater and Art UM UM* for a decade, thereby establishing the foundation for the project's implementation; John-Robin Bold, a German artist and composer specializing in electronic music, the internet, and installation art; and Anna Khvyl, a Ukrainian sound artist, composer, and researcher with a background in cultural studies and anthropology.

Accordingly, I have adopted an autoethnographic methodology that encompasses an ecological approach. This emphasizes the structure of the environment itself and regards perception as the reception of that already structured information. This is considered according to three factors: the relationship between perception and action, adaptation, and perceptual learning.

The Politics

What is the role of sound in perceiving and enacting changes in contemporary society?

Before describing *Symposium Musicum* in its different phases, I need to express the motivations and the political imaginations the project was based on. *Symposium Musicum* recognizes individual listening patterns, biases, and abilities that influence our sonic encounters. Through critical listening, we framed listening as an encounter where diverse cultures inter-

sect within power dynamics. This underscores the importance of acknowledging our own perspectives on ethnicity, language, communication, class, gender, and ability in shaping these encounters.

Through *Symposium Musicum* I analyze the aesthetic potential of listening towards performing, composing and recording. However far removed this is from conventional forms of music theater, new music theater, opera or musical and their modes of production, I consider this project to be music theater because of the emphasized performative quality of sound itself—here performative sounds carry an unexpected potential for rethinking the theatrical form. I define it music theater, indeed, exploring this concept by thinking through the project *Symposium Musicum*, especially with an emphasis on its capacity to suspend our habits of thought. This idea, drawing from phenomenology, means that the aesthetic experiences I'm going to analyze, whether from the perspective of the creator or of the spectator, set themselves apart from other everyday encounters thanks to their capacity to reveal something as strange, or queer.[3]

The phenomenology of aesthetic experience is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been explored by many philosophers and scholars. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, experience of the world is inherently subjective and can be understood through phenomenology, which is the study of conscious experience.[4] In the context of aesthetics, this means that our experience of art is not simply a matter of sensory perception but is also influenced by our emotional and cognitive responses to the work. As Merleau-Ponty argues, "the body is our general means of having a world,"[5] and our physical and emotional responses to art are a crucial part of our aesthetic experience.

Similarly, philosopher Mikel Dufrenne argues that our aesthetic experience is not solely determined by the objective qualities of the work but is

3 This is something closer to what Guy Debord would define as *detournement*; see Guy-Ernest Debord and Gil J. Wolman, "Mode d'emploi du detournement," *Inter* 117 (2014): 23–26. Debord and the Situationist International created possibilities (*situations*) out of everyday life, with the aim of critiquing and challenging the alienating and socially controlling forces of the spectacle. For Debord, *détournement* was by definition an anti-spectacular action. I am aware that the social, cultural and also political environment of post-war France is very distant from today's Slovakia. However, I find similar political motivations in the challenge to shift the paradigm of everyday reality with an artistic sensibility.

4 See Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey et al. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), xlviiin2.

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 147.

also shaped by our own perceptions and interpretations.[6] Dufrenne argues that art is not a mere representation of reality but is rather a way of experiencing the world in a different way. This means that our aesthetic experience is not limited to the formal qualities of the work, but also involves our own subjective responses to it.

Overall, the phenomenology of aesthetic experience emphasizes the importance of understanding *Symposium Musicum* as a subjective experience that is shaped by our own perceptions and interpretations. By reflecting the conscious experience of this artistic process, we can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which sound shapes our perception of the world around us. This concept has important implications for fields such as musicology or performance studies, as it encourages us to think beyond the formal qualities of the work and to consider the role that our own perceptions and interpretations play in shaping the aesthetic experience. *Symposium Musicum* entered the texture of Slovak reality through listening, with the clear intention of creating a feedback loop, not as a tool for action or interaction, but for the experience that, when it comes back, it can bring awareness of possibilities, in a way that disrupts the usual stereotypes.

It is through such ecological approach that the project *Symposium Musicum* has been created in 2019. Its underlying question was how an experimental music theater project could open up new spaces for dialogue and perspectives of a multicultural society. We assumed that, through an ecological approach to the perception of sound, it's possible to achieve an acoustic knowledge, that is articulated on modalities of listening as knowing in action. Hence it will be necessary to consider the relationships to and between process and product, the space of production versus the space of reception, the time of making relative to the time of attention.

Symposium Musicum emphasizes subject-to-subject relationships, moving beyond a listener-centric view and valuing the agency, life, and subjectivity of sound. By being aware of our listening positionality, we engage with communities' aurality and explore the political dimensions within. This exploration aims to enrich our understanding of the politics inherent in sonic practices, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable engagement with the communities we have met.

This mechanism has been clearly articulated by Jacques Rancière, whose work since the late 1990s has developed a highly influential account of the relation between aesthetics and politics.

6 See Dufrenne, *Phenomenology*.

In *Symposium Musicum*, there are two competing features at play—the logic of the everyday experience and the ability to deviate from our expectations and create a performative, transformative, experience. While these may seem contradictory, they should be seen as complementary aspects of the event. This also refers to Jacques Rancière's concept of the distribution of the sensible (*le partage du sensible*),[7] which is defined as "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it."[8] Rancière argues that art holds transformative power beyond the realm of traditional critical analysis, emphasizing its affective capabilities that go beyond the mere transfer of knowledge through didactic means and instead rely on the creation of a sense of rupture and ambiguity.

By rejecting the "traditional" understanding of engaged art as a mere tool for political activism or social critique, Rancière insists that it is through the emotional and sensory experiences generated by art that individuals can be truly empowered and inspired to challenge the status quo and imagine alternative futures. From this point of view, we can look at *Symposium Musicum* as a political act, the result of power relations and struggles that are constantly being renegotiated and contested.

By bringing attention to the ways in which our modes of perception and representation are shaped by power relations, *Symposium Musicum* encouraged to question and challenge the status quo of Roma relations in contemporary northeastern Slovakia, and to imagine other possibilities for political action and social change.

This approach to art, according to Rancière, is not only more effective in creating meaningful and lasting change but also allows for a more complex and nuanced understanding of the world and our place within it:

7 One of the key implications of the *partage du sensible* is that it has the power to both enable and constrain political action. On the one hand, it can serve as a source of empowerment for those who are excluded from dominant modes of perception and representation, allowing them to challenge and disrupt the existing order. On the other hand, it can also serve as a means of control and domination, reinforcing existing hierarchies and preventing meaningful political change. Overall, Rancière's concept of the *partage du sensible* is a productive tool for understanding the ways in which power operates in our society, and for thinking about how we might challenge and transform existing structures of domination and segregation.

8 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, rev. ed., trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 7.

> Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of a negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning.[9]

In this delicate balance between familiarity and strangeness, *Symposium Musicum* stands out as an example of how music theater can create an experience that is separate from other dominant narratives and communicative outcomes. It is this element that sets *Symposium Musicum* apart and makes its experience original. Listening provides an opportunity to exit the mundane and enter into other modalities of perception and aesthetic experiences.

If politics is understood as not being just the domain of the state and the expert, but rather a field of action in which anyone can participate and create change, it follows that the aesthetic experience of the everyday is not divorced from politics, but rather a crucial site for political action. This reconfiguration of the relationship between aesthetics and politics has important implications for how we think about art and its role in society. Along this line, by combining the notions of encounter and appearance, Kelleher argues that theater provides a unique site for political engagement (Kelleher 2009). The encounter between performers and spectators, along with the act of appearance, creates a space for the negotiation of meaning, the exploration of social and political issues, and the potential for transformative experiences. Kelleher imagines theater as a site of collective imagination and reflection, allowing audiences to engage with different perspectives, challenge their own assumptions, and potentially mobilize for social change. Rather than seeing art as separate from everyday life, *Symposium Musicum* explored ways in which art can be a tool for political intervention by creating new forms of perception and cognition.

Rancière influenced *Symposium Musicum* by prioritizing the affective capacities of art in order to avoid the pitfalls of a didactic critical position in favor of rupture and ambiguity. What are the political potentials of listening to sound, and how does it shape the intersections of contemporary territories, such as ethnicity, gender, and social belonging? How can sound

9 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 59.

help define our active engagement with ethical issues? Is there an inherent potential in sound that can contribute to intercultural struggles? What behaviors or strategies can be derived from the experiences of listening and being heard? Can the knowledge nurtured by a culture of sound practices support us in navigating personal and political crises?

In his book *Sonic Agency* (2018), Brandon LaBelle explores sound as a tool for resistance and social change. LaBelle argues that sound has the ability to disrupt the dominant power structures and create new forms of agency for marginalized communities. And this idea was a fundamental motivation when we designed *Symposium Musicum*. LaBelle, further, highlights the potential of sound to create new forms of community and solidarity in the face of social and political oppression. He argues that through sound and listening, individuals can come together to share experiences, express themselves, and challenge dominant narratives. Overall, LaBelle's book offers a compelling argument for the transformative power of sound in shaping social and political change.[10]

To approach the northeastern Slovak social context through the practice of listening implied a deep involvement in the situations, events, histories and elements that tell about it. It's a process that recalls modalities of listening that invited to expand "the perception of sounds to include the whole space/time continuum of sound—encountering the vastness and complexities as much as possible."[11] It's a practice of *deep listening*, as defined by Pauline Oliveros, that involves a level of depth and attention to sound capable of revealing the territorial transformations that produce the ideologies and ecosystems that continue to shape social relations, such as those of marginalities.

The analogy between listening and understanding the relations between subjects lets the sound itself become a device able to narrate truths which carry their own firm point of view. *Symposium Musicum* became a critical and resistant common environment in which to experiment with strategies of adaptation, train a nomadic sensibility and incorporate differences. With *Hungry Listening* (2020), Dylan Robinson advocates for a "resonant theory" that foregrounds the ways in which sound is embedded in social, cultural, and ecological contexts.[12] This approach requires a "hungry listening" at-

10 See Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018).

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

12 Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 15–21.

tuned to the multiple layers of meaning and significance that sound carries in indigenous cultures.[13] A *resonant theory* is what we were in search of. We came and listened: what was the role of sound in those communities and their relations? Can sound resist marginalization and power structures?

Rejecting the temptation to answer, we listened. In the realm of individual listening experiences, each of us clearly comes with their own unique listening patterns, biases and abilities, both positive and negative.[14] *Symposium Musicum* embraces the concept of *critical listening positionality*, which prompts us to redefine the act of listening as a sonic encounter. Within this framework, diverse cultures converged, interacted, and grappled with one another, perhaps within power dynamics that were not always balanced.[15]

Symposium Musicum is made of encounters, the relationships between the source of sounds and the listeners creates relationships to human and other than human. This shift moves away from viewing the listener as the sole subject in the act of listening, and instead recognizes the agency, life and subjectivity inherent in sound itself: therefore listening in order to perceive the nuanced and ever-changing relationships in which we are embedded.

The concept of critical listening positionality embraced by *Symposium Musicum* underscores the importance of recognizing our own listening patterns, biases, and abilities. It prompts us to redefine listening as relation and commitment, wherein diverse cultures intersect and grapple with each other within often unequal power dynamics. This is how we explored the political dimensions inherent within communities' sonic practices.[16]

13 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 2–3.

14 Recognizing and understanding these factors is crucial to develop our listening skills.

15 This understanding emphasizes the significance of clashes and grappling that take place within these sonic encounters. It highlights the unconscious nature of the listening process, which involves engaging with musical subjectivity and alterity. Consequently, we are prompted to consider how our own perspectives of ethnicity, class, gender, and ability shape and frame the moment of contact between the listener and the sounds being listened to.

16 Brandon LaBelle even proposes to situate sound and listening as the basis for an insurrectionary sensibility—"a potential found in the quiver of the eardrum, the strains of a voice, the vibrations and echoes that spirit new formations of social solidarity" (LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 5)—so that they may support an involvement into contemporary politics and society. These motivations stand at the core of socially engaged art, which is a practice that focuses on creating social change by directly engaging with specific communities and addressing social issues. It involves collaborating with community members, initiating dialogue, and seeking to create a social transformation through art that challenges social norms and power structures. When talking about socially engaged art in Central and Eastern Europe, it is necessary to look at the region's socialist past. That has been influenced by a deep-rooted tradition of activism and social engagement, which has informed the work of many artists—an interest

In the context of the majority–minority relations in eastern Slovakia, it is evident that there is a necessity for continued efforts to facilitate engagement among individuals. Based on observations made over an extensive period of time, I can conclude that there is still work to be done to engage society in critical positions; the Roma minority is too often marginalized, isolated and, in extreme situations, segregated. Worse still, this is met with public indifference. An indifference that makes evil appear normal, banal, and makes fake news sound funny. I got involved into such a bold task as the one of socially engaged art through sound, an ephemeral entity, a presence that remains invisible.[17] Yet, I'm still wondering what the political possibilities of sound in the specific context of *Symposium Musicum* are. How does the act of listening connect us with communities, and to what extent can a community's aurality contribute to its politics?

Symposium Musicum is not merely a sonic or performative event, but a political act that challenges established norms and constructs public space and time by dealing with political complexities. Through the lens of artistic connectivity, the project opens up space for the emergence of alternative social configurations that are always in progress and negotiable among different agents involved in them. By rejecting the traditional understanding of engaged art as a mere tool for political activism or social critique, *Symposium Musicum* encouraged us to question and challenge the status quo of Roma relations in contemporary Slovakia, and to imagine other possibilities for political action and social change.

in participating in daily life, simulating everyday human activities (e.g., Milan Knížák), and turning the observer into an active participant (e.g., Jiří Valoch). According to Stanisław Ruksza, in the 1990s, artists were involved in a conflict that concerned various aspects of life, such as political reality and the transformation of political language. The purpose of this social movement, created and supported by artists, was to establish a more critical society that could experience democracy by critically examining its own institutions; see Artur Żmijewski, *Trembling Bodies: Conversations with Artists* (Bytom: Kronika, 2010), 13.

17 Sound is not limited to a particular object or category and cannot be compared to something tangible. It cannot be strictly categorized as social, political, or cultural, but instead should be considered as the interaction and relationship between various objects. Sound exists in an ephemeral space where these objects meet, and it relates to the listener, rather than to something permanent. This intangible quality of sound has the capacity to challenge and reshape our perceptions of identity, meaning, and subjectivity.

Symposium Musicum

Together with *Symposium Theatrum* and *Symposium Pictum*, *Symposium Musicum* took place in the *Community Festival of Contemporary Theatre and Arts UM UM*, in the northeastern Slovak small town of Stará Ľubovňa and the surrounding villages. Over a six-year period, the main goal of the festival has not been a presentation of artistic products, but the engagement of non-hierarchical contingencies in creative dialogue among local cultural apparatuses and between the local diverse community and international visiting artists. *UM UM* has been exploring the possibilities of connecting the language of participatory or community art with the history, traditions and non-staged folklore of the multicultural Slovak region called Horný Spiš. In 2015, after the first four editions of the festival, the founder and curator of the festival, Marika Smreková, felt a change in Slovak society and politics towards the radicalization of opinions and the escalation of dangerous relationships between various parts of society on an ethnic basis. Therefore, each edition of the festival from 2016 till 2020 reflected the topic of the relationship of Slovak society with the one minority, namely Czechs, then Ruthenians, Carpathian Germans together with Jews, Roma, Hungarians and Poles on the end.

Founded in 2012 and running annually until 2021, the *UM UM Festival* is a testament to the transformative power of grassroots cultural initiatives that aim to enrich local communities far from major urban art centers. Created by a collective of young artists and volunteers, its primary goal was to introduce contemporary art to their hometown while fostering meaningful engagement between artists and locals. Over the course of ten editions, the festival flourished through collaboration with various partners, including local residents, cultural institutions, national and international foundations, as well as direct support from the city. Its commitment was not only to artistic expression, but also to addressing pressing global issues within a local framework. Crucial to this success were the efforts of festival director Marika Smreková, who cultivated an environment ripe for dialogue between artists, experts, critics and the community at large—a process that enriched both regional culture and public understanding of contemporary art forms. By bridging global discourses with local experiences, the *UM UM Festival* exemplifies how independent arts festivals can transcend geographical boundaries to create lasting cultural impact.[18]

18 The website of the festival is still online, as a kind of archive of the festival and the other

It was a special project, one of a kind in that region, and a source of inspiration for new artistic projects to come. It represented a bottom-up community project for the larger communities it was referring to, in a continuous transformation.

As Raymond Williams describes it,

> community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (*state*, *nation*, *society*, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.[19]

These ideas of community and activism framed the experiment *Symposium Musicum* into the activation of a process aiming to open spaces of interaction between the local communities, ethnic groups and the artists. Grounded in the ephemeral action of listening (technologically mediated by a microphone, or not), an augmented space was generated and relationships were multiplying. *Symposium Musicum* did not aim at producing relationships but enabling them. *Symposium Musicum* became a critical and resistant common environment in which to experiment with strategies of adaptation, train a nomadic sensibility and incorporate differences.

The project was organized in three parts.

Field

> …a bus driver points out to us that in his thirty-year career we are the only non-Roma who want to go to Lomnička on our own initiative. We could feel that our presence brought some confusion, especially among the children. Since the end of the Second World War, Lomnička has been inhabited exclusively by around three thousand Roma. We're here to listen, to make recordings. Soon, however, we find ourselves becoming the objects of attention. The children, constantly trying to entertain us, lead us into a dilapidated church, once built by the Carpathian Germans who lived here. We get inside, and they

projects that have come out of it: https://umumfestival.com.

19 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, new ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 40.

> create loud claps of smashing leaves in the acoustic of the ruins. Although none of us, apart from Marika, who couldn't participate fully in fieldwork because she had to take care of little Emilia (1 year old), speak Slovak, let alone Romani, fluently, we manage to let some conversations emerge. Erik tells in German that he works in a supermarket in Vienna several times a year. He hopes to move there soon like his older sister did...
> *(diary written during fieldwork by Elia Moretti, Anna Khvyl, and John-Robin Bold; Lomnička, August 27, 2019)*

The first part consisted in fieldwork.

In the time lapse of a week, Anna Khvyl, John-Robin Bold, and myself walked to places or settlements symbolic of Slovak–Romani relationship on the Carpathian mountains of northern Spiš, a region that lays in north-eastern Slovak Republic: leaving from Stará Ľubovňa, we continued to the town of Podolínec; the former Carpathian-German village of Lomnička, nowadays completely inhabited by Romani; walking through the formerly military forest of Levočské vrchy to Kolačkov, a village which presents a strictly, though not formally, regulated form of relationship between the village itself and the Romani settlement, and back to Stará Ľubovňa.

Geographically this is a small area in northern Spiš, a region that hosts a big portion of the Romani population in Slovakia. We walked toward unpredictable and spontaneous meetings. In each of the places we visited, we set up a temporary camp, and the search for a dedicated site was sometimes the first contact with the locals; in fact, we understood the camp to be a methodology for making explicit the encounter with the community, and a symbol that goes beyond the individual and the collective, beyond the human being as the subject of the political. We imagined the camp as a possibility to incorporate history and archive, space and nature, protest, resistance and critique. It offered new forms of temporality and was able to originate new claims against capital, sovereignty, the nation-state and regimes of citizenship.

The aesthetic and critical processes of fieldwork were aiming to generate analysis of removed cultural elements, highlighting the possibility for us and the local inhabitants of discovering and re-appropriating different levels of the environment (physical, political, and cultural).

Of course, the act of field recording cannot be objective. The choice of the tools of recording, their positions, the presence of foreigners and their gaze influenced the outcomes of the recordings. Sound was rather a performative device, bringing its own position, originating a potentiality of

Fig. 1 – Carpathian haystacks on agricultural land with a view of the Tatra Mountains. What appears to be a natural landscape is in fact a mosaic of different types of land. The Carpathian landscapes have different values. Land management is influenced by many factors. Pastoralism was the main traditional livelihood on the Carpathians. The traditional pasture landscape is threatened by succession, resulting in a loss of biodiversity. Many valuable sites were destroyed by collectivization and industrial agriculture, which caused irreparable damage to nature and led to the extinction of the Slovak ancestral heritage. These traditional agricultural landscapes are under pressure from human activities. Photo by Elia Moretti.

dialogue in the same process of listening. Indeed, soundscape doesn't etymologically correspond to the notion of acoustic environment, because it doesn't refer to one point of view, a place to observe from. It rather articulates as a space where sound, intended as multiple, malleable but still invisible matter, builds an imaginary. Therefore, soundscapes are active environments, able to offer questions, phenomena and models. An environment made of critical, physical and disciplinary spaces in a continuous exchange characterized by the plurality of individual and collective sonic perspectives.

Intercultural actions are a slippery territory. It is very easy for artists to create superficial work that reproduces dominant inequalities.

Perhaps what is most needed to this kind of experiment is a long-term commitment. The festival *UM UM* was giving grounding to *Symposium Musicum*, having already been an active reality in the territory for several years. Even though it's a relatively small and independent reality, in the last editions it succeeded in framing a perspective of activity in relation to the surrounding communities and minorities.

Although fieldwork took place in the span of just a few days, the experience brought an original approach. Several locals have told us during fieldwork that no *gadžo* (or *gadje* in English transliteration, i.e. non-Roma) had ever spent their time in those villages, nonetheless in that way.

There is a moral imperative to attempt such dialogues, imperfect as they are. *Symposium Musicum* invited us to perceive the act of listening as a temporary activity that establishes relationships in the fragility of what it could be, rather than what it permanently shows. Sound became a performative device, bringing its own position and creating a potentiality of dialogue in the same process of listening. In fact, listening through the microphones and the actions of the local inhabitants only signified what they achieved.

The act of listening has a particular power to transform the behavior of both the listener and the listened to, perhaps even more so in the absence of any technical mediation, especially today when video recording via smartphones has become commonplace (with no difference between center and periphery, or rural and urban environments). Nevertheless, the Roma we met were quite concerned about the presence of cameras, which we deliberately did not bring with us. But they accepted the presence of recorders with curiosity. This field research introduced us to a variety of situations and atmospheres, namely those of repression, spirituality and compassion. These environments included rural villages, ghettos, abandoned and natural spaces, as well as the places we moved through. Most importantly, I need to remark that we did not view these experiences solely through the lens of Roma victimization or loss. Rather, our work has focused on understanding the socio-economic and political conditions that underlie the sounds we have encountered. We wanted to shed light on the complexity of relations between Slovak Roma and non-Roma Slovaks as experienced in everyday life. And from what we heard and the conversations we had (albeit with a very limited knowledge of the Slovak language), the themes that emerged with greater urgency from our fieldwork were social segregation, economic dependency and compromised education.

Composition

> We decide to leave before sunrise, not to strain the hospitality of the people. On the footpath to Kolačkov through the Carpathians (Levočské vrchy), we are surprised by a thunderstorm. You can hear the voices of Kolačkov from

Fig. 2 – The village of Lomnička was founded during the German colonization of the Carpathians, which began in the thirteenth century. Today it is almost exclusively a Roma settlement with about 3,000 inhabitants. In the center of the village stands the ruin of an Evangelical church, abandoned, an unsafe place where locals go in search of shade. Some children showed us a game they were playing with the leaves from the bushes growing inside the church, and in return we played them some recordings of the game itself, a dialogue beyond words that created a creative feedback loop. The church in Lomnička is closely associated with the great Slovak poet Terézia Vansová (1857–1942) who lived part of her life in the village. Photo by Anna Khvyl.

> hundreds of meters away. Kolačkov is separated by a stream into a Roma and a Slovak part. When a group of Roma youth want to show us the way to the supermarket, an elderly Slovak stops them: Since the shop on the Slovak side was closed, they have to return to their side. As the night progresses, we are treated with the greatest hospitality on the Slovak side. Hardly any of them may have ever been on the Roma side. We too refrain from crossing the bridge. *(diary written during fieldwork by Moretti, Khvyl, and Bold; Kolačkov, August 29, 2019)*

Once we came back to Stará Ľubovňa, overwhelmed by the intensity of our exploration, our task was to compose the sounds we had recorded to create a piece of music theater that would invite the audience to participate. We knew that our piece of music theater would take place in a public space, namely the local bus station, which had some empty rooms since the bankruptcy of the grocery store. This composition was meant to be an exploratory medium, allowing the listeners to define their stay in the place and to recreate a proprioception within the context. In light of this consideration, it is necessary to move away from the anthropocentric vision and, instead, to start considering the idea that the acoustic environment is the result of the language of a landscape, in which each element, through sound communication, creates its own cognitive processes. These mechanisms give the possibility to interpret and define one's own *Umwelt*, the subjective world and individual universe in which to act.

Coming back to the words "participation" or "collaboration," I'm not referring to the involvement of a specific individual or group of people, because the whole process was less about the rewards and benefits of particular people and more about exploring the contingent relationships that have been changing all along. Because artistic forms have no intrinsic or fixed political affiliation, and their meaning shifts in relation to the uses that society at large makes of them, *Symposium Musicum* situates participation as a constantly moving target.

Claire Bishop suggests that participatory art, often used as a tool for social and political change, can create a false sense of democracy and participation.[20] This is because the artist still retains a degree of control over the outcome of the artwork, and the audience is limited in their agency, in their ability to fully engage and participate in the art-making process. Bishop

20 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012).

argues that true participation requires a level of agency and autonomy for participants that is often lacking in participatory art. The composition aimed to create a sound object, performative and independent from the authors and from the original sources of the sonic material.

The theatrical thinking behind the acousmatic composition that we produced after the field research was aimed at the encounter, this composition was designed to be performative and participatory in the way that it would trigger relationships between people who would hold on to their vision and only meet because they were waiting for their bus at the bus station in Stará Ľubovňa. *Symposium Musicum* explored how aspects of music theater practice could embody principles of inclusion. This was done through particular approaches to compositional material, performance practice and audience engagement.

The creative process developed in a collaborative way, and it was based on the assumption that listening is understood as a generative and participatory practice that is never predetermined, but built in the making through the suspension of any idea of gender, context, theory and purpose; and that sound is a critical device that helps unveil the invisible in the world, opening up different spaces, different visions and different approaches to our experiences of it.

Can participatory practices in music theater provide an arena for the empowerment of people so that they can confront on common matters? Does it have emancipatory potential?

We wanted to create processes capable of fostering interactions between the people in the bus station, even if only temporarily, or simply based on the accidental meeting during the accidental experience of inhabiting the same place at the same time. The space of the bus station was not transformed but inhabited; we avoided any illusion, but still the way our sound composition related to the space of the bus station can be thought through the realm of scenography.

In contemporary approaches to scenography, another set of spaces comes to the fore. Sodja Lotker and Richard Gough argue that scenography can happen anywhere.[21] Scenography is to be found not only in the theater but equally in our homes, public spaces, airports, television shows, courts of justice or politics, in fashion and advertizing, on social media and in video games. Expanding forms of scenography implies a conceptual widening of

21 Sodja Lotker and Richard Gough, "On Scenography: Editorial," *Performance Research* 18, no. 3 (2013): 3–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2013.818306.

the spaces that scenography creates. These spaces are no longer just backgrounds for performances, but rather are increasingly seen as important sites for self-presentation, encounters, and social interaction. As such, they can be described as performative spaces that actively shape and enact the performance itself. The interactions and reactions to these spaces are integral to their transformation into performance spaces, each imbued with its own unique affordances and agency. Through this process of engagement and transformation, the spaces of the bus station performed through sound, they were able to convey a wide range of meanings and qualities, reflecting both the performers and the audiences who inhabit them.

We aimed at designing a music theater participatory practice, which would expand its performativity along relationality, affectivity, and materiality, defined as core components of (expanded) scenography according to the inventory by Joslin Mckinney and Scott Palmer in *Scenography Expanded*.[22]

Music theater is understood as spaces of encounter. Can music theater shape interactions? And how is spectatorship involved, addressed, and positioned?

Symposium Musicum is a processual event, with a fundamental emphasis on the aspect of time. Spaces are deeply processual, generating behavior and defining how to perform. Juliane Rebentisch's book *Aesthetics of Installation Art* offers a theoretically rigorous version of this argument, based largely on Theodor Adorno's theories on music. Rebentisch affirms that, for Adorno, music is first and foremost a time-based art form. This is because the sense of music comes from the way successive sonic events relate to each other.[23] "In music," Adorno writes, "nothing has the right to follow something else unless it has been determined by what precedes it or conversely, unless it reveals *ex post facto* that what has preceded it was, in reality, its own precondition."[24]

Disregarding Adorno's negative view on postwar avant-garde music, I aim to explore the concept of sound installation as a variant of music theater. Here, the acousmatic composition functions as a means of generating a

22 Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer, eds., *Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design*, Methuen Drama (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), 8–13.

23 Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, trans. Daniel Hendrickson and Gerrit Jackson (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 211.

24 Theodor W. Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," (1961) in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998), 297.

Fig. 3 – John-Robin Bold, Anna Khvyl and Elia Moretti during the composition process in the rooms of a former grocery store at the Stará Ľubovňa bus station. Since the grocery store went bankrupt, the three artists asked for permission to clean the rooms and temporarily occupy them for the *UM UM festival*. Photo by Marika Smreková.

performative atmosphere that alters the actions and perceptions of the participant or observer, transforming both temporal and spatial dimensions.

The composition considered musical parameters and formal aspects of academic music composition. However, as the composition is acousmatic and the source of the sound field recordings, it developed primarily through digital signal processing, entailing the use of software, a digital audio workstation. The result is a delicate and uncertain construct that does not conform

to predetermined expectations, but instead encourages re-evaluation, engagement and doubt. This interpretation views the composition as a dynamic process or openwork, providing an alternative to representational symbols and avoiding the appropriation of cultural aspects of ethnic Slovaks and Slovak Roma populations: an ecological way of confronting the world and the possibility of hearing other realities. What might it afford, or enable, in terms of the struggle that the Roma experience daily in the east of Slovakia?

Performance

> We presented our recordings as a sound installation in a bankrupt grocery store in a bus station of the nearest town, Stará Ľubovňa, for *UM UM festival*. It encompasses various artistic disciplines, called symposia, which deal with the relation of different groups in the multiethnic region. Our Symposium Musicum, *musical supper* (…here I want to translate the German word *Gastmahl* / it means more generally *coming together*, *sharing hospitalities*), dealt with the Roma and their relationship to Slovak society.
>
> …
>
> Only few people approached the composition with the intent to listen. However, many people started to cue, standing by the door, as if waiting for buying their tickets. But they were "just" listening. I think many people today have experienced something for the first time.
>
> …
>
> One [non-Romani] lady in the waiting room was very concerned. She was actually upset, she repulsed Roma in any form, even in the invisible and ephemeral of the sonic dimension. However, this provoked a conversation/discussion with Marika. Several people had similar, adverse, reactions: a safe, starting point for intercultural dialogue.
>
> …
>
> Suddenly, in the afternoon, a man with muddy shoes entered with a big smile. He probably recognised the sheep bells sound. He told me we should go visit him at the pasture he's working. He didn't comment on Roma and Slovak relationship.
>
> …
>
> Several Roma people inhabited the bus station today, I cannot generalize one reaction. However, several approached us with an attitude of complacency. Judging from their comments and gestures, we thought they may have felt empowered by the sounds. However, how to evaluate such an achievement?

> How to receive a feedback from the random travellers? How to evaluate if and when the performance was transformative?
> *(diary written during fieldwork by Moretti, Khvyl, and Bold; Stará Ľubovňa, September 2, 2019)*

The third part of the project *Symposium Musicum* consisted of setting up a sound installation at Stará Ľubovňa bus station, running the whole day September 2, 2019, the first day of school. In the waiting room, the spaces of the former grocery shop, no longer functioning, had been transformed into a performative space. Initially marking a certain kind of disturbance or intervention on senses and cognition, sounds and music were brought to a public and liminal space. If fieldwork focused on listening as an epistemological act of knowledge and dialogue, the performance shifts the community into the role of perceiver and listener in order to provoke relationships within the community itself.

The performance invited a process that, instead of elaborating the situations we encountered in the relations between non-Roma and Roma, involved this reality in a dynamic process with the given context. This perspective brought the composition to the level of an openwork, striving for an alternative to symbolic representation, avoiding the appropriation of cultural features of the Roma and Slovak population we have met during fieldwork, but rather creating a condition of and for knowing. An alternative way of encountering the world and the possibility of hearing other realities.

The perception of the performance is dependent on the way many elements interact with each other and their environment. In this line, George Home-Cook refines the idea of a focused listening directed at sonic phenomena so as to produce what he calls "aural attention." He suggests that how we listen to performance is, in fact, "an inter-subjective act of embodied participation."[25] Hans-Thies Lehmann, in his *Postdramatic Theater*, proposes an "independent *auditory semiotics*."[26] Finally, Salomé Voegelin describes the listening act as involving the listener in the world, rather than offering an interpretation of it. Who listens lies in a position of uncertainty

25 George Home-Cook, *Theatre and Aural Attention: Stretching Ourselves* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 168.

26 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theater*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 91.

between the sound and the sensory self, participating as well to the creation of the aesthetic moment:

> Every sensory interaction relates back to us not the object/phenomenon perceived, but that object/phenomenon filtered, shaped and produced by the sense employed in its perception. At the same time this sense outlines and fills the perceiving body, which in its perception shapes and produces his sensory self. Whereby the senses employed are always already ideologically and aesthetically determined, bringing their own influence to perception, the perceptual object and the perceptual subject. It is a matter then of accepting the a priori influence while working towards a listening in spite rather than because of it. The task is to suspend, as much as possible, ideas of genre, category, purpose and art historical context, to achieve a hearing that is the material heard, now, contingently and individually.[27]

Following what Voegelin says, we can understand the performance part of *Symposium Musicum* as being produced by the same sensory activities, through a process that makes the listeners at the bus station the performers. This one-day performance attempted to include such an enactive perspective on the act of listening. It was an experiment in participatory art, where the act of listening motivated behavior towards intercultural dialogue.

In the ephemeral act of producing and listening to sound, a different space was created where opportunities for togetherness, dialogue and confrontation were generated. The audience became fully engaged in the performance, which they received as an environment. Clearly, such a position has the potential to make participants extremely vulnerable, to disempower them almost completely. But what if such performances could somehow create access to new sources of collective empowerment, especially through the forging of a sense of community, then they could point to the potential for a radical response to the most difficult challenges Roma face among non-Roma, in other words, in the dynamics of coercion, control, cohesion and collective power; in short, who empowers whom for what.

One way of explaining these dynamics of interaction could be through the concept of *periperformativity*, as defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Periperformativity, she indicates, although not itself performative, clusters around performatives. Periperformative utterances are in the neighbor-

27 Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 3.

Fig. 4 – The waiting room of the bus station in Stará Ľubovňa. Photo by Elia Moretti.

hood of the performative. The locality of the periperformative resides in spatial metaphors and spatial figurations.[28]

Sedgwick's notion of the periperformative is an extension of Althusser's concept of interpellation, which refers to the means by which individuals are incorporated into cultural and ideological formations. Interpellation is structured as an "I-you-they" scene in which a person hears their name being called and responds to it as if it were their identity. Sedgwick's periperformative expands on this approach and acknowledges that individuals are not only incorporated into ideological structures through certain explicit performances but through a broader context known as the periperformative environment.

This periperformative context is spatialized and objectified through a series of material bodies, including architecture, space, visuals, institutions, and politics, and is temporalized through narratives in the forms of rhetoric and logic. The binding is therefore multi-layered, encompassing moral relationships implied in explicit performances, social and political relationships implied in periperformative contexts, spatial boundaries established through environmental periperformativity, temporal limits established narratively and performatively, and the situation as it extends and bleeds through moral, political, spatial, and temporal areas.

28 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 68.

Indeed, *Symposium Musicum* was able to link to certain modes of listening in what Budhaditya Chattopadhyay defines *nomadic condition*.[29] The listener, rather than analyzing the objective meanings of the sounds, addresses them in relationship to imagination and memory of feelings that are triggered during the listening. The participation in the performance generates memories and imaginations of other realities that, by reacting immediately, propose reflections and confrontations. These are temporary sounds, since the listeners are moving, inhabiting the bus station for the short period until the bus will leave. The bus station is a liminal space, indeed, a neutral ground that hosts the regular, voluntary, informal gatherings of individuals.

People kept coming to the bus station, some staying for a long time, others for a few moments, but either way they were becoming performers, not just witnesses. Through their physical presence, perception and feedback, the audience became cocreators. In this way, *Symposium Musicum* became a space for participation, where cultural actions, positions, could be developed in order to generate intercultural dialogues. Sound involved people in an affective environment based on crossing, meeting, waiting, talking, living, looking for tickets and walking in the environment itself. Through sound we imagined different realities, built in dialogue with the other, yet familiar.

We experienced very different reactions: some people smiled, others were curious and asked questions, some rejected the experiment, others were attracted but looked confused, or some were triggered by sounds not specifically related to the relationship between Roma and non-Roma. We were present at the station while the sounds were playing, so we were able to respond to some of them in a way that facilitated or provoked such intercultural dialogue, but ideally our presence shouldn't have been necessary, in fact we had no control over what was happening around us. We were observers ourselves, with a greater insight into what was going on.

Performativity is typically understood as a productive and generative concept, focusing on human actions that produce or generate certain outcomes. However, it is also important to consider the performativity of seemingly non-productive aspects of human action, such as silence, hesitation, observation, perception or waiting. Perception is an important aspect of performativity. When we observe and perceive the world around us, we are actively shaping our understanding of it. This can have a significant

29 Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, "Auditory Situations: Notes from Nowhere," *Journal of Sonic Studies* 4 (2013), https://doi.org/10.22501/JSS.269178.

impact on how we interact with others and how we make decisions that affect the context around us. By being mindful of our own observations and perceptions, we can become more aware of the ways in which our actions and decisions are shaped by our environment and the people around us. These seemingly non-productive actions are just as important to our understanding of human behavior and its effects on society. *Symposium Musicum* invited a deeper exploration of what performativity means, and what role it plays in those social and cultural contexts.

Essentially, these experiences allow us to interact with the world in ways that are different from typical, habitual responses. Aesthetic experience provides opportunities that can act as a short-circuit to stereotypes. These possibilities are short-circuited or rerouted in aesthetic experiences. This creates a tension between our habitual responses and those specific to the artistic context, which can result in an affective response that is not fully expressed as a meaningful and complete action. In other words, we are on the verge of a response that we cannot fully articulate or act upon. This was the performative methodology of *Symposium Musicum*, which took place for an entire day at the bus station in Stará Ľubovňa, the town we'd set out from and returned to for our fieldwork.

Conclusions

Symposium Musicum aimed to go beyond documenting sonic encounters between specific modes of perception and bodies. It also sought to place these experiences within a broader intellectual context of critical listening and the examination of one's own positionality. Objectively, it is difficult to measure the impact of this project. It definitely had an impact on myself and my relations to some of the people we first met during fieldwork. Transformations happen on a personal basis and at different rhythms. How do you gather such feedback? I can only hope that these kinds of relationships have been transformed for others, and that this is reflected in future practices of respect, care and attention. At the time of publication of this article, more than five years have passed, and unfortunately the political situation in Slovakia has taken the line of national populism, with a ministry of culture advocating that Slovak culture should be Slovak and nothing else. A typical populist, arrogant, short-sighted position that overlooks the fact that Slovak culture (like any other) has been shaped by other influences in its history.

With this in mind, musicology has a responsibility to address these issues by facilitating a dialogue between music, music theater, and contemporary social and political struggles. *Symposium Musicum* can act as a catalyst for critical discourse and reflection within the field of musicology. By drawing on interdisciplinary methods and incorporating diverse perspectives, *Symposium Musicum* may challenge established notions and encourage a more nuanced understanding of music and its social and cultural implications and positionalities.[30] Furthermore, by linking music and music theater with broader socio-political issues, *Symposium Musicum* can stimulate much-needed engagement and dialogue between the discipline of musicology and other fields of study, fostering a more collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to the study of music.

Perhaps most importantly, *Symposium Musicum* has shown how experimental music theater can challenge traditional notions of agency. This whole process has shown that agency can be found in unexpected places and that the power to effect change can come from unexpected sources. This has been a particularly important message in a world where people often feel powerless in the face of large-scale political and social issues.

Symposium Musicum therefore aims to open up a perspective on the possibilities of agency by reflecting on the political not as an arena of overt and exaggerated acts and images, but rather by recalling how political recognition is given through the care of attention, where listening can also recur. While priority is often given to the one who delivers argumentations, *Symposium Musicum* equally turns the attention toward the one who listens—the listening as an act that lends an important force. "For listening also draws us toward states of critical reflection, slowness, shared attunement, and capacities for understanding or care, all of which articulate other dimensions of power."[31] To learn to listen to each other we require a complete undoing of how we are taught to listen. Narrowly misinterpreted as conditional on the ears and voice, listening is understood as instrumental to sharing language. Listening is, as all communication, trained. It is encul-

30 This can be achieved by disseminating the results of the project as a tool to create conditions for an encounter between Roma and non-Roma or to arouse the curiosity of scholars far from the Carpathians; by organizing conferences, listening sessions and workshops to be seen as well as work opportunities for Roma; and by promoting cooperation between scholars and practitioners in the field, specifically to recreate such a relationship between Roma and non-Roma at the academic and institutional level.

31 Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Justice: Listening, Performativity, and the Work of Reorientation* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 4.

tured and geographically specific, shaped by social, political and economic forces, violence and oppression. The fallacy of this is clear when we consider that even though we assume we listen carefully, being unheard, misheard or misunderstood is a common complaint.

Reality can only consist of listening to the voices of those who know what is going on (human and non-human) and thus broadening one's awareness. Trapped in our logic, what seems right from a distance is often completely wrong. Our goal was not to produce, instead, we were set in motion and this determined simultaneity, transition and adaptability. *Symposium Musicum* took place to prioritize the Roma and non-Roma relationship, knowledges, voices and practices. This is an approach that requires time, until the moment when people and places tell us what they want from us, what we can be in service of, and become familiar with what is incomplete, unknown and ultimately incommensurable.

From this point of view, aural attention engages in processes that are related to politics and social relations. Thus, if we take sound as an ontological tool, aesthetic practices based on it may gain relevance in the contemporary activist and political scenario of public spaces, generating tensions, questioning dominant points of view and creating conditions for other positions to be perceived. These are transitory territories where we have communicated our own perspective through sound, creating a possible dialogue in the process of listening itself.

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Abstract

This article investigates the performative aspects of sound and listening through *Symposium Musicum*, an experimental music theater project that embraced an ecological approach to sound and culture perception. Situated in the Eastern Slovak Republic, this case study examines the relationship between the Slovak Roma and non-Roma in the contemporary Slovak society, shedding light on new spaces for intercultural dialogue and offering fresh perspectives on perceiving and imagining a multicultural society.

Drawing from experiential and conceptual frameworks of sound, listening, and performance, the study uncovers the transformative potential of sound as a catalyst for critical thinking. It argues that active listening processes serve as forms of knowledge in action, revealing territorial and cultural transformations that shape ideologies and ecosystems in which individuals are embedded.

Furthermore, the article explores the political potentials of listening to sound, investigating how it influences and intersects with contemporary territories, including ethnicity and social belonging. It examines the behaviors and strategies that can be derived from experiences of listening and being heard and delves into the concept of "social sound practice" as an attitude that explores sound within its social setting, ultimately leading to positive change.

By focusing on the case study *Symposium Musicum*, which was part of the 9th edition of the *Community Festival of Contemporary Theatre and Arts UM UM* (2019), the article offers insightful perspectives on the intricate interplay between sound, performance, and society. It provides a nuanced understanding of sound's potential to transform and provoke critical engagement within contemporary society.

Elia Moretti's research focuses on contemporary and experimental music theater, approached through an ecological perception of sound. He is completing a PhD at Charles University in Prague, developing research that explores the intersection between music and performing arts, with special attention to the agency of sound. He is interested in the ways in which sound can contribute to changing the experience of performance, and in the ways in which artistic practices participate in the contexts (social grounds) from which they emerge or to which they respond.

Elia graduated in percussion from the Nicolini Music Academy in Piacenza and social sciences from the University of Pavia. As a performer, he regularly appears at national and international festivals. He is also the co-founder of the performance art group Ferst Dadler. In 2022, Elia's composition "Once Enea Stuck an Apple Seed to My Ear" earned him the Palma Ars Acustica award.

ARTICLES

From *Vox Ferus* to Canine Posthuman: Becoming a Singing Dog

Jelena Novak

Virtually Dog

Last year I ran into a dog in the VR opera *Songs for a Passerby* (2023).[1] It was an unexpected encounter. A digital dog, with its full range of vocal sounds, guided the listening spectator through the piece. Only one person could experience this VR opera at a time. It lasted for thirty minutes, and there were actually two physical "stages" for it—two gray carpets laid out in an emptied space in the Studio Boekman of the Dutch Opera and Ballet in Amsterdam. Equipped with a VR helmet and visor installed on my head by an assistant, I was ready for *Songs* to begin. Instruction for taking part in it were familiar: like in Michel Van der Aa's VR opera *Eight*, if I felt unease or panic, I was instructed not to mess with the equipment, but simply to raise my hands.[2]

"In *Songs for a Passerby*—a VR opera by Celine Daemen about our tenuous relationship with the transitory nature of reality—you will autonomously walk through a musical dreamscape shown in a VR headset. You are following your own 3D mirror image and on the way you will pass by various scenes: a dying horse, a choir of murmuring people, two playing

1 I saw this VR opera on February 9, 2024 at De Nationale Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam. Its authors are: Celine Daemen, stage direction; Aron Fels, VR art direction; Asa Horvitz, composition music & sound; Olivier Herter, libretto; Wouter Snoei, sound & mix. Cast: Nadia Amin, Vincent van den Berg, Hans Croiset, Sterre Konijn, Misja Nolet, Carl Refos, Michaela Riener, Eleonora Schrickx, Georgi Sztojanov, Garbo, Micha, Raffie, Rey. It is produced by Silbersee.

2 Protocols of seeing and participating in Michel van der Aa's VR opera "Eight" are described in Jelena Novak, "*Eight, aus Licht*, and The Unbearable Lightness of Being Immersed in Opera," *The Opera Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (Autumn 2019): 358–371.

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dogs."[3] One question that often arises is how much the experience of such a piece as an opera is shaped by the fact that it is labeled as an opera, rather than simply being viewed as a VR experience. Indeed, in *Songs*, the melodious singing is less prominent than in Michel van der Aa's two VR operas, *Eight* and *From Dust*. Still, the concept of VR opera fits the piece well, as there is a deep sense of vocality woven throughout. As Daemen explains in the "behind the scenes" video, the singers are exploring melodic material through mantra-like repetitive murmuring texts (in Dutch). "In this piece, there is no real division between sound and music. All the entities you encounter—whether it's a dog, a rock, or a person—are sounding entities."[4] Singing and chanting are omnipresent.

After an introductory cast list, akin to what one often finds in a movie theater before the opening scene of a film, a virtual dog appears. It whines, wags his tail, barks, flatters, and sniffs around me. It looks as if it wants me to follow. The dog leads me through the virtual opera as a kind of narrator, introducing me to its own language. The sound of a passing train can be heard nearby. Everything is dark, gray, like some sort of ghetto, reminiscent of the atmosphere in Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film *The Children of Men*. People can be seen walking down the street, their murmur is audible, yet unintelligible: whispers can be heard, but the words are indistinguishable. Like a dog, I don't really understand the meaning of the words, but I intuitively *feel* and decipher the intentions behind them. Those people are going somewhere, but it's unclear where; I observe them. I ascend the labyrinth-like old city fortress. At one of the resting places lies a horse, in its death throes. I cannot see my hands or feet in that virtual walk. I cannot touch the horse, nor can I help in any way. I try to put my arm on his back, but it is in vain. The dog is by my side.

The interaction with the dog is continuous. It is both my guide and guardian while wandering around this unknown place. If something holds my attention for too long, a dog appears and signals it is time to move forward. Several times, I manage to activate a grid that indicates that I am reaching the boundaries of the designated space. The grid on the screen signals that I should go back, which makes me feel like a dog on a leash myself. In that case, the dog appears and, through its behavior, suggests that I move

3 A quote from the piece's presentation text on the Dutch National Opera and Ballet website, accessed January 15, 2025, https://www.operaballet.nl/en/dutch-national-opera/2023-2024/songs-passerby.

4 See the video on the Dutch National Opera and Ballet website, accessed January 15, 2025, https://www.operaballet.nl/en/dutch-national-opera/2023-2024/songs-passerby.

Fig. 1 – The author of the text attending the VR opera *Songs for a Passerby*, led by the virtual dog. The picture was taken by one of the performance assistants with Novak's phone.

on and follow. The music is composed of whispers, singing, incantations, sounds of water and rocks, fire, and machines. I hear a drone tone; the music sounds mystical, with a murmur of incomprehensible voices over the drone. Some of the music sounds like a fragment of Hildegard von Bingen's hymns. Over the houses' rooftops, I see a train passing by.

Suddenly, I am on the train and have some sort of interaction with the passengers sitting in it, including a dog of a different breed from the one that was guiding me. In that moment, my thoughts go to Louis Andriessen visiting a museum in Belgrade: he excused himself as he wanted to run through the exhibition "like a dog," alone, led by his impulse, not following the paths of the assumed museum hierarchy. The train passengers talk about identity, about memory. Before I know it, I am outside the train and continue climbing through the city-fortress.

Suddenly, in the visor, I see myself in real time, with the VR equipment on my head. Confronting my appearance in the VR environment places me in the human sphere, in parallel to that of a dog. The dog is there, and I feel (or imagine) that we share a common language. The dog is leading me to the top of the settlement and fortress. There, I confront myself in reflection: there are two of us. Eventually another dog appears, of the same breed as my companion. They play eagerly and joyfully, clearly happy to be together. The vocal sounds of the two dogs playing stay in my memory as an echo of the entire event. Their voices sing in their own manner. A dog's "song" is

Fig. 2 and 3 – *Songs for a Passerby* (2023) by Celine Daemen, Olivier Herter, Aron Fels, Asa Horvitz, and Wouter Snoei. Video stills.

somewhat distinct from its other vocalizations, characterized by a certain tendency toward melodic expressivity in the vocal particles exchanged with its own kind. At least, that's how it remains in my memory, as if they started to build some melodious tissue together. "Sounds pass us by, pass through us, grabbing our hearts and minds for a moment, and remain only as memories."[5] My ears stay tuned for the dog's song.

"Human is constitutively inhuman" asserts Bojana Kunst,[6] aligning with Giorgio Agamben's claim that "*homo sapiens* … is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human."[7] All the dog voices performed, invented, imagined, barked, sung, heard, and suggested by the examples in this text might also be understood as kinds of mechanisms for producing the recognition of the animal within the human, and as vocal and audible machines for reinventing the human–animal divide.

Vocal Divide

In his novella *The Metamorphosis* (1915), Franz Kafka explores precisely what interests me about the subject of animal voice: hearing the non-human in the vocal sphere. Salesman Gregor Samsa wakes up one day in his room only to discover that his body has been transformed into that of a huge insect. While his family members try to figure out why he remains in his locked room, he struggles with the shock of his new existence, initially pretending that everything is fine. However, when he starts talking to his family through the locked door, they become aware that something has truly gone wrong:

> Gregor was startled when he heard his own voice in reply; no doubt, it was unmistakably his previous voice, but merging into it as though from low down came an uncontrollable, painful squealing which allowed his words to

5 Words by Asa Horvitz, composer and member of the authors team. See: program note for *Songs for a Passerby*, DNO, 2023.

6 Bojana Kunst, "Restaging the Monstrous," in: *Anatomy Live: Performance and the Operating Theatre*, ed. Maaike Bleeker, 211–22 (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 215.

7 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, translated by Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 26.

> remain articulate literally for only a moment, then stifled them so much as they died away that you couldn't tell if you'd heard them properly.[8]

Though Gregor at first assumes that his voice and ability to speak have remained the same as when he had a human shape, his voice pitch and articulation have changed to the point where his ability to speak becomes disfigured. He still understands human speech, but humans have difficulties understanding the words he is saying. His voice becomes animal-like, monstrous.[9] When they hear it, it becomes obvious that Gregor might be at a point of no return.[10] Later, the shock of finally seeing Gregor in his insect form confirms the horror, but it is his monstrous "voice" that truly triggers distress.[11] I am interested in how we hear this divide between human and animal, human and monster, human and machine, human and non-human. How do we sense and detect it? How do we learn to feel it, and is that divide indeed truthful or viable? How does voice transformation sound during the process of "becoming animal"?[12]

Imagining the non-human voice, I discuss the reworking of the demarcation line between human and animal through the vocal sphere referring to the dog as an "animal of interest." In contemporary visual art, music, and opera I noticed several recent examples where the figure/construct/representation of the dog and dog–human relation serves as the central motor of

8 Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, Translated by Joyce Crick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 31.

9 See more about monstrous voice in Jelena Novak, "Monsterization of Singing: Politics of Vocal Existence," *New Sound* 36, no. 2 (2010): 101–19.

10 Naama Harel explores the human-animal barrier in Kafka's work in inspiring ways. However, the book lacks insights surrounding voice and vocality in the context of posthumanism. Naama Harel, *Kafka's Zoopoetics: Beyond the Human-Animal Barrier (*Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

11 For the same example of monstrous/animal voice in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, see Jelena Novak "Posthuman Voice Beyond Opera: Songful Practice of Holograms, Robots, Machines, and Vocaloids" in *Contemporary Opera in Flux* ed. Yayoi U. Everett (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2024) 45–66.

12 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explain this concept in the chapter "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 232–309. They understand this concept as a process of transformation, of creating relational, fluid identities. They introduce "becoming-animal" as a way to rethink identity beyond human-centered categories. I learned of the Deleuzian concept of "becoming" via Austin McQuinn's *Becoming Audible: Sounding Animality in Performance* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2021).

the piece. Thus, I shall focus on representations of humans that "go out of themselves," acquiring animal characteristics. I am especially intrigued by how this "going out of human" reflects on the voice, if there is something that could be called animal voice, and what its characteristics would be.

Starting from the example of a feral child raised by dogs and the illuminating performance-art pieces by Oleg Kulik, in which the artist performs as a dog, I arrive at the analysis of the representation of the dog/animal vocal figure in two Alexander Raskatov's operas: *A Dog's Heart* (2008–09), based on Mikhail Bulgakov's 1925 short story, and *Animal Farm* (2023), based on the famous novel by George Orwell. I am especially interested in the vocal perspective of "The Posthuman as Becoming-animal" in light of Rosi Braidotti's commentary.[13] I will also refer to the philosophy of human–animal issues discussed by Oxana Timofeeva.[14]

And why dogs? In her book on posthuman, Braidotti reminds us of Deleuze's classification of animals into three groups: those we watch television with, those we eat, and those we are scared of. While this classification could be expanded—for example, where do animals used for experiments, including those sent into space, fit in?—I am intrigued because dogs encompass all three categories: they are among the most common domesticated and pet animals, their meat is consumed in various parts of the world, and they can also evoke fear as wild dogs, fighting dogs, street dogs, or sick dogs. There are even famous dogs that have ventured into space for experiments. This ubiquity of dogs in the human world places the figure of the dog in the spotlight, particularly concerning the realm of the vocal sphere.

Vox Ferus[15]

Let's take feral children as a first example. The etymology of the word "feral" evokes meanings such as wild, untamed, uncultivated, brutal, and savage qualities that stand in stark contrast to a norm. This norm implies being tamed, cultivated, civilized, compassionate, and well-behaved. However, the norm also defines those who establish it—humans. It represents a conventional view of humanity: placing humans at the top of the species

13 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 67–76.
14 Oxana Timofeeva, *The History of Animals: A Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
15 In Latin "Ferus" means wild, untamed, fierce.

hierarchy, distinguished by their supposed superiority in being tamed, cultivated, and norm-setters, among other things.

Feral children are humans neglected by their parents and left to be raised by animals. These rare children imitate the gestures, poses, sounds, and behavior of their "parent animals" to such an extent that their animality calls into question their belonging to the human sphere. Even when placed in "normal" human circumstances, their behavior may remain adapted to animal norms, and these children often experience lifelong impairments, especially in the domain of language. One such example is the case of Oxana Malaya from Ukraine, who was neglected by her alcoholic parents and raised by dogs until the age of six. She imprinted the behavior and "vocabulary" of dogs.[16] When authorities discovered Oxana, she was walking on all fours, barking, making sounds, and exhibiting bodily movements typical of dogs. She did not react to her reflection in the mirror and was unable to speak.

Several documentary films featuring various scientists have been made about Malaya. For the scientific community, feral children pose cutting-edge questions and provide valuable insights, as they are seen as rare "experiments" that would not be ethically feasible to conduct in society. Reflecting on Oxana Malaya's case, one of the scientists involved, James Law, then a professor of language and communication at City University, London, cautions that "part of being human is being brought up by humans." He poses an intriguing and somewhat controversial question: "If you are not brought up by humans, are you completely human?"[17] I'm intrigued by what might be considered "completely human" in an era of solidarity with "nonhuman people," as advocated by Timothy Morton.[18]

Discussing Malaya's case, scientists explain that if/when the evolution of language skills in cases of feral children is omitted in early childhood, later it is much harder to learn to talk since the brain restructures its language resources, so to say.[19] And as the use of language is one of our strongest points of difference with animals, feral children stay on the edge of the human/animal divide. Braidotti claims that "Post-anthropocentrism displaces the notion of species hierarchy and of a single, common standard for "Man" as the measure of all things. In the ontological gap thus opened,

16 See: "Ukranian Girl Raised by Dogs," accessed March 25, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkX47t2QaRs.

17 "Ukrainian Girl Raised by Dogs," 2:03.

18 Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity With Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017).

19 "Ukranian Girl Raised by Dogs."

other species come galloping in. This is easier done than said in the language and methodological conventions of critical theory. Is language not the anthropological tool *par-excellence*?"[20] In Oxana Malaya's case, she managed to learn to speak and distance herself from her dog-like voice and behavior. Her experience underscores the complex interplay between language, identity, and the human–animal divide, leaving Braidotti's question open and reverberating.

Another question raised by cases like Malaya's is why witnessing feral children's behavior and hearing their "wild voice," *vox ferus*, is so unsettling. Why don't we experience the same disturbance of seeing Malaya acting and sounding like a dog when we observe, for example, a dog "singing," as in Laurie Anderson's 2015 movie *Heart of a Dog*? What exactly disturbs us when we see a girl howling and barking? Does this "monsterization of the human" question something profound about our own identity?

Watching the video of Oxana Malaya I note a kind of ontological de-synchronization between what I hear and what I see at the same time, in a sense similar to what Heiner Goebbels discusses in his "aesthetics of absence" when he talks about the mismatch between visual and acoustic "stage."[21] It makes me think about the notion of voice-body that Steven Connor discusses as a double mirror mechanism: The voice is projected by the body, but it also reflects back onto the body that produces it; it is this very process that constitutes identity.[22] It is a sort of figurative "catch." The howling and barking animal voice is produced by the human body and in the process of reflecting itself back to the body's identity, the human is seen with interference, "monsterized" into animal. Because of this interference, Malaya's identity stays continually trapped in the process of "becoming animal," which is never accomplished. She will never be "completely human," as James Law would say, as she is not "completely a dog." Her existence is perpetuated in a limbo of becoming.

The extremely skillful performance of her vocal apparatus within the context of dog sounds plays a decisive role in this "becoming," as her vocalizations sound much more convincing as a dog than as a human, despite her physical appearance leaning towards the human side. This in-

20 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 67.

21 Heiner Goebbels, "Aesthetics of Absence," in *(How) Opera Works*, ed. Pierre Audi (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 154–162.

22 For more about voice-body as a mirror mechanism see Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body*, London, Routledge, 2015.

terplay between seeing and hearing the transformation into dog is challenging to grasp, and it makes the case of Oxana Malaya and her canine voice so compelling. This desynchronization fundamentally redefines the conventional understanding of what voice can be. As I shall discuss further, Alexander Raskatov focuses precisely on this divide, this striking desynchronization, when composing the voice of a dog turned into human in his opera *A Dog's Heart*.

Dog Artist

Before focusing on Raskatov's opera, let me first discuss the work of Ukrainian-born Russian artist Oleg Kulik, which investigates the role of the artist as a dog. He portrays himself as a proletarian artist, distinct from being merely human: he *is* a dog. Using powerful mechanisms, Kulik strongly challenges the boundaries between the human and animal respective worlds. The process of "becoming an animal," as seen through the desynchronization between canine vocality and the human body producing it, serves as the primary driving force behind Kulik's series of performance art pieces. In these works, Kulik acts as a dog, appearing naked with a collar around his neck, barking, growling, howling, and whining. He usually performs alone, although he's sometimes accompanied by a "master"—the person holding his chain. Depending on the circumstances, Kulik presents himself in different guises: as an anarchist on the street, provoking confusion, fear and aggressively wandering around as a mad dog;[23] in front of the gallery, policing the entrance like Cerberus guarding the gates of the underworld;[24] and inside the gallery, as a prisoner kept in a cage, where visitors can enter and confront him at their own risk.[25] In these three cases, Kulik, portraying the figure of the dog-artist, metaphorically represents various institutions of society: madness, police, and prison.

Braidotti notes that "Since antiquity, animals have constituted a sort of zoo-proletariat, in a species hierarchy run by the humans."[26] The idea of a

23 See video "Mad Dog, or Last Taboo Guarded by Alone Cerberus," Moscow, November 23, 1994, accessed April 15, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkQ4kjL8UHU&rco=1.

24 See: Reservoir Dog, Kunsthaus, Zurich. March 30, 1995, accessed April 15, 2024, https://www.artriot.art/artist.html?id=OlegKulik&ch=perfomance&tid=80.

25 See video: I Bite America and America Bites Me by Oleg Kulik (1997), accessed April 15, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRiH7ys_A_s&rco=1.

26 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 70.

dog as a proletarian is not uncommon for Russian art and especially literature in the first half of the twentieth century. For example, Mikhail Bulgakov's story *A Dog's Heart* particularly resonates with it. Looking back at the context of the communist revolution, Oxana Timofeeva suggests the idea of a "total transformation of the social and natural order towards emancipation and equality" and underlines that after the October Revolution in 1917, "the standards of a revolution 'in nature' and even of a 'struggle against nature' were continually raised in all spheres of the nascent Soviet society."[27] With this in mind, Kulik's decision to act as a dog in the art world also seems like a dialogue with the aforementioned tradition.

Kulik's starting point is steeped in bitterness as he illustrates a reality in which the artist is treated as nothing more than a stray dog, an object for society's cruelty. He embodies the dog, mimicking its sounds and movements, attempting to live as one, but solely within the context of the art world. What Malaya experienced firsthand, Kulik portrays through his impersonation. Kulik's portrayal of the dog is far from the image of a cute puppy; instead, it embodies frustration, neglect, aggression, and unpredictability. It symbolizes the proletarian, viewed from the capitalist perspective—a figure best avoided unless absolutely necessary. He leaves a warning note, signaling that he should not be disturbed, and those who dare to approach him do so at their own risk. Playing with his "animal nature," Kulik asserts that he is not accountable for any resulting consequences. Naked and unkempt, he barks, growls, and issues threats.

Observing Kulik in a documentary where he talks normally with his human voice, he appears as an entirely different individual.[28] Using his voice to produce animal sounds and projecting them onto his "becoming animal" body introduces identity interferences and lays bare that identity within the political context of the art world and its hierarchies. The notion of the human as a "perfected animal" is a recurring theme throughout European history and culture (and beyond). Kulik's "monsterization" of voice resonates with Timofeeva's concept of "nature as a battlefield for class struggle," particularly in the motives of Russian art following the October Revolution. If, as she elucidates, "a potential or actual transformation of one species into another—such as animals into humans—accompanied by the attainment of higher levels of consciousness and freedom" represents the theme

27 Timofeeva, *The History of Animals*, 165.

28 See, for example, "Interview with Oleg Kulik at the Saatchi gallery, Art Riot," accessed March 22, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7YLJS3PS_0.

prevalent in Soviet literature and poetry of the period and can be identified as revolutionary humanism, then Kulik's activities could even be seen as counter-revolutionary.[29]

Dog Voice, Singing

Starting from virtual dog's whining and barking while leading me through VR opera, to Gregor Samsa's voice, which served as a kind of proof that he had entered the realm of the monstrous, I examined the voice-body of Oxana Malaya and her *vox ferus*. I also discussed the voices that Oleg Kulik produced as a dog in his performances. Those cases of reinventing vocal divide in the human sphere lead me to the central case study of this article: the dog and animal voices in the operas *A Dog's Heart* and *Animal Farm* by Alexander Raskatov.

As mentioned, *A Dog's Heart* is based on Mikhail Bulgakov's 1925 story, which narrates the peculiar transformation of a dog into a human. In the tale, the esteemed doctor Filip Filipovich Preobrazhensky adopts a starving street dog named Sharik. Unfortunately, the rescue is not motivated by the doctor's grace, but by his scientific ambitions: he needs a "victim" for a pre-arranged experiment. After the dog recovers, Preobrazhensky operates on him, implanting the testicles and pituitary gland of a hardened drunkard who was killed in a skirmish. As a result, the dog undergoes a gradual transformation, standing up straighter, beginning to resemble a man, and ultimately becoming a citizen named Sharikov. Accidents occur when it becomes evident that Sharik's behavior does not conform to social norms—he is impulsive, scratches, licks, and gasps; his voice is monstrous; he chases cats—and he doesn't adhere to rules. Similar to Oxana Malaya, the creature remains trapped in the limbo of becoming. Thus, the dimension of monstrosity permeates Bulgakov's imaginary realm, resulting in discomfort. The depiction of a deregulated man may have served as a sharp satire aimed at communism, but they're also a critique against any totalitarian system attempting to mold individuals into standardized forms.

The way in which Raskatov and director Simon McBurney bring Bulgakov's story to life is captivating. The opera opens with a somber scene: on a quiet and gray Moscow street, a starving stray dog wanders around in search of food on a snowy night. The blizzard is simulated with spe-

29 Timofeeva, 165.

Fig. 4 – Alexander Raskatov's *Dog's Heart*, opening scene, video still, Nationale Opera&Ballet, Amsterdam.

cial stage effects, creating a realistic atmosphere. The dog is portrayed as a larger-than-life "skeleton marionette," inspired by Alberto Giacometti's 1951 sculpture *Dog*. It appears very thin, resembling a pile of bones—a dog skeleton—whose movement and animation are performed by four puppeteers visible on stage and two singers.

The opening scene left a profound impression on me, becoming one of the most vivid moments I've ever witnessed in opera. The "skeleton marionette" of the dog is placed under the spotlight on stage. Initially lying alone, illuminated yet lifeless, in silence, it gradually comes to life as a puppeteer approaches and stands it upright. As the music emerges from the orchestra pit, the puppet seems to awaken: its eyes and nose gleam in a realistic way as it starts to respond to the music. The sequence of musical events unfolds rapidly, filled with staccatos, and the dog appears to listen with intention, exhibiting typical head movements as it adjusts the angle of its head to hear better.

After approximately two minutes into the performance, three additional puppeteers and one singer, Elena Vassilieva, join the spotlight. They are all dressed in neutral dark colors, allowing them to blend with the stage darkness as they readily conceal themselves around the dog. Vassilieva wears a hat and carries a megaphone to deliver Sharik's "unpleasant voice" (as

Raskatov marks it in the score), filled with staccatos, glissandi, howling, growling, and occasional barking. The voices produced by Vassilieva do not resemble the common vocal sounds of dogs. They sound as if she imagines being a dog, a dog as a machine that transforms the human voice.

The last performer to join this "collectively-performed" dog is a countertenor, representing its "pleasant voice."[30] He enters the spotlight as the dog begins to move around, holding one of the puppeteers by her hand and mirroring her movements. He sings in a conventional operatic style, reminiscent of early music, with an exceptionally high voice. As they all move around, centered on the dog and its movements, the magic of becoming unfolds. Despite the live presence of six human performers on stage, choreographed and moving on and off the spotlight, I found myself completely absorbed by the dog puppet, eagerly anticipating its actions, sounds, and vocalizations. "We are the dog!" one of the puppeteers states in an interview.[31] The puppeteers fade into the background, and my attention is solely focused on the dog, as if it is real, sort of *alive*.

Raskatov's portrayal of the dog encompasses both speaking and singing, growling and barking, with two distinct voices. The pleasant and unpleasant voices engage in dialogue for the most part, but there are occasions when they sing together simultaneously. It recalls how Kafka described the voice of Gregor Samsa, where the unpleasant voice would spoil the meanings of the words, while the pleasant voice would strive to keep them clear. Towards the end of the opera, when the dog Sharik transforms into the human Sharikov, he acquires a third voice, a *basso buffo*.

Austin McQuinn discusses the process of Gregor becoming an animal by quoting part of Kafka's story that suggests how animal voice can be imagined, a process similar to the one Raskatov uses when giving a voice to Sharik:

> Once Gregor loses his speech, he becomes less interested in everything else to do with the human world and begins to explore the possibilities of his new insect body by walking on the ceiling. In order to complete the zoomorphosis, Gregor must willingly sacrifice his sense of human consciousness and human language.[32]

30 In De Nederlands Opera and Ballet production the dog's pleasant voice was performed by countertenor Andrew Watts.

31 Statement by Mark Down in *Raskatov's A Dog's Heart by Dutch National Opera*, accessed November 4, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83Un_xrytw4.

32 Austin McQuinn, *Becoming Audible*, 130.

It looks as if Raskatov is led by pure experimental impulses in finding a voice that can go beyond itself when creating the operatic character of the dog. I asked him why it was necessary for a dog to be portrayed by two voices. Here is his response:

> One is a pleasant voice, a countertenor. The other is a dramatic soprano using a sort of megaphone, as you may recall. She sings through the megaphone with a style that in Italian is called *rauco*—a very rough sound—performing very high *vorschlags* (grace notes). It's an incredibly difficult role to perform. In my first version, she also had to play the timpani. Many years ago, I wrote a piece called Ritual based on a text by the futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov, in which the soprano—Elena Vassilieva—had to sing into a megaphone while simultaneously playing the timpani.
>
> If you place the megaphone very close to the timpani, it creates a kind of Tibetan sound—but sung by a woman. Unfortunately, the stage director wasn't keen on including timpani on stage because the effect was too strong. So, we decided—or rather, he decided—not to use the timpani and just kept the megaphone. This still produced an absolutely strange, ethno-techno sound, which everyone who attended the performance remembers. The third voice is actually Sharikov, representing the dog's transformation into a man. So, basically the dog is performed by three singers.[33]

The division Raskatov establishes (between two performers), highlighting the "pleasant" and "unpleasant" spheres, is intriguing. While this could have been achieved with a single performer portraying both realms, Raskatov opted for two very distinct voices—a countertenor and a growling dramatic soprano with a megaphone. This choice implies the necessity to demonstrate that animals cannot be represented in opera in the same way as humans. "The unpleasant voice could be thought of as the voice that people hear from the outside (*grrrrrh*) and the pleasant voice could be thought of as its human side."[34] The animal evokes the emergence of at least two singing identities, perhaps reflecting the contrast between the tamed and the untamed.

The pleasant and unpleasant voices engage in dialogue, jointly narrating the story and seamlessly passing the narrative line back and forth. This dynamic is evident from the opening lines of the libretto:[35]

33 Alexander Raskatov, interview with the author (Amsterdam, 2023). See appendix.

34 Statement by Simon McBurney in *Raskatov's A Dog's Heart by Dutch National Opera*.

35 Opera is sung in Russian language, as it is in the score, and the libretto that I consult is in the original Russian, and in parallel translated to English language.

Act 1, scene 1
(first atmosphere: night, hunger, pain, snowstorm)

An unpleasant voice
U-u-u-u-hu-hu-hu-u!
U-u-ho-oow da-a-ark!
I'm dy-y-ing!
Sno-o-owsto-o-orm!

A pleasant voice
I am dying, look at me!
Oh, glance at me.

An unpleasant voice
Uuu, mo-o-oans, ho-o-owls!

A pleasant voice
The snowstorm is moaning a requiem for me...
And I am howling with it.

An unpleasant voice
Uuu a-vi-i-ilain co-o-ook!

A pleasant voice
The cook – the villain in a dirty cap.

An unpleasant voice
U-uu wha-a-at an u-ugly no-o-se

A pleasant voice
What a fat mug!

An unpleasant voice
Uu, pro-o-ole-
e-taw-bow-wow-ria-an!

A pleasant voice
A swine although a proletarian![36]

36 From an unpublished libretto of "Dog's Heart" by Cesare Mazzonis, translation into English by Boris Ignatov. Courtesy of De Nationale Opera&Ballet, Amsterdam.

This brief excerpt from the libretto demonstrates the relationship between the two voices in the dog character. To convey the growls, howls, and other stylizations of dog sounds, the text of the unpleasant voice is fragmented into syllables, creating a stuttering effect that makes it difficult to understand, both when read or sung on stage. The dialogue implies the involvement of two distinct animal persona: one in distress—the unpleasant voice—appears to be shivering, perhaps even dying, under pressure and far beyond comfort, while the other—speaking in a normal tone—acts as a kind of singing narrator, discussing the same elements as the unpleasant voice (the snowstorm, cold, wind, and the cook who scalded the dog). However, this narrator does not exhibit the distress evident in the delivery of the unpleasant voice. Interestingly, without looking at the title screen, the text from either of these two voices cannot be understood, leading me to think that perhaps it is meant to be perceived solely on an auditory level, without comprehension of the words—as if the listener were an animal.

An integral part of being a dog is listening like a dog. In *A Dog's Heart*, Raskatov prompts us to alter our mode of listening and our perception of the boundaries between man and animal through the portrayal of a dog. Earlier, I discussed the ontological desynchronization between the body and voice of Oxana Malaya. In interpreting the dog Sharik, this desynchronization becomes the central theme of the piece. The puppet dog's movements are choreographed by four humans, while its voice is provided by two individuals—one imitating dog sounds through a megaphone, the other singing with a voice unheard in the animal world. Therefore, the entire "dog-machine" operates as a multi-layered desynchronized mechanism. It blurs the line between realism and bizarre, presenting perhaps the eeriest dog ever seen on stage. Similar to Giacometti's sculpture, Raskatov's dog grapples with the experience of being a dog—thinking, walking, sounding, and listening as one. It emerges as a sort of anatomical theater within theater, with its voice serving as the site where any strict definition fails. It becomes a mechanism of becoming, in a constant loop between the search for authenticity (the unpleasant voice) and the human as the measure of all things (the pleasant voice).

The differences inherent to the structure and content of the text are further emphasized in the music and musical interpretation of the dialogues. The unpleasant voice is consistently sung through a megaphone, while the pleasant voice is delivered without any amplification or alteration of its timbre and volume. This amplifies and reinforces the unpleasantness, positioning it prominently in the foreground, yet always keeping the pleas-

ant voice as its counterpart. The composition and musical material of these two voices exhibit radical differences. The unpleasant voice is experimental in nature, characterized by excessive glissandi and delivered through the megaphone.

I found myself wondering why a megaphone was necessary. Did the composer have any political intentions or inspirations for its use? Despite my initial associations with the amplification of voices during rallies and protests, where it is used to enhance their power, Raskatov explains that the use of the megaphone is motivated by purely aesthetic reasons:

> I didn't have any political ideas. I was inspired by my own piece, *Ritual*, which I wrote ten or twelve years ago. But maybe you never really know what happens in a composer's brain. Of course, by the end of the opera, I used sixteen megaphones—one for every soloist in the choir. They became like clones of Sharikov, and everyone had to sing a cappella through their megaphones. Here, I did intend to depict a kind of crowd—a terrible, chaotic crowd. Not necessarily a revolutionary crowd, but a wild, uncontrollable one. I wanted to suggest what could happen to all of us if these Sharikovs kept multiplying. Step by step, the Earth would be overrun with Sharikovs. That's what I wanted to convey. But my first impulse was purely artistic. I wanted to capture the idea of an angry, hungry dog at the very beginning of the opera.[37]

The second act, where the captivating dog turns into an unfit man, lacks the spectacle of the puppet singing dog, making it feel somewhat less dramatic. Bulgakov, Raskatov, and Kulik all pose the same question: are we deemed worthy as individuals only when we conform to the dictates of the ruling system? Or, akin to dogs, are we simply reliant on our masters? The answer, perhaps, lies in our ability to bark and observe. Questions arising from a similar perspective are notable in the second Raskatov's opera, *Animal Farm*, where the unexpected manifestation of an unpleasant singing dog's voice—just like in *A Dog's Heart*—plays a fundamental role in understanding the human/animal divide.

37 Mazzonis, "Dog's Heart."

Animal Farm of Voices

"For Alexander Raskatov, the human voice, with its tonal mutability, is one of the most important means of expression," asserts Raskatov's publisher.[38] In his latest opera, *Animal Farm* (2023), with a libretto based on Orwell's classic, the animals of the farm are depicted as they organize their society and attempt to transform the power structures that govern them.

One of the most striking visual elements of the production was the animal masks worn by the entire singing cast. These masks, though slightly exaggerated in size and style, were crafted from transparent materials, allowing the performers to move, breathe, and sing with ease. When asked why in his staging of the work characters gradually lose their animal-like appearance, Damiano Michieletto responded:

> "Orwell's book ends with a scene where the other animals peer into the farmhouse where the pigs have holed up, and they see that the pigs have started to look like the humans. In this production, the entire slaughterhouse has been transformed into a posh place and all the surviving characters on stage have become human. They enjoy themselves at a luxurious feast where animals are consumed. All their initial ideals have been forgotten."[39]

In parallel with Michieletto's staging, Raskatov was mostly interested in giving peculiar voices to both human and animal characters:

> Together, the soloists of *Animal Farm* can be seen as a kind of vocal orchestra. Hardly any of the roles could be called supporting roles: each character has their own personality and development. I lay awake at night wondering how to find sufficient musical contrast between all those characters. Eventually I found a way. Before I started working on a part, I sat down in a chair and let the scene play in my imagination. That helped me find distinct characters. That's how each character got their own texture and range, from extraordinarily high to extremely low."[40]

38 "Alexander Raskatov," Boosey & Hawkes, accessed February 1, 2025, https://www.boosey.com/composer/Alexander+Raskatov.

39 Damiano Michieletto quoted from the Animal Farm Program booklet, Amsterdam, DNO, 2023, 77.

40 Alexander Raskatov quoted from the Animal Farm Program booklet, Amsterdam, DNO, 2023, 65.

Despite the various vocal effects to be found in various roles, the "catalogue of voices" is quite conventional in the operatic sense.[41] Watching the opera, with its grotesque scenes involving farm animals (most often pigs), I suddenly thought that I heard a voice of a dog as well: it was the same dog's voice from *A Dog's Heart*.[42] Indeed, it was dramatic soprano Elena Vassilieva, Raskatov's spouse, who had already sang the "unpleasant voice" of the dog Sharik and was now present on stage in the role of Blacky. Dressed entirely in black formal attire, with short hair, she resembled a secret agent. Her gender appeared deliberately obscured by her costume, which featured a black coat, sunglasses, and trousers.

In the approximately seven-minute opening scene of the first act, Blacky sneaks onto the stage, moving between the cages where the other animals are kept. During the exposition of the horse, Blacky enters with the provocative question "*Why is this?*" Delivered in a bold, *forte* manner, the line is marked in the score as *rauco* (hoarse), a vocal quality reminiscent of the "unpleasant" dog voice from *A Dog's Heart*. In response to Blacky's question, the existing power structure is implicitly challenged and accused: "Because the produce of labour is stolen from us (…) summed in a word – man (…) Man is the only enemy we have." All the animals take part in a vocal discussion of how unjust it is that man does not work for the produce but owns it.

As the animals discuss their situation, Blacky silently observes from the back of the stage, positioned behind the cages. The animals deliberate on how they will achieve wealth and freedom without humans. Meanwhile, at the front of the stage, a meat-grinding machine is illuminated, expelling

41 As is written in the score in French, "rôles et tessitures" are as follows: Mollie, soprano colorature aigu; Young Actress (Pigetta), soprano lyrique léger; Blacky, soprano dramatique colorature; Muriel, mezzo-soprano colorature; Mrs. Jones, mezzo-soprano; Clover, contralto; Minimus, contre-ténor; Squealer, ténor aigu; Snowball, ténor (cantor); Benjamin, ténor bouffe (haute-contre); Mr. Jones, ténor; Boxer, baryton martin; Pilkington, baryton; Napoleon, basse; Old Major, basse profonde; Men from the van, Men of Jones, Men of Pilkington, Animals choir (Hens, Ducks, Goats, Cows, Sheep, Pigs), choeur d'enfants et choir mixte.

42 The cast of Animal Farm: Mollie, Holly Flack; Young Actress (Pigetta), Karl Laquit; Blacky, Elena Vassilieva; Muriel, Maya Gour; Mrs. Jones, Francis van Broekhuizen; Clover, Helena Rasker; Minimus, Artem Krutko; Squealer, James Kryshak; Snowball, Michael Gniffke; Benjamin, Karl Laquit; Mr. Jones, Marcel Beekman; Boxer, Germán Olvera; Napoleon, Misha Kiria; Old Major, Gennady Bezzubenkov; Mr. Pilkington, Frederik Bergman; Two men of Mr. Jones, Alexander de Jong, Joris van Baar; Two men of Mr. Pilkington, Mark Kurmanbayev, Michiel Nonhebel; Two men from the veterinary car, Alexander de Jong, Mark Kurmanbayev.

minced meat. Nearby, a pig begins to sing, proclaiming a single, powerful message: "*Revolution!*"

Suddenly, Blacky emerges at the front of the stage, embodying the unsettling energy of Sharik's unpleasant dog voice. Moving with vigor, she shouts "*Revolution!*" repeatedly in a *rauco* and *forte* tone. Then, shifting dramatically, she sings the word "*Revolution!*" in the bright, agile voice of a traditional dramatic soprano coloratura. The choir of animals joins in, echoing the same word in unison.

"All animals are comrades! All men are enemies! We must not come to resemble them!" declares the pig in a commanding baritone. Soon after, the choir sings *a cappella*: "All animals are equal!" (repeated), their voices filled with hope for a golden future. Throughout this time, Blacky remains at the front-right corner of the stage. When the lights fade, she exits, and the scene transitions.

Vassilieva's stage presence was striking, as she seemed to regulate the crowd on stage in a policing manner. During the performance, I wasn't closely following the libretto, yet I was under the impression she was playing the role of a dog. My perception of both her canine-like stage presence and vocal expression was inherited from *A Dog's Heart*. And that "inheritance" was no coincidence. Although there was no dog puppet on stage and her costume was different, the dynamics of her singing—balancing pleasant and unpleasant voice—closely resembled the vocal expression she had previously delivered as the dog Sharik. However, upon reviewing the roles of the animals in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, I realized that the only character that could correspond to Blacky is Moses, the raven. Representing the Russian Orthodox Church, Moses speaks in metaphors to convey ideas about religion—for example, when presenting the utopian image of Sugarcandy Mountain.

There was a clear nod to the pleasant and unpleasant dog voices in *Dog's Heart*. However, unlike that earlier work, this performance involved no ventriloquism with puppets and puppeteers, nor the use of a megaphone to further amplify and distort the voice. Instead, the contrast between the harsh, unpleasant voice of the dog and the more melodious voice of the raven clashed within a single body—Elena Vassilieva's. Despite this vocal duality, her character, cloaked entirely in black, did not visually evoke the figure of either a dog or a raven. She didn't wear a mask. Every aspect of her role was embodied in her voice alone.

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In an anthropocentric world, with its artistic and cultural representational mechanisms, the reinvention of animals as humans is often perceived as a "natural" progression. In performing arts, for instance, where a ventriloquist dynamic arises—what we see (an anthropomorphic representation of an animal) versus what we hear (a human voice)—this humanized-animal construct becomes a widely accepted convention, a "make-believe" easily grasped even by young children, who quickly understand it as a social norm.

The reverse movement: the animalization of humans involves humans who begin to act, behave, and sound like animals—as Others, monsters, or, like in the cases discussed in this text, dogs. Unlike the humanized-animal construct, which aligns comfortably with cultural conventions, the *animalized human*—in which humanity is stripped away and projected into a "monstrous zone"—creates tension and provokes a sense of discomfort. This dehumanization unsettles our perceptions and introduces a friction that challenges established norms.

From the case of a feral child raised by dogs to performance-art pieces by Oleg Kulik and the dog/animal vocal figures in Alexander Raskatov's operas, the presence of the dog is made audible in the voice, while the division between dog and human is performed and continuously reinvented. Artists and composers enact, re-enact, and perpetuate the artificiality and unsettling nature of this divide. The voice and movements of Oxana Malaya are obscure, Kulik's dog double is unsettling, Raskatov's Sharik is grotesque, and his Blacky is eerie and fun at the same time. Artists intuitively highlight the constructed nature of this divide in striking ways, often without consciously developing a theoretical framework for it—much like Raskatov, who described his process of inventing pleasant and unpleasant dog voices in *A Dog's Heart* as intuitive rather than conceptual.

This grotesque interplay of pleasant and unpleasant vocal divisions, crafted by Raskatov and performed on the opera stage, perhaps offers the most vivid exploration of the human–animal divide in the singing voice. This divide is a construction—shaped by intentions, norms, and ideology—yet it is largely taken for granted. When Oxana Malaya uses her body and voice to perfectly imitate her canine parents, the sight is disturbing to the human eye/ear. This disturbance is consumed but rarely explained or contextualized. Kulik, like a wild dog, channels aggression, unpredictability, and fear—emotions the audience intuitively perceives as "wrong" when a human acts and vocalizes like a dog. Raskatov, in turn,

makes a grotesque spectacle of the entire human–animal vocal game. He achieves this in a striking way: by creating a *meta-voice*—a voice about the voice—one that fragments into multiple characters, oscillating between the pleasant and the unpleasant. These voices expose the artificial and fluid boundaries between human and animal, revealing a continuous process of vocal *becoming* for both.

Appendix

"Civilization Started with Voices": A Conversation with Alexander Raskatov*

JELENA NOVAK: *One scene particularly stood out to me in* A Dog's Heart *(2010): the portrayal of the dog Sharik with four puppeteers and two singers. It was one of the most memorable scenes I've ever witnessed in any opera. Despite the presence of six performers on stage, I found myself completely absorbed by the dog, anticipating its actions, sounds, and vocalizations. It was as if the puppeteers faded into the background, and my attention was solely focused on the dog as though it were real. Perhaps this can lead us to discuss the concept of realism in opera, which I believe holds significance not only in your new work* Animal Farm *(2023) but also in* A Dog's Heart. *Realism, both in a general sense and within the context of socialist realism, plays an important role. I wonder, what are your thoughts on realism in opera? Do you find it challenging? Do you believe it's achievable?*

ALEXANDER RASKATOV: Before answering your question—Elena (gesturing to Elena Vassilieva, soprano and the composer's partner, who was present during the interview) sang the role of the dog. She performed the dog with an "unpleasant voice," as if it was hungry. It immediately came to me that I should write the dog's part using two voices. So that was the beginning of my thinking about this opera—that the dog needed to be represented with two totally different voices.

I don't know if it's socialist realism, maybe. I would call it a kind of paradox, which I think opera needs. Bulgakov was never a socialist realist. He wrote *Heart of a Dog* in 1925, and, as you know, it was strictly forbidden in the USSR. So, it's already something far removed from socialist realism. Maybe it's a kind of post-socialist realism; I'm not sure. I've never tried to classify this opera. My librettist, Cesare Mazzonis, called it a *dramma giocoso*. Maybe he was right.

* The conversation with Alexander Raskatov took place in Amsterdam on 13th of March 2023, before Jelena Novak saw the performance of the opera *Animal Farm*.

JN: *Why did you use two voices for the dog?*

AR: One is a pleasant voice, a countertenor. The other is a dramatic soprano using a sort of megaphone, as you may recall. She sings through the megaphone with a style that in Italian is called *rauco*—a very rough sound—performing very high *vorschlags* (grace notes). It's an incredibly difficult role to perform. In my first version, she also had to play the timpani. Many years ago, I wrote a piece called *Ritual* based on a text by the futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov, in which the soprano—Elena Vassilieva—had to sing into a megaphone while simultaneously playing the timpani.

If you place the megaphone very close to the timpani, it creates a kind of Tibetan sound—but sung by a woman. Unfortunately, the stage director wasn't keen on including timpani on stage because the effect was too strong. So, we decided—or rather, he decided—not to use the timpani and just kept the megaphone. This still produced an absolutely strange, ethno-techno sound, which everyone who attended the performance remembers. The third voice is actually Sharikov, representing the dog's transformation into a man. So, basically the dog is performed by three singers.

JN: *As a person, it's a* basso buffo.

AR: Yes, exactly.

JN: *How did you get the idea to use the megaphone? Was it inspired by political demonstrations?*

AR: No, no, I didn't have any political ideas. I was inspired by my own piece, *Ritual*, which I wrote ten or twelve years ago. But maybe you never really know what happens in a composer's brain. Of course, by the end of the opera, I used sixteen megaphones—one for every soloist in the choir. They became like clones of Sharikov, and everyone had to sing a cappella through their megaphones.

Here, I did intend to depict a kind of crowd—a terrible, chaotic crowd. Not necessarily a revolutionary crowd, but a wild, uncontrollable one. I wanted to suggest what could happen to all of us if these Sharikovs kept multiplying. Step by step, the Earth would be overrun with Sharikovs. That's what I wanted to convey. But my first impulse was purely artistic. I wanted to capture the idea of an angry, hungry dog at the very beginning of the opera.

JN: *Ihis is very interesting because it raises the question: where is the boundary between man and animal? It's an intriguing question. For example, if you think about the very definition of "voice," it's typically assigned to humans. But when you hear a bird sing, or a whale sing, it challenges that notion. Scientists usually don't say that a whale has a "voice," but they acknowledge that it can sing. It's a kind of paradox.*

AR: Yes, that's right.

JN: *I think you explore that paradox—perhaps unconsciously—but you make the question very relevant: Who can have a voice?*

AR: Actually, I think the voice existed long before words. Civilization, I suppose, started with voices. Voices were present on this planet before words ever came into being. Words came much later.

At first, there were just sounds. When voices emerged, humanity began. And not just humanity—the animal world, too. Voice was the beginning of expression, though perhaps without meaning in the way we understand it now. Of course, voice is still incredibly important in nature. People, I suppose, once lived in caves, hunted mammoths, and used their voices in different ways to communicate. But we are far removed from that time.

Still, I remember, years ago, before I wrote *Ritual*, I bought a set of CDs called *Le Voyage* (in French). It contained recordings of music and vocal expressions from many different parts of the world. It was absolutely fascinating—extraordinary singing and playing of instruments, often combined. I was amazed to discover that hundreds, or even thousands, of years ago, people were already using such fantastic techniques, techniques that professional composers today are trying to rediscover. And they did it back then—for free, so to speak.

JN: *Are you familiar with the work of Oleg Kulik? He created performances where he behaved as a dog. He comes from the world of visual arts and wanted, as I understand, to portray how difficult the life of an artist is. During his exhibitions or performances in galleries, he would appear naked and behave like a dog. He would even bite people. This figure of the dog is fascinating. Sharik is a stray dog, and the metaphor of stray dogs is especially present in Eastern Europe, particularly among Slavic nations. I think it's always there, somewhere, this metaphor. Here in Holland, for example, you won't find stray dogs—they simply don't exist because dogs are sterilized.*

AR: Maybe we're all stray dogs. I don't know. Living in Russia, especially

now, there are so many people without homes, living in poverty. It's very sad. When Bulgakov wrote this novel, you can imagine how many stray dogs, or even stray people—children without parents—were living on the streets just after the revolution. It was a horrible time. Maybe it was even more difficult for Bulgakov to describe what he saw in the streets of Moscow during that period. Who knows?

JN: *What are your thoughts on political art? How do you feel about expressing political ideas through music?*

AR: I have nothing against it. The most important thing is that political art today should work for the good of all humanity. There are ways to capture political realities—documentary cinema, for instance, can address what's happening here, there, or elsewhere. But for more universal concerns, I believe music rises above specific events. Even though we live in times when we're inspired—or affected—by what is happening around us, music must transcend the moment. Unfortunately, war is the most terrible thing, but wars have existed throughout history, in every era. There's always been a war somewhere, and sadly, this seems to continue.

For me, art, including music, must preserve humanity and foster love for humankind. That is the most important thing, even in satirical works or politically charged pieces, like *A Dog's Heart*. The aim should not be to provoke anger in the audience, but rather to inspire a sense of humanity. I think we've lost some of that. Music—especially experimental music—has, in some ways, moved away from this idea. But music, like literature, is responsible for portraying certain truths about life.

As for theater, there are, of course, works that rely on pure provocation or spectacle (*épatage*). You see this kind of superficial treatment of political themes. It's not for me. I think we, as artists, must be professionally honest. It's far too easy to create works that simply shock or speculate on political topics. That's not genuine or professional art. We have to be honest with our craft and, most importantly, more human. This is more important than pointing fingers at a particular country today, another tomorrow. Take the wars in Yugoslavia—it was horrible. What's happening now between Russia and Ukraine is absolutely insane. But that's a separate conversation. We've all gone through suffering in various ways, and for many reasons, we don't always talk about it. Still, I believe we need a truly humanistic attitude toward one another. That, at least, is my goal.

JN: *When we talk about opera, I noticed on your list of works that you've written at least one more opera besides* Animal Farm *and* A Dog's Heart. *So, you seem to have a strong interest in opera.*

AR: I actually wrote two operas after *A Dog's Heart* and before *Animal Farm*. One of them is *GerMANIA* (2018), commissioned by the Opéra de Lyon. It's based on Heiner Müller's play *Germania*, which was very difficult for me to work on. It's also a kind of political satire about World War II, Stalin, Hitler, and so on. I think writing it took a toll on my health because there were some extremely challenging moments in the play, and then in the opera itself.

Around the same time, or maybe slightly later, I wrote another opera for the Mariinsky Theatre called *Eclipse* (2018). It was a commission from the Mariinsky Theatre and Valery Gergiev. It was performed four times in concert versions, including at the Montreux Festival in Switzerland, and there were plans to stage it. However, all of this was disrupted by the horrible events that followed, and the staging never materialized.

Now, I think that because *Eclipse* was written specifically for Russia and for the Mariinsky Theatre, it can't really be performed anywhere else.

JN: *You mean legally?*

AR: Not legally—conceptually and musically. It was written for the Mariinsky, and my position is that it should either be performed there or not at all.

JN: *When you think about the history of opera, what are some of the pillars of the genre that are particularly dear to you and that you perhaps have in mind when you compose?*

AR: Opera has given us so many extraordinary examples. In different periods of my life, I've had different preferences. But, of course, the greatest example—the one we can only admire from afar without any hope of truly approaching—is Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*. It's the kind of ideal opera that, I believe, died with Mozart. After that, if I were to single out another exceptional case, it would have to be Verdi's *Falstaff*, which is my favorite opera. It's pure joy—like champagne. It's not weighed down by heavy ideology, like Wagner's monumental works. Instead, it offers a completely different perspective on the opera genre. *Falstaff* is brilliant, sparkling, and spectacular.

As a Russian composer, I've also always drawn from the Russian operatic tradition. For me, Mussorgsky and Shostakovich stand at the pinnacle,

alongside Tchaikovsky, of course. Operas like *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* by Shostakovich are part of my musical DNA. But Mussorgsky is particularly significant for me.

JN: *In both* A Dog's Heart *and* Animal Farm*, you have animals singing. I read that, for* Animal Farm*, you put considerable thought into inventing distinct vocal styles for each group of animals. Can you elaborate a bit more about that?*

AR: Yes, of course. Before starting, you need to be well-prepared. While working on the libretto, I realized that there were so many animals involved that it would be easy for them to blur together, especially with masks or costumes. So, I decided that each type of animal had to have its own distinct world, its own unique vocal effects. A common element across all the characters is their extensive vocal range. I felt that, in the 20th century, the orchestra had made much more progress in terms of its capabilities than the voice, which seemed to lag behind. I thought it was time to develop the voice in new directions, much like what had been done with the orchestra.

For each animal, I created specific vocal effects and techniques. I also established a kind of system. For example, Old Major—the Marx-like figure in the opera—is represented by a *basso profondo* with an extremely low range. Then there's Napoleon, who is a simple bass, and Snowball, a tenor with substantial low notes. Squealer, on the other hand, has an extremely high, almost hysterical voice. Together, these voices form a sort of "pyramid of power" among the pigs. On the other end of the spectrum, there's Mollie, the frivolous horse, who is an *extremely* high coloratura soprano. Her range goes up to an A-flat in the third octave, which is about a third higher than the highest notes written for Cunégonde in *Candide*. If you combine Mollie's voice with Old Major's lowest C, you span almost the entire keyboard, covering nearly all the octaves. This vast range was intentional. I wanted each character to have their own unique musical "corner," with specific vocal techniques and effects that reflect their personality and role in the story.

JN: *These are all trained voices in the tradition of lyrical and dramatic opera singing. No use of jazz idioms or folk singing styles?*

AR: There is a scene between Pilkington and Mollie that has an old-fashioned, jazzy foxtrot feel. There's also a parody of *cabaret-style singing* in one place for certain dramatic effects. But in general, the approach is very

open—it ranges from speech, like in *Singspiel*, where there's a mix of spoken dialogue and singing, to full arias. In some instances, speech is integrated directly into the scene because there's no strict division between aria and recitative. For example, Napoleon might sing a cantilena in one moment but speak in another—it depends. For me, drama is the most important element of opera. It's not a static genre. That's why I use both techniques—speech and singing—freely, adapting them to the dramatic needs of the scene. Sometimes they even blend into *cantabile* passages.

JN: *Do the voices you use for each character have gender-specific qualities?*

AR: Yes, but not always in the traditional sense. Each animal has its own distinct vocal identity. For example, there's a high coloratura soprano and a dramatic soprano. The soprano in *A Dog's Heart* had a complex technique that blended elements of classical singing with influences from folk music. That role required a great deal of vocal agility and nuance.

When I was younger, I traveled across Russia with a group of Conservatory students to collect and record folk songs. That experience gave me a deep understanding of vocal traditions and their emotional power. It was very influential for me, and I sometimes draw on those techniques in my work. For instance, in *Animal Farm*, I included a *contralto* and even a *travesti*—a male singer performing a female role. So, the vocal assignments are quite varied.

JN: *Does a soprano always have to be a woman?*

AR: Not necessarily. In *Animal Farm*, there's one case where a man sings a soprano part for a woman.

JN: *How do you think about the role of the choir in opera? Does it represent the opinion of the people? And what about the choirs in* Animal Farm*?*

AR: There are two choirs in *Animal Farm*: a children's choir and a mixed adult choir. Their function is to react to the events unfolding in the story.

JN: *Does the children's choir bring a sense of naivety?*

AR: Yes, exactly—freshness and naivety. It reflects the smaller animals, like ducks and hens, rather than the larger animals like horses. That's why I decided to use a children's choir for those parts.

JN: *Do you use direct quotations in your music, like in* A Dog's Heart, *where there were references to mass songs?*

AR: I don't specifically remember quotations in *A Dog's Heart*, but there is one quotation from a revolutionary song in *Animal Farm*. However, I use it in a very paradoxical, satirical way—not as a straightforward revolutionary anthem. It's just one quotation. There's also a second quotation, a subtle nod to "Casta diva."

JN: *Can you tell me which revolutionary song it is?*

AR: Yes, of course. It's "Smelo, tovarishchi, v nogu!" (Comrades, let's bravely march!)

JN: *Regarding the traditional operatic repertoire, I've always been a bit puzzled by conventional stagings. For instance, when a singer, heavily made up and wearing a wig, stands almost immobile on stage and then produces this huge voice—it always felt disproportionate to me. No one ever really explained why it has to be that way. Of course, it's part of operatic aesthetics. But later, I started discovering more and more operas that didn't follow this tradition. How do you view the relationship between the body and the voice on the opera stage?*

AR: Sometimes that's true. For example, when a 60-year-old woman sings Juliet, it can look a bit strange. I remember at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, there was a Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin* who also didn't fit the conventional image. Visually, it might not align with expectations. But vocally? Sometimes it can still be magical.

In contemporary music, I think the physicality of the performer—how they look and move—has become much more important. Sometimes, it's deliberately paradoxical. For instance, in *Animal Farm*, there's a scene where an enormous man plays the role of Benjamin the donkey but sings with an incredibly high voice. When he's dressed in a giant red robe, it looks absolutely absurd, but that's the goal. It's meant to create irony and paradox.

We're living in the age of the stage director now. Directors often reinterpret classical works in completely new ways. Take *Aida*, for instance—it's been staged hundreds of times in the past. How do you make it fresh? The level of past performances is so high, and we may no longer have the same kinds of voices as before. So, directors often reinvent the story visually and conceptually. Sometimes it works beautifully; sometimes it doesn't. But that's the trend—people want to see new interpretations of old works. That

said, I believe we need more contemporary operas that can become part of the repertoire. That's the real challenge. If we had new works alongside the Mozarts, Verdis, and Wagners, stage directors wouldn't need to constantly come up with new tricks for old operas.

JN: *A director friend of mine in Belgrade once said, "When you close your eyes, it's all the same."*

AR: True, but many people come to see, not just to listen. That's why we now use terms like "show" for an opera production. Opera isn't just about sound anymore; it's also a visual spectacle. Personally, I still prefer listening to a CD over watching a DVD, but the visual aspect has undeniably become more important.

JN: *The staging of* A Dog's Heart *was very closely tied to Simon McBurney's ideas. Can you imagine this opera being staged by another director?*

AR: Of course, I can. *A Dog's Heart* isn't entirely dependent on McBurney's staging. The music exists independently of him, though there are elements in the staging that he specifically requested me to add—things I didn't initially find necessary. These were more for his vision than mine. So, yes, it could be staged by someone else, though certain adjustments might be needed.

JN: *How involved were you in the staging process?*

AR: It was very different with Damiano Michieletto, who worked on *Animal Farm*. He's a pure opera stage director, and for me, the atmosphere of the collaboration was much more pleasant. With McBurney, while I respect his incredible skill, the process was often stressful—unnecessarily so. McBurney discovered and changed things constantly, which made the process challenging for everyone involved. In the end, he achieved some remarkable results, but it wasn't easy.

Michieletto, on the other hand, knew what he wanted from the very beginning. The process with him was lighter and more respectful of the music, which is extremely important to me. It's hard to compare the two—they're like a right hand and a left foot, completely different. But the collaboration with Michieletto felt more cohesive.

JN: *Were you involved in the libretto-writing process for* Animal Farm*?*

AR: Yes. The librettist, Ian Burton, gave me an initial version, but we only met twice because of COVID. His first draft was completely unusable for

me. It was far too long, with extended phrases and a structure more suited to an oratorio than an opera. For example, the anthem "Beasts of England," based on Orwell's text, was repeated nine times—completely impractical for the stage. There was also a lack of direct speech, with too much reliance on descriptions like "he runs" or "she comes." I asked for changes, and while Burton adjusted some parts, I realized I didn't have enough time to keep requesting edits. I asked for his permission to adapt the libretto myself, and he agreed. Ultimately, I rewrote sections to fit my goals and even wrote two scenes myself, despite English not being my native language. So, I consider myself a co-librettist for this opera.

JN: *I sometimes work as a dramaturg in opera, and I often see librettists—especially those inexperienced with opera—come in with huge, unwieldy texts.*

AR: Burton is experienced, but even so, there were many elements I wasn't happy with. That said, he was very accommodating and gave me carte blanche to make changes. I haven't seen him since.

JN: *Was it the idea of the director of Dutch National Opera to stage* Animal Farm*?*

AR: Yes, it came from Sophie de Lint. She shared this idea with Michieletto, who had long dreamed of staging *Animal Farm*. Together, they approached me.

JN: *And for* A Dog's Heart*? Was it Pierre Audi's idea?*

AR: No, that one was my idea. Pierre Audi gave me carte blanche to choose the subject, and I chose *A Dog's Heart*.

JN: *Do you have plans for another opera?*

AR: I do, but only in my head for now—it's not written yet.

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Abstract

In this article I discuss the reworking of the demarcation line between human and animal through the vocal sphere by referring to a dog as an "animal of interest." I draw attention to a number of recent works—paintings, performance pieces, and operas—where the figure/construct/representation of the dog and dog–human relation serves as the engine of the piece. My focus is the representation of humans that "go out of themselves," acquiring in the process animal characteristics. I am especially intrigued by how this "going out of oneself" is reflected in the voice, whether there is something that could be called animal/dog voice, and what its characteristics might be.

In the first part of the article, I briefly discuss the VR opera *Songs for a Passerby* (2023) by director Celine Daemen, writer Olivier Herter, and music by Asa Horvitz, where a digital dog, with its full range of vocal sounds, guides the listening spectator through the piece. I continue with the example of a feral child raised by dogs and delve into the performance-art pieces by Oleg Kulik (where the artist embodies a dog). I end with the analysis of the representation of the dog/animal vocal figure in two operas by Alexander Raskatov: A Dog's Heart (2008–09) based on Mikhail Bulgakov's 1925 novel of the same name, and Animal Farm (2023), an adaptation of George Orwell's 1945 timeless classic. I am especially interested in the vocal perspective of "The Posthuman as Becoming-animal" (after Rosi Braidotti). I also refer to the philosophical discussion of the so-called human–animal divide in the work of Russian philosopher Oxana Timofeeva.

In her book on the posthuman, Braidotti reminds us of Deleuze's classification of animals into three groups: those we watch television with, those we eat, and those we are scared of. This ubiquity of dogs in the human world places their figure in the spotlight, particularly concerning the realm of the vocal sphere. Dogs featured in the above-mentioned pieces acquire voices to express their identity and perform it in a new form of relationality with human and non-human people.

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Emergence: Examining Gender in Music through Contemporary Opera*

Felicity Wilcox

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6 Wilcox and Shannon, v.

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

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

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

Opera and gender

Operatic narratives traditionally portray women as victims of murder and/or sexual violence,[10] leading to some commentators labelling opera as a misogynistic artform,[11] whose canonic narratives are dominated by patriarchal control of women and gender diverse people's bodies, sexuality and power.[12] Carolyn Abbate argues that the "voices" or identities represented in operas also encompass the physical voices heard within them, or that musical narration "may speak both with and *across* the text" (her emphasis).[13] Thus, she suggests that even though problematic narratives of gendered violence proliferate in 19th century opera, at the same time it has been a powerful vehicle for the evolution of female expression through its contribution to an "unconquerable" female identity, "undone by plot yet triumphant in voice."[14] Opera has also been the subject of much queer theory; gay male perspectives consider opera through the lens of homoerotic desire, the phenomenon of the castrati, and operatic cross-dressing,[15] with lesbian perspectives also exploring the radical strategies found within opera for women's personal and sexual self-expression[16] and arguing that, despite its preponderance of tragic female leads, "opera has an intriguing history of challenging misogyny and heterosexism."[17]

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

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

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

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

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

14 Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, ix.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

18 Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, ix.

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

20 Smith, *Shine Bright*, 23.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Music at the margins

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

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

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

31 Fraser, "Deconstructing the Diva."

32 Fraser.

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

34 Wilcox and Shannon, 29.

35 Wilcox and Shannon, 38.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

40 Du, interview.

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

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

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

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

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

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

41 Du, interview.
42 Du, interview.
43 Du, interview.

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

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

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

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

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

44 Du, interview.

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

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

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

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

Linking acoustic ecology to more inclusive methods in opera

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

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

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

In *The Visitors* (2023), a Victorian Opera production, Dharug man and composer Christopher Sainsbury drew on the sounds of his Country[55] of Eora/Sydney to create what he called the work's "sonic signature."[56] Dha-

49 Fraser, "Deconstructing the Diva."

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

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

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

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

54 Neale and Kelly, *Songlines*, 46.

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

56 Sainsbury, interview.

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

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

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

57 Sainsbury, interview.

58 Sainsbury, interview.

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

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

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

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

61 The "Emergence" project website can be accessed here: https://emergenceopera.com.

62 Blackwood, "(Re)Claim the Frame," 169.

63 "About me," QVocal – Quin Thomson's official website, accessed June 27, 2024, http://www.qvocal.com.

64 "About," Sonya Holowell's official website, accessed June 8, 2024, https://www.sonyaholowell.com/about.

65 "About," Nicole Smede's official website, accessed June 8, 2024, https://nicolesmede.com/about.

66 See "About the House," The House that Dan Built's official website, accessed June 8, 2024, https://www.thehousethatdanbuilt.com.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

70 Du, interview.

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

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

On feminist listening

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

For example, US composer Gelsey Bell's *mɔ.ɹnŋ [morning//mourning]* (2023) was premiered at Protoype Festival 2023, and is a music theater work

71 "About," Short Black Opera, official website, accessed December 8, 2024, https://shortblackopera.org.au/content.

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

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

74 Blackwood, "(Re)Claim the Frame," 169.

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

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

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

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

76 Lucia Pietroiusti, *Sun & Sea*, official website, accessed June 8, 2024, https://www.sunandsea.lt/en.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

82 Bickford, The Dissonance of Democracy, 129.

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

84 Westerkamp, "Listening to the Listening."

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

85 Wilcox and Shannon, *Women and Minority Genders in Music*, 51.
86 Palme, quoted in Fischer-Lessiak, "How Feminism Matters," 92.
87 Fraser, "Deconstructing the Diva."
88 Oliveros, *Deep Listening*, 15.
89 Palme, quoted in Fischer-Lessiak, "How Feminism Matters," 92.
90 Pia Palme, "An Anthology as Polyphony. An Introduction," in Lehmann and Palme, *Sounding Fragilities*, 11.

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

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

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

92 Bickford, The Dissonance of Democracy, 129.

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Abstract

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

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

INTERVIEW

Crafting Sensation: The Alchemy of Sound in Gaspar Noé's films.

An Interview with Ken Yasumoto*

Sara Aresu

Introduction

Ken Yasumoto is a film sound professional who has worked in a variety of roles including sound editor, sound effects designer, sound editor supervisor and more. After graduating from the Louis Lumière film school, he began his career as a cinematographer, first working with directors such as Luc Besson and Leos Carax. His career includes collaborations with several French directors, the most important and long-lasting of which is his work with Gaspar Noé, where he is involved as a sound designer. The film that marks the beginning of a long and fruitful professional relationship is *Enter the Void* (2009). The sound designer recalls being contacted by the director (who asked him to do the sound recording), not so much because he knew or appreciated his work, but because he remembered his Japanese name and felt there was a stronger connection to the sound approach required for the film, which was to be shot in Tokyo. Yasumoto was unable to take part in the shooting for personal reasons, but a year later he was invited to work on the film's post-production.[1]

* The interview took place in two stages. In the first, I focused on *Enter the Void* to explore the creative processes and understand how the complexity of the film's sound was integrated into Gaspar Noé's poetic vision. The questions were sent via e-mail and I received his answers on May 22, 2024. The second part of the interview extends to subsequent collaborations, starting with *Love* specifically and moving on to other films. The last two questions also explore Yasumoto's work with Lucile Hadžihalilović, as some significant elements of the aesthetic of both directors, although stylistically different in their final outcomes, are compatible and similar. The second part was concluded on November 15, 2024.

1 Guillaume Valeix, "Ken Yasumoto nous parle de *Vortex* de Gaspar Noé," interview with Ken Yasumoto on AFSI, October 1, 2022, https://www.afsi.eu/articles/104872-ken-yasumoto-nous-parle-de-vortex-de-gaspar-noe.

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Gaspar Noé is an Argentine-French filmmaker who began his career in cinema as an assistant director. During his studies, he developed a close relationship with French screenwriter and director Lucile Hadžihalilović. Both motivated by the desire to create "atypical" films, they co-founded Les Cinémas de la Zone in 1986, an independent company that allowed them greater creative freedom in financing their projects. Noe's films have been associated with a movement often described as the New French Extremity, a term introduced by James Quandt to identify a provocative (in his view) trend in French cinema between the 1990s and 2000s.[2] This style emphasizes intense physical and emotional experiences, later reinterpreted as "cinema of the body" by Tim Palmer and "cinema of sensation" by Martine Beugnet (concepts that extend beyond French cinema). These definitions underline a common focus among certain filmmakers on visceral, polarizing narratives that challenge conventional audiovisual experiences.

Gaspar Noé's professional career began with the short film *Carne* (1991). Although he initially intended to expand it into a feature film, financial difficulties led to the production of *Seul contre tous* (1998), a true sequel. This was followed by *Irréversible* (2002), which gained notoriety for its shocking content and caused strong reactions at Cannes, including several people fainting. This film marked a turning point in Noé's career and preceded his collaboration with sound designer Ken Yasumoto on *Enter the Void*, for which Noé secured significant funding, making it his highest-budgeted film to date. The story follows Oscar, whose death triggers a journey through his disembodied consciousness. The narrative of *Enter the Void* explores themes of life, death, memory, trauma and altered states of mind, using subjective camera angles to immerse viewers in Oscar's memories. Inspired by his personal vision of certain visionary and dreamlike cinema, shaped by impressions of films he watched throughout his life, including his childhood, *Enter the Void* represents Noé's most ambitious and longest gestating project to date. It seems to be perhaps the most emblematic of his cinematic style and poetics. Continuing his collaboration with Yasumoto, Noé directed films that further expanded his immersive and sensory approach. In *Love* (2015), he explored love and heartbreak in 3D, incorporating explicit scenes of unsimulated sex to enhance the raw emotional experience. *Climax* (2018) depicts the chaos of a dance troupe with elements of psychological horror. *Lux Æterna* (2019) is an experimental metacinematic work that

2 James Quandt, "Flesh & Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema," *Artforum International Magazine* 42, no. 6 (2004): 126–32.

pushes the boundaries of traditional narrative cinema, merging the processes of filmmaking with the story itself to create a chaotic, disturbing and ultimately torturous sensory experience. *Vortex* (2021), which stands out for its documentary-style approach, focuses on aging and memory. Despite a seemingly more sober tone than Noé's previous works, the film retains a sophisticated tone, aided by the use of split screen, a technique previously explored in *Lux Æterna* (2019).

Despite his background in the visual arts, Gaspar Noé has developed specific preferences for sound, which in his films often creates a disturbing effect or induces an altered state of consciousness in the viewer, in accordance with his visual aesthetic. Not being a sound expert himself, he has always relied on trusted professionals, including Yasumoto for sound design and Thomas Bangalter for music. His choice of these experts was not driven by a search for a defined style, but rather by their alignment with his creative vision. He selects and retains his collaborators on the basis of their sensibility. In general, one of Noé's creative requirements is to work with a small crew, which fosters a collaborative and artisanal environment, but can also limit technical possibilities. Noé insists that sound work is done simultaneously with image editing, sometimes even during shooting, in order to optimize production time. This approach encourages a creative exchange between the visual and sound departments, enriching the production process. Noé's aesthetic, which is inextricably linked to the concept of chaos, is also reflected in the soundtrack (understood as all the audible sounds in the film), which was designed and tailored by Yasumoto. In *Enter the Void*, the "void" appears as an "impermanent" flow of sound, a complex web in which the abstract sounds of pre-existing concrete music, voices, environmental noises and music intertwine to form an indivisible whole within Oscar's subjective sphere. Although the subsequent films also take different approaches, they all aim to psychologically and emotionally immerse the viewer through images and sounds that convey more intimate and oneiric impressions than realistic and sharp representations.

Interview

SARA ARESU: *Your long collaboration with Gaspar Noé began with* Enter the Void. *The term "sound design," invented by Walter Murch, is ambiguous and often used with varying interpretations: what exactly did you handle in this film?*

KEN YASUMOTO: Initially, Walter Murch invented the term "sound design" to bypass union rules. But it fits well with Murch's approach to Coppola's films. He handles the entire soundscape from A to Z. He has a panoramic view of the film's sound, including dialogues, sound editing, Foley, music, etc. He may even get involved before shooting to anticipate recording setups. The term "sound designer" is often used now to refer to the person who creates non-naturalistic sounds that could be likened to music but are not necessarily melodic. Basically, anything between naturalistic sound editing and music. Strange sounds… But this interpretation of the term sound designer is not mine. I would be closer to Walter Murch or Wylie Stateman. For *Enter the Void*, I took care of the entire soundtrack. I did the sound editing, dialogue editing, recorded the ADR, Foley, assembled the music, and pre-mixed everything with the help of Nicolas Bourgeois, Alexis Durand, and Hiromune Kurahashi.

SA: *What were the main steps in the sound creation process? Can you outline the key stages from conception to final execution?*

KY: I started by editing the production sounds. Very quickly, I convinced Gaspar that we needed to post-synchronize a large part of the film. For example, the first part of the film up to Oscar's death is entirely post-synchronized. This allowed for greater freedom in voice processing. I didn't want to depend on the quality of the on-set recording. The direct sound from the shoot wasn't bad but not pure enough to be manipulated as I wanted. Then we recorded the Foley for this first part of the film. This was followed by two or three Foley sessions. I had to do the Foley in several stages because Gaspar initially didn't want any Foley. I managed to convince him gradually. He didn't want ADR either. By re-recording the dialogues and Foley, we had much more leeway to transform these sounds. Simultaneously, we did the sound editing. We also recorded sounds with Thomas Bangalter and his modular synth for an entire night. Thomas created sound material that we mainly used for the mandalas, those tibetan geometric figures that serve as transitions between different locations in the third part of the film (the astral vision part). I edited all these sounds (dialogues, effects, foley, etc.) and pre-mixed them simultaneously. One of the difficulties was that the image was constantly changing. New edits and new VFX all the time. Then we did the final mix with Lars Ginzel, but the image kept changing, which made the process quite complicated.

The key stages for me were the work on the voices, which I did very early in the process, and the first screenings of the film where I began to un-

derstand what Gaspar wanted. But I remember the process as extremely chaotic and exhausting for everyone. It's hard for me to precisely recall the "workflow" because I don't think there really was one. You could say I moved forward in a disorderly manner. I think the chaos and fatigue contributed to the creation of the sound and perhaps the film in general. The real key stage for me was a screening that went very badly. Gaspar felt I was not at all doing what he envisioned. I had assembled too many layers and other abstract sounds when it needed to be much simpler. Gaspar is very pragmatic. At first, I felt we had to do something very stylized or very "arty" given the extreme sophistication of the image. In fact, we had to create a soundtrack that was the image. The sound of this image. Exactly what Oscar hears. Not a single sound in the film is one that only the viewer hears (and that's why there's no film score). We hear what Oscar hears. Not what the camera hears but what Oscar hears, meaning what enters his ears but also and especially what is distorted by his brain (DMT intake, childhood memories, emotional memories with his sister, current emotions, fatigue, etc.). Even Delia Derbyshire's Bach Air is, to me, a music he hears in his head. So, it needed to be something very organic, very natural without necessarily being naturalistic.

Gaspar didn't explain this to me. I had to interpret it from his frustration after this catastrophic screening for me. That's why this screening was a key stage.

SA: *Could you describe the process of integrating the sounds produced by your work, the sound effects provided by Bangalter, and the film's music? I've read that Bangalter provided a "palette" of drones and music, but it's unclear if someone else processed or edited this material. Additionally, when listening to the soundtrack, it's hard to discern how these elements intertwine, especially considering the interaction of different voices and ambient sounds, such as street voices while Oscar is in his room or the overlay of Oscar's voice with the vortex sound during his "journey," followed by the phone sound bringing him back to reality after his hallucinations. Can you explain how this complexity was managed?*[3]

KY: As I mentioned earlier, there wasn't really an organized "process." I edited the sounds based on my whims and the urgencies. The palette provided

3 The questions were formulated with consideration of the interaction between these three elements: upon listening, it is difficult to distinguish and identify the overlaps. This can only be identified through a more detailed analysis, which was conducted afterward.

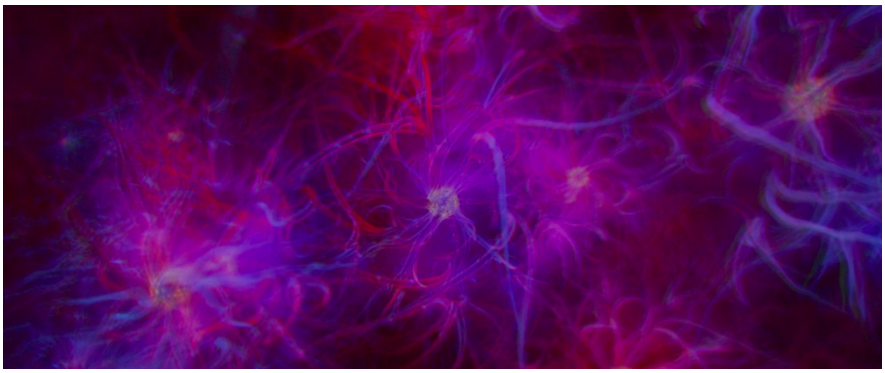

Fig. 1 – Psychedelic vision of Oscar's mental trip in *Enter the Void*: colorful fractals with ambient sounds, voices, and a pre-existing piece of experimental electroacoustic music.

by Thomas was very useful for the mandalas. However, he didn't provide any music. All the music in the film is pre-existing music (Delia Derbyshire, Christian Vogel, Throbbing Gristle, etc.) except for Thomas Bloch, who re-interpreted Bach on the glass harmonica for the film. I also created many sound effects like Thomas. When we worked with Thomas for this sound palette, the three of us (Gaspar, Thomas, and I) were in my studio. The sounds were created gradually through the night without a precise direction initially. Thomas started producing sounds, and we reacted to these sounds. I edited these effects based on the needs and desires of each scene afterward (mainly for the mandalas). What we had was really a sound palette.

The complexity is managed through a succession of layers and experimentation over time. There was no initial plan. Besides, there is never a plan like a musical score when doing film sound design. Our raw material is the "image" edit. I put "image" in quotes because the image edit always comes with an initial draft of sound editing and dialogue editing. It gives a direction. There are several ways to approach a film. For *Enter the Void*, I started with the dialogues. Work on the production sounds, ADR recordings, pre-mixing the voices. This allowed me to get into the film, give a color to the voices, and especially find the sound of Oscar's inner voice. What may seem complex in retrospect is not so much actually. The complexity arises from significant work on each sequence. We do, undo to redo, then prune, then have new ideas, etc. Sometimes what seems very complex is actually very simple. The final sequence, starting with the accident, Linda as a child crying, and leading into the Love Hotel, I edited quite quickly. If I remember correctly, I found this treatment of the voices from the first

Fig. 2 – Subjective perspective of Oscar being shot in *Enter the Void*, with the sounds of his heartbeat and his inner voice.

attempts. And this sound of the voices with slight distortion and echo set the tone for the rest of the sound layers.

SA: *In your previous discussions, you mentioned Gaspar Noé's desire for sound editing to be done* simultaneously *with image editing. I'd like to know if the same process was followed during the making of* Enter the Void.[4]

KY: With a few details aside, we indeed did both simultaneously.

SA: *Did you have the opportunity to review the film's script during the sound creation process? Given that Noé wrote very few dialogues, I'd like to know if you found any crucial elements or indications in the script to guide your choices in the film's sound design and environment. For example, were Oscar's heartbeat sounds at the moment of his death specified in the script, since this choice of internal sound was also present in his previous film,* Irreversible*?*

KY: I had the script in my possession, but I don't remember consulting it for sound creation. I would need to find and re-read it to verify, but I don't think so. I understood early on those internal sounds interested him because Gaspar gave me, when I arrived on the film, old vinyl records of internal sounds used to train doctors to detect heart malformations with a stethoscope.

SA: *Did you receive specific instructions from Gaspar Noé regarding the treatment of voices, such as Oscar's thoughts or his DMT trip, or the child's*

4 See Valeix, "Ken Yasumoto."

cry during the accident? Did you find creative solutions for treating these voices yourself?

KY: For the thoughts, we first recorded Nathan in the studio. Since I didn't yet know how we would treat the voice, I used several setups, different microphones to have different voice colors. Then I edited them, removing everything that doesn't exist when we think. Breathing or mouth noises. In our thoughts, we have a very "theoretical" voice. No organic noise.

What needs to be emphasized is that the actor's performance determines the success of the "thought" effect before any creative and/or technical solution.

Then Gaspar suggested overlaying the takes to give a disturbing superposition effect. So, we synchronized a second take of the same text word for word, creating a slight shift at times. It's not an echo; it's two different takes. It gives the impression that the thoughts are jostling in his head or that he is under the influence of drugs or very tired. You should know that Gaspar had already spent a lot of time on the voice-over of the butcher played by Philippe Nahon in *I Stand Alone*. He had already experimented with different processes.

I didn't have specific instructions for Linda's cries. As I said earlier, the treatment of the cries was relatively easy to find. I used an effect that I really liked called Echofarm. It simulates a tape echo. You can adjust the distortion, delay, and feedback. I don't know why I love this effect. I had used it for another film, and it seemed very suitable for these voices. It gives an analog feel and thus probably a natural one. The effect is oddly very strong and obvious but doesn't seem artificial. As if this sound could exist in nature.

Fig. 3 – Linda's crying in the first subjective memory of Oscar in *Enter the Void*.

SA: *Were there situations where the visual editing influenced the creative decisions in terms of sound, and vice versa, in* Enter the Void*?*

KY: Without visual editing, I can't think about sound. For me, it's inseparable. So, I would say 100% of the sound is influenced by the image. It's harder to say the other way around. I would tend to think yes to a certain degree, but I don't have any example that comes to mind.

SA: *What is the main aesthetic or narrative objectives you aimed to achieve through sound in this film?*

KY: For *Enter the Void*, as for other films, it's hard to think in terms of goals to be achieved. I feel that working with sound material reveals things to us as we progress in making the film. In some films, I can possibly create a constraint at first to approach the film from a certain angle. I would say that I set myself an objective from the start to work on the voices. To find the tone of the film through the voices. By spending whole nights recording Nathan, Paz, or Cyril with Gaspar in my small studio, I was also able to soak in the spirit of the film. I felt like I was with the film's characters. We worked at night, and the atmosphere of these recordings had some similarities with the film itself.

So, I'm not really answering the question. I think we found the film's aesthetic over time and through work. I can't say I aimed to achieve any particular goal.

SA: *In a recent interview, I learned that Gaspar Noé didn't intend to incorporate a sense of movement in the sound of his films.*[5] *However, considering that many viewers might expect an immersive audiovisual experience, especially with the commercialization of the DVD with 5.1 sound and the possibility of spatializing sound in motion, I was struck by the fact that in* Enter the Void*, the sound is mainly static in spatial terms. Do you know the reasons for this choice?*

KY: First, I must say that the term "immersive," which is very much used nowadays, doesn't resonate with me at all. It's used in every possible way and doesn't mean much anymore. Let's first talk about the broadcasting format. The film is mixed in 5.1 for its "theatrical" release (for the cinema). This is just a technical format. This means there are 6 possible tracks corresponding, to simplify, each to a speaker (Left, Center, Right, Left surround,

5 See Valeix, "Ken Yasumoto."

Right surround, and Low-Frequency Effects). If we want, we can put sound only in the center and nothing on the other tracks. It's like deciding to make a film in black and white even though color is technically possible. It's an artistic choice.

When we make the DVD or Blu-ray, we don't touch the spatialization of the cinema mix. The idea is to stay faithful to the "theatrical" version's mix. We usually modify the dynamics, so the viewer doesn't constantly play with the remote-control volume.

In general, Gaspar doesn't like when the sound overflows from the image and when the sound moves within the image. I don't have an explanation for this choice, which he has always asserted. It's a matter of taste. He is not against some occasional overflows in the surrounds. In *Climax*, there is a lot of music in the surrounds. Some elements (mainly music) move, but it's imperceptible. I tried to synchronize these movements with the sensations one might have while watching the film, which makes the movements more natural.

I think the immersive aspect of *Enter the Void* is not technical in the sense that we would put sound everywhere to immerse the viewer in an enveloping atmosphere. The immersion must be emotional. It plays out in the texture of sounds and voices, the depth of sound fields within the image. Sound immersion also calls a lot on the memories of sound sensations we all have. For example, in a nightclub scene (there are several in *Enter the Void*), the accuracy of reproducing the sensations we had ourselves in a nightclub is more important than the strict reproduction of nightclub sound. It's the difference between a faithful capture of nightclub sound and an interpretation of what the character might feel. What we seek is the character's point of view, not to immerse the viewers in a nightclub. The difference is sometimes subtle.

In *Enter the Void*, the image is so subjective that it's unnecessary to use sound artifices to create a kind of immersion that would likely be too objective. If there is immersion, it would be an immersion in the character's head and not in the filmed locations. The viewers don't hear the microphone that would be attached to the camera, but they hear the sounds distorted by Oscar's emotions. Does Oscar think in 3D? I don't know…

SA: *You yourself have admitted that you are not a big fan of surround sound, such as Atmos technology, unless justified. And you also said that, used to*

"mono" (which is actually stereo) when working with Gaspar Noé, you ended up getting used to it. Is that the case?[6]

KY: It's a little lie. I like using the surrounds, but Gaspar made me realize that we always need to question the relevance of a setup. Should we use the 6 channels just because there are 6? Should we use the entire audible spectrum (20–20,000 Hz) just because we can? Should we be faithful to reality? Our first reflex when a technical innovation is offered to us (like Atmos, for example) is to try to imitate the real world. A plane passes in the sky, so we make the plane sound move through the ceiling speakers in the cinema. Once we've explored the possibilities of the proposed setup, we need to move to the questioning stage. And we need to try to play with it, perhaps even subvert it. Atmos is often used for "immersion" and precision in placing sounds in space and spectrum. Can't we use this setup to create chaos and blur instead?

SA: *Now let's talk about collaboration in general in other films. Following the previous question, have you noticed significant influences on your style and choices as a sound designer due to your collaboration with Gaspar Noé? How has working with Noé shaped your approach to sound design and influenced your creative decisions in other projects?*

KY: I partially answer this question in the previous response. In fact, my way of working has changed because or thanks to Gaspar because I'm hired because of my collaboration with him. The directors who trust me are seeking a bit of Gaspar in me. What Gaspar taught me is a form of simplicity and, oddly enough, a certain pragmatism. I rediscovered the artisanal aspect of filmmaking, the pleasure of working as a team (a small team).

SA: *As you mentioned, the team led by Noé has been the same for years, and you described it as a kind of artistic collective. Did you find this way of working starting with* Enter the Void*, and has it gradually consolidated?*

KY: *Enter the Void* is a bit of an exception in Gaspar's films. It's his biggest budget. Moreover, it's my first film with him. The work was collective, but I really felt part of this collective starting with *Love*. I hope this way of working consolidates over time with the films, but it shouldn't become synonymous with routine.

6 See Valeix, "Ken Yasumoto."

SA: *As you explained, working with Gaspar Noé is a layered process in which image and sound editing take place simultaneously and evolve toward the final result. This also suggests a great deal of freedom in your role. During this process, have you made a choice or proposal that influenced visual editing decisions, or was there always a kind of priority given to the visual aspect?*

KY: To the extent that my work in 99% of cases begins with receiving the image edit, one could say that priority is given to the image. Without the image edit, there wouldn't be any sound work. I don't know of any film conceived around sound. There are certainly experiments, but I don't have an example in "classic" fiction cinema. However, in Gaspar's films, there is significant interaction between sound and image.

That said, I can't provide a specific example of sound work that influenced the image. Once the process starts, the interaction is constant. We influence each other mutually. My freedom is considerable, but this freedom is framed by Gaspar's universe. I know his tastes and make proposals within that framework. In *Enter the Void*, there were times when Gaspar categorically rejected my proposals. This film was, in a way, my apprenticeship into his universe through a series of stinging failures.

SA: *Did Bangalter participate in the selection of the pre-existing music? Or were all the pieces selected by Noé?*[7]

KY: Thomas did not participate to the choice of the music. They are all music pieces found by Gaspar. Thomas did this one-day sound effects session with his modular synth; he organized the recording with Thomas Bloch and gave us a selection of Glass Harmonica sounds.

SA: *The oneiric and psychedelic sound returns in* Love *during the ayahuasca scene, but the film as a whole remains anchored in a lucid narration of Murphy's grief, fully aware of his loss. His inner voice reflects the difficulty of expressing sorrow, while sound elements such as little Gaspar's voice, Electra's cries, and the telephone—a symbol of incommunicability—draw the viewer into discomfort. In this context, a dreamlike dimension could perhaps evoke*

7 This question was formulated later, based on previous answers, and is the final question of the first part of the interview. The second part focused on new aspects of Noé's filmography, with more targeted and detailed questions aimed at exploring specific themes. These questions were shaped by Yasumoto's explanations of his creative process and work methods shared earlier in the interview.

the illusion of a possible remedy, but in Love*, reality is inescapable and not just a bad dream. In your sound design work, can it be said that you have achieved a balance between the objective dimension of reality and the inner one?*

KY: Yes, I think we found a good balance. Achieving this kind of balance isn't very difficult given the nature of the images and the editing. In a way, Gaspar's direction speaks for itself. I edited and mixed *Love* out of sequence; the first scene I worked on was the one with the meeting at the Buttes Chaumont park, followed, if I remember correctly, by a breakfast scene with Omi and Murphy. At no point did we discuss the objective versus the inner dimension of the scenes with Gaspar. There was a sense of obviousness. This is often the case in Gaspar's direction. In a way, it's enough to follow the images, and things naturally fall into place. Gaspar Noé's cinematic language is clear enough to understand the direction to take with the sound.

SA: *Noé said that his initial intention was to shoot a silent film, and that now he can no longer imagine the film without that soundtrack.*[8] *He stated that he chose the tracks during the editing phase. Were the track selections presented to you as final from the beginning, or did you both go through an experimentation process during editing to evaluate their effectiveness? Were any of the initial musical proposals later discarded? Can you explain how this process unfolded? Additionally, apart from the slow motion adopted for the dance scene, which allowed you to overcome the rhythmic affinity issue with Pink Floyd's "Is There Anybody Out There?" and to suspend chronological needs, it usually seems that the music is used as commentary but is always subordinate to the images timing, fading out before the track ends. Can you explain how this relationship between music and editing was managed?*

KY: No, the musical selections are neither presented as final nor as provisional. Once they're in the edit, they're considered more or less final, though we know very well that things can change over the course of editing. Quite often, we don't get the authorization to use certain pieces we initially wanted. This happens frequently in film production. We choose music, but rights holders sometimes refuse permission for various reasons, or the pieces are simply too expensive for the film's budget.

The music work begins with the selection during the picture edit. Gaspar chooses tracks he tries out in the edit. He often asks me to mix the music to make it "source," meaning diegetic. I mix it with an effect to make it sound like it's coming from a nightclub, for example, or from a neighboring apart-

8 "Gaspar Noé talks about *Love*," DVD extras in *Love*, Koch Media, 2022, Italian edition.

ment, and then I send it back to the picture edit. The picture then returns to me, and I rework the mix. Sometimes we re-time the music, and the mix can change or amplify the effect intended by that music. There aren't really strict rules on managing the relationship between music and editing; each scene is treated differently. I suggest a way to mix the music to Gaspar, he listens, asks for adjustments, or approves it. Sometimes he even gives me instructions before I mix.

Ultimately, the process is quite simple. Occasionally, the timing and mixing of the music are immediately evident, but more often, we experiment with various timings and mixes until we're satisfied with the result.

SA: *In his musical choices, Noé seems to draw from his own "catalog," creating a sort of compilation based on his personal tastes. In* Love*, the inclusion of some pre-existing film scores somewhat resembles the use of his personal collection of movie posters. It doesn't appear to be a case of true citations. For instance, the use of "School at Night" from* Profondo rosso *during a sex scene evokes, with its timbre, a sweet and innocent sound on one hand, while on the other, the sinister melodic development creates an atmosphere of "sensual horror." This duality seems to represent the nightmare of a broken condom and the arrival of a child in a clandestine relationship. Were these contrasts intentionally sought to generate a subtle emotional and semantic tension, or was the choice more instinctive, without precise conceptual planning?*

KY: Each piece of music is chosen with great care. They are always connected either to the narrative, the characters, or what they are experiencing. Sometimes, they're chosen simply because they are beautiful or because they naturally fit the scene. I don't think we can distinguish between intentional and instinctive choices. Music selection is the result of research, trial, discussion, even debate—it's never as straightforward as pre-planning or pure instinct. This applies to music and any other sound or visual element; it's not simply planned or instinctual. Filmmaking, in my view, is far more complex than that.

It's important to remember that filmmaking is primarily a collective effort. The decisions made aren't one-directional. It's not just a matter of the director setting a plan that everyone else then executes. A film in progress is like a living organism, constantly nourished by everyone's ideas. Of course, there are exceptions, like *Climax*. In that kind of film, the music choices have to be made in advance for obvious reasons.

Fig. 4 – Murphy in *Love*, after cheating on Electra with Omi, discovers the broken condom as "School at Night" from *Profondo Rosso* plays.

SA: *Let's talk about* Climax. *A common thread seems to run through Noé's films, and this is often a sonic prerogative—*Climax *begins with the music of Satie, a composer already featured in the soundtrack of* Love*—accompanying a scene of desperation. The film opens with the first movement of the* Trois Gymnopédies*, presented here with an electronic sound, softened by the fluidity of the portamento of the synthesizers from Gary Numan. The combination of images, anguished screams, barking dogs, and music creates a powerful contrast, where beauty seems to prevail over pain. Was this continuity between* Love *and* Climax *intentional?*[9] *Furthermore, were the extradiegetic pieces, such as this opening track and "Mad" by Coh for the finale scene, chosen by Noé during the editing phase or were they already predetermined?*

KY: No, the continuity wasn't intentional. If it were, Gaspar never made it explicit. Only the songs the characters dance to were chosen beforehand, for obvious reasons related to the actors' movements and dancing on set. The rights had to be negotiated in advance.

SA: *The material you worked with in* Climax *is predominantly musical, along with the characters' voices. There is significant attention to the spatial component, given the linearity of the story, which unfolds over a few hours, and the continuous change of the listening perspective that follows the camera. This approach is more "objective" compared to* Enter the Void *but maintains a psychological immersiveness. As the film progresses, the music and sounds*

9 Gaspar Noé's films are often interconnected, with openings that visually or sonically echo the endings of previous works, creating a subtle continuity through aesthetic or narrative details.

seem to increasingly occupy the space of the scene, conveying a sense of obsession, loss of control, and chaos. The musical choices and the treatment of the tracks evolve along with the emotional alteration of the characters: for instance, the persistent kick in the distance and Tito's screams lingering in the background during the piece Voices*, the sound of wind and storm belonging to an external space, perceived as an inaccessible escape and a symbol of isolation. Was this immersive method planned from the outset to engage the viewer, or did it take shape during the editing phase? And considering the choreographed scenes, which require music to be played on set, how were the sound recordings and post-production work managed?*

KY: Personally, I don't work with the spectator in mind. I don't ask myself whether they'll feel immersed or not. What matters to me is that what I edit and mix is satisfying to me, to Gaspar, and to the rest of the team.

The immersion you feel is neither planned nor accidental—it's the very nature of the film. It goes beyond sound design. The film is a claustrophobic piece intended to be oppressive and anxiety-inducing. Gaspar creates an emotional immersion, and the sound immersion flows naturally from that. It's relatively easy to implement as a result.

Trying to immerse the audience in an environment when the film doesn't call for it would be pointless. We see this in quite a few films, and it creates an absurd disconnect. Just because we technically can immerse the audience with the tools we have, doesn't mean we should.

The characters' evolution and the group's growing madness lead naturally to a kind of intensity in sound and image. What can be challenging is understanding what the director is aiming for.

Fig. 5 – The opening credits of *Climax*, accompanied by Satie's music, with the sound of a barking dog and the woman's desperate crying.

I recorded the dialogue on set while playing the music at a fairly high volume. I kept some of these recordings, but we post-synced many of the lines afterward (those after the credits and the sangria scene). Usually, for nightclub dialogue scenes, we don't play music during the dialogue. On *Climax*, though, we wanted to maintain a certain intensity and tension on set, so we played the music to keep the actors in the true conditions of the story.

SA: *In a scene of delirium in the corridors, "Tainted Love" can be heard in the distance (maybe from the boombox, after the blackout). There is a noticeable sound band that modulates downward, creating an effect of loss of altitude and balance. This phenomenon seems to be a distinctive feature of the sound poetics of Noé's cinema and somewhat reminiscent of a Shepard-Risset Glissando; these sounds are, in a sense, destabilizing. They were also present in* Ritual*, but what is interesting is that they already appear in the tracks chosen by the director. The musical fragments extracted from the pieces seem to have been selected specifically to include these sound effects integrated into the music. Is this how it works? What can you say about this?*

KY: I'm not sure if we can talk about a "sonic poetics" in Noé's cinema, but it's true that the effects are chosen or crafted to blend with the music. We approach the soundtrack as a cohesive whole. There are multiple layers, but ultimately, we need to hear a single unified sound. It's as if a microphone on the camera captured the madness and energy of the characters and situations without distinguishing between the different layers. That's why the music is always mixed as "source." All the sounds heard are also heard by the characters. There's no film score or overarching sound design acting as commentary on the scene.

There's a documentary-like aspect to the sound, though it's a fake documentary.

SA: *In* Lux Æterna*, where you briefly appear as yourself, the first line that opens the scene is "Can we stop that hell?" in which Béatrice seems to be referring to a disturbing noise on set, which is then turned off. When the lighting system goes haywire, the RGB strobe effect is synchronized with a sound band and an acoustic flicker. In* Enter the Void*, you talked about a sound that is the image; here, however, in an even more essential way, we have the sound of light. The effect inspired by* The Flicker *by Conrad reappears, which has been used in other films by Noé, but while in the past it was accompanied by music, in this case, were you the one who created the disturbing sound effect? Also, in* Climax*, at the moment when little Tito is electrocuted and*

Fig. 6 – Moment of chaos in *Lux Æterna* where RGB strobes flicker synchronized to diegetic sound, disturbing the characters on set.

the blackout occurs, the RGB flickering seems to anticipate this audiovisual synchronization.

KY: Yes, I created the sound effect. I designed several sharp electronic sounds and gave them to Gaspar, who synced them with the flicker's rhythm. Then I took that edit back and added additional sound design and mixing effects.

I'm not sure if the flickering effect in *Climax* was a precursor to *Lux Æterna*, but Gaspar certainly likes this type of visual effect. This kind of effect can induce an altered state of consciousness, a hypnotic effect. Gaspar has always been interested in this kind of visual and auditory experiment.

SA: *Being a form of metacinema and recounting a moment of backstage on a film set, we see the same professionals involved in the shooting as "victims" of this torture. However, as Noé and Béatrice Dalle clarify in the commentary for the film, the chaotic scene was "fortunately" shot without sound.*[10] *In the end, it is always the viewer who suffers from it. Did working on those images disturb you or provoke unpleasant effects?*

KY: It's always easier to tolerate something when you control it yourself. I can't say it caused any unpleasant effects for me.

In this case, though, the idea was to provoke a reaction of discomfort in the audience, which contradicts what I said earlier about not focusing on the viewers' experience.

10 "Brand New Audio Commentary by Writer/Director Gaspar Noé and Actress Béatrice Dalle," DVD extras in *Lux Æterna*, Arrow Films, 2022, DVD.

SA: *In your previous interview, you explored many technical aspects of your work on* Vortex. *There is a catalog of sound elements that seems to have been selected to best describe the life of this elderly couple in a Paris apartment. The radio program from the alarm clock and how it resonates in the room, the typewriter, the moka pot, the sound of the gas from the stove, the toilet flushing, the blood pressure monitor, the slow dragging footsteps—these are all sounds that emerge during prolonged moments devoid of dialogue and are particularly effective in recreating the atmosphere of an almost documentary representation of the life of two elderly people, belonging to a past generation focused more on the essentials and centered on the difficulties related to health. Were these sound choices targeted from the outset, or did they arise as a consequence of the visual and scenic decisions?*

KY: Since these objects appear on screen, I had to work on their sound. Each one contributes to the narrative, visually and sonically.

If the question is whether they were planned for sound before filming, I don't think so—not by me, and I doubt Gaspar thought specifically about their sounds. The only exception is the radio alarm clock, where the sound is part of the staging. The set and props are, of course, chosen in advance, selected by Gaspar. These props naturally come with associated sounds, and our goal is to find a perfect match between the visual and the added sound, as well as to create a dramatic or narrative effect.

We spent a lot of time finding the right sound for the radio program. I think we changed programs at one point due to rights issues, and then it took a while to find the right distortion effect. Additionally, mixing the radio sound was a bit complex. I had to make the sound realistic according to the characters' movements around the apartment, while ensuring certain phrases or words from the radio remained clear.

For the other sounds, I sometimes highlighted the objects on set to enhance the atmosphere or emphasize specific situations.

I can't quite remember why, but the moka pot sound isn't from the shoot. I recorded it at home because I needed a particular type of sound that wasn't there in the original recording.

SA: *In* Vortex*, you also managed the "on the air" music and sounds, adapting them to the spatial context of the scenes. The piece by Ennio Morricone, "Se sei qualcuno è colpa mia," is played in the environment where Stéphane is located, but it is also very effective as an emotional commentary, perhaps due to the use of split screen. On one side, we see Françoise Lebrun in a different environment, where the music is external to her physical experience. This*

interesting combination, often present in the film, causes the music (or sound in general) to once again cross the barrier between diegesis and extradiegesis, amplifying the emotional involvement and complexity of the scene. Do you agree with this ambiguity, and if so, do you have any reflections on this effect?

KY: This ambiguity is almost constant in Gaspar's films. He's not a big fan of traditional film scores. A significant part of the mixing process on his films is devoted to blending the music. He likes to place the music within the setting itself—what we call "source music." Gaspar is as attentive to the music as he is to its mix and its spatial integration. Finding the right balance between the realism of sound and its dramatic effect is often lengthy and complex. Even music that's meant to be mixed like a film score might be mixed as if it's coming from the neighbor's place, for example.

This likely comes from Gaspar's appreciation for documentary style. Both music and non-musical sounds are integrated into the environment and are rarely non-diegetic.

SA: *When Dario Argento is in the hospital bed, we hear the "beep" of the medical equipment monitoring vital functions and heart rate while he wears an oxygen mask. There is a sort of reference to the internal bodily sounds used earlier, as in* Enter the Void*, or in films that preceded your collaboration, such as* Irréversible *and even* We Fuck Alone *(although this time, the character "dies" alone). In* Vortex*, this hospital sound appears more documentary-like than cinematic, coming across as more real, technological, and anempathetic. When the character dies, we don't hear the usual flat and continuous sound, but rather a brief signal of two notes in a descending minor third interval. The effect is very strong, almost like a "game over." How did you obtain this sound? Was it simply from a medical device, or was there a more careful selection involved?*

KY: This sound is from an actual machine recorded at the hospital where we filmed. With the help of the film's medical advisor, I recorded the heart monitor. I simply used the authentic sound that fit this kind of situation. In this case, I'd say we were lucky because this beeping was perfect for creating the effect we wanted. We could have created a different sound or recorded another machine, but the quality of this sound comes from its realism combined with a kind of emotional precision.

SA: *During the shooting of* Vortex*, you were also working on Lucile Hadžihalilović' s film* Earwig*. Beyond the biographical and artistic connection*

Fig. 7 – The character played by Dario Argento in *Vortex* dies in a hospital bed hooked up to vital signs monitor.

with Noé, each director pursues their own style and poetics. However, certain aspects allow us to draw associations. For instance, let's talk about the resonances of glass, a material that plays a central role in the diegesis, evoking impressions of fragmented memories typical of trauma and manifesting as light, sound, and matter in all its sensory qualities. This synesthesia, with its strongly immersive character, is linked to the use of rare instrumental sonorities, such as the Cristal Baschet, played by Nicolas Becker (not to mention the use of Ondes Martenot for the original score). In Noé's Enter the Void*, something similar happens, for example, in the lamp store where Linda touches the colored crystals against the glassy notes of Bach's Air as performed by Thomas Bloch. It seems almost possible to identify a trend in this approach, and in Hadžihalilović's film, the entire narrative structure is subjected to these symbolic and mysterious dynamics. What was your contribution to this synesthetic approach? Additionally, do you think we can identify an aesthetic or a trend in the use of rare instruments as well?*

KY: I believe synesthesia is what we aim for in all circumstances—it's not limited to specific effects. I always try to blend the senses so that a sound isn't simply heard as a sound, but rather as a memory, a feeling, an image, or even a scent. Likewise, images can evoke sounds without those sounds actually being present. This complex interplay between sound and image is something we work on. We also use sensory dissociation to create contrasts.

Fig. 8 – The character in *Earwig* picks up the phone and takes part in one of the mysterious conversations of the film.

A synesthetic approach is the foundation of what we do. I think Gaspar and Lucile share a common musical and cinematic culture. Their appreciation for rare instruments comes from their interest in contemporary music. Lucile certainly tends to use rare instruments, though I wouldn't say the same for Gaspar.

SA: *Even the ring of the telephone, referring to a device from the mid-twentieth century, clearly has a resonant tail. But it is mainly the background noise of the receiver during Albert's mysterious conversations that seems to open up another distressing dimension, leaving a subjective interpretive glimpse for the audience. The director has stated that she includes many sound descriptions in her scripts, using few dialogues, while relying on sounds and music to create the allegorical world of her films, focusing on these elements in their subjective aspect, far from objective realism.*[11] *In* Earwig, *there are "materializing" sounds, such as the creaking floor, chattering teeth, the ticking of a pendulum clock, the sound of paper, and hyper-diegetic effects like the background noise of the telephone conversation. Were these details present in the script?*

KY: The script for *Earwig* did indeed contain more sound cues than a typical screenplay. Sounds like the clock, the clinking of teeth, the finger on the crystal glass, and the train were mentioned, but not in detail. For example,

11 Alison Taylor and John Edmond, "Film Rituals: Interview with Lucile Hadžihalilović," *Senses of Cinema* 102 (August 2022), https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2022/the-natural-models-of-lucile-hadzihalilovic/film-rituals-interview-with-lucile-hadzihalilovic.

it might say "a clock sound resonates" or "the sound of glass teeth," without specifying the type, intensity, or "color" of the sound.

On the other hand, sounds like the phone ringing and most other effects weren't specified in the script—they were developed during post-production.

In conclusion, I'd say it's quite challenging to explain the choice of sounds or mixing decisions made on Gaspar Noé's films—or any director's, for that matter. We don't analyze our choices; they arise from listening, experience, and personal taste. There's no theorizing involved—the concept is simply the film in front of us. It's an alchemical process. We create, undo, and redo endlessly until we reach a point where "it works." That feeling of "it works" is elusive—that's the alchemy.

REVIEW-ESSAY

Performing *Eno*: Generative Music as a Biopic

Niccolò Galliano

Review-essay of the generative documentary *Eno*, directed by Gary Hustwit. Brendan Dawes (director of programming), Mary Farbrother (director of photography). Generative software by Anamorph. Screened at Sheffield DocFest on Sunday, June 16, 2024.

It can be quite hard to summarize Brian Eno's artistic arc, even for experienced connoisseurs of his recording catalog. Eno is a composer, a music producer, a singer/songwriter, and the alleged inventor of ambient music—or, at least, the term's coiner. He has been an essential collaborator of groundbreaking pop artists such as David Bowie and the Talking Heads, but also of more mainstream acts like U2, Coldplay, and lately EDM's rising star Fred Again. At the same time, he's also praised in contemporary music circles: in 2023 he received the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement at the Venice Music Biennale "for his research into the quality, beauty and diffusion of digital sound and for his conception of the acoustic space as a compositional instrument."[1] Interestingly enough, the festival's statement did not mention his fundamental endeavor in popular music but rather presented him as a "traditional" composer within the lineage of avant-garde music and sound art. This is a revealing clue of Eno's multifaceted artistic and human identity. He's notoriously the author of the Windows 98 starting sound and an activist for Palestinian rights, a pop icon and a political thinker. The fact that he cannot be reduced to clear-cut and coherent traits is at the very core of his whole persona. Therefore, the idea of depicting him in an ever-evolving, always different biographical documentary seems particularly fitting.

1 "The 2023 Lion Awards for Music," *La Biennale di Venezia*, accessed November 26, 2024, https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/2023-lion-awards-music.

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Eno, the film, was directed by Gary Hustwit and premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2024. As mentioned, it is no ordinary documentary. Every screening is unique and differs from the previous, because the movie is edited live by a special software tapping into a vast digital repository that includes archival footage, music videos, behind-the-scenes clips, and new interviews with Eno alongside former and current collaborators. Thanks to more than 500 hours of original footage granted by the musician's personal archive, any episode in his life—whether a major achievement or some private moment—can surface at any point, suppressing traditional chronological continuity in favor of a layered temporality in which everything happens simultaneously. As a result, the movie is not a typical career-spanning documentary but can be better described as a philosophical journey into Eno's artistic mind, exploring his perspectives on universal themes like creativity, technology, and politics.

This approach enables the film to avoid many clichés of the biopic genre, particularly the tendency to compress a complex life story into a conventional narrative structure. As noted in various reviews, Eno was never interested in participating in a biographical film about himself, often finding such projects unbearably one-dimensional. However, when he received a proposal from Hustwit—with whom he had previously collaborated on a film about designer Dieter Rams—to create a documentary inspired by the same generative principles rooted in his music, he became intrigued, as the project offered an opportunity to critically engage with his decades-long career without indulging in futile celebrations. The director had teamed up with digital artist Brendan Dawes to develop software that could edit sequences in real-time, resulting in multiple versions of the same film that varied with every screening. For the two of them, who co-founded the start-up Anamorph to produce the movie, mechanical reproduction is nothing more than a technical limitation, a by-product of how analog technology used to operate (reels as mass-produced physical objects, duplicated in hundreds of copies and projected in countless movie theatres, etc.). In contrast—at least according to this technology-enthusiast narrative—digital media allows us to envision cinema as a fluid art form, where the work constantly evolves rather than being merely reproduced. As Hustwit puts it, "We've created a system in which the film can create itself."[2]

2 Val Cameron, "Film Director and Producer Gary Hustwit: *Eno*," uploaded on January 27, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkQTKq_A51g&t=1123s&ab_channel=IAmValCameron.

Due to these distinctive features, it would be impossible to discuss *Eno* without addressing its technological dimension. This is evidenced by the numerous reviews that, rather than focusing on the film's subject, delve into its generative nature, try to explain it to the general public, and speculate on its upcoming potential within the film industry. An early article from *Variety* even erroneously mentions the film's reliance on generative AI, tying it to the current AI-mania that has infiltrated every field of cultural production.[3] Actually, *Eno* does not use artificial intelligence models to generate audiovisual material from text prompts; however, the reference to cutting-edge technology is a symptom of its relevance in the public discourse. This revived interest in technology could be seen as a modern iteration of the "cinema of attractions," the earliest experiments in cinematic expression when the functioning of the medium still had a major role in its attractiveness to the audience. Yet, in this case the form and content of the film intertwine, generating a fascinating and synchronous relationship. Eno's concept of creativity is embedded in the film's technology and interacts with it on multiple levels to create a self-sustaining meta-narrative. The very notion of "generative art" has been at the core of his work for decades, along with the idea of using machines as creative tools to cooperate with.

The musician's first experiments with generative practices began in the mid-1970s, particularly with albums like *Discreet Music* (Obscure, 1975) and *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (EG, 1978) where he used the tape machine to generate short loops of recorded sound out of various musical sources (piano, vocal parts, synths). In these compositions, the interaction between loops gave rise to unexpected melodic combinations, which were then re-processed through delay and echo effects, producing an ever-changing musical ambiance that, as he famously stated, was intended to be "as ignorable as it is interesting."[4] Although this is generally regarded as the foundation of the ambient music genre, Eno's approach—whether consciously or not—drew from principles circulating in the experimental music scene at least since the previous decade. In the manifesto *Music as a Gradual Process*,[5] Steve Reich had already explored the concept of processes through which a composition can evolve autonomously and progressively: examples

3 Todd Gilchrist, "How AI Persuaded Brian Eno to Participate in Gary Hustwit's Documentary About His Life," *Variety*, January 16, 2024, https://variety.com/2024/film/features/brian-eno-documentary-gary-hustwit-ai-1235870677/.

4 Brian Eno, liner notes for *Ambient Music 1: Music for Airports*, EG AMB 001, 1978.

5 Steve Reich, "Music as a Gradual Process," *Writings on Music, 1965–2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34–6.

of this style include Reich's *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966), as well as Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1968), pieces in which the resulting musical material emerges from the interplay between human and non-human agencies (in this case, the composer and the tape recorder)—thus giving birth to a "generative" work of art.

Of course, generative principles are not exclusive to experimental music, but permeate an entire approach found across twentieth- and twenty-first-century arts (and even earlier). Writers such as William Burroughs and Brion Gysin or visual artists like Sol LeWitt and Ellsworth Kelly developed autonomous systems to come up with cultural products that pushed the boundaries of conceptual art in its traditional form. Drawing on these experiences, in 2003 art scholar Philip Galanter gave a definition of generative art that has since become widely popular:

> Generative art refers to any art practice in which the artist uses a system, such as a set of natural language rules, a computer program, a machine, or other procedural invention, that is set into motion with some degree of autonomy, thereby contributing to or resulting in a completed work of art.[6]

The most important aspect is that the artist gives up a degree of control to an external system, which can be either analog or digital, technical or conceptual. As Galanter explains, generative art is uncoupled from any specific technology: just as contemporary computer art, millennium-old basket weaving—created through memorized, humanly executed algorithms—could also be regarded as generative. What's interesting is that this diversity of approaches is reflected in Eno's artistic research as well, as he has consistently relied on generative techniques throughout his entire career. In the past fifteen years, he has been involved in developing iOS apps like *Bloom* (2008) and *Reflection* (2017) that give rise to endless musical compositions on the spot allowing users to contribute to the resulting material through touch-screen controls. However, Eno's interest in generative methods is not fueled solely by the digital realm. Back in 1975, evidently inspired by the *I Ching*, he had already published his *Oblique Strategies* (together with artist Peter Schmidt), an experimental method for sparking creative ideas consisting of 55 cards, each featuring enigmatic phrases, suggestions,

6 Philip Galanter, "Generative Art Theory," *A Companion to Digital Art*, ed. Christiane Paul, (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 151.

and prompts—like "Faced with a choice, do both" or "What are you really thinking about just now?"[7]

Eno, then, seems something of a culmination of this journey, applying generative principles not only to sound and visual art but also to a feature film. But how is the documentary related to the musician's previous production? Does it play with *Oblique Strategies* too, composing itself every different time? The impression is that *Eno* flows in a musical way. According to Hustwit, individual scenes were edited leaving open possibilities about where they would fit in the narrative arc, thus supporting the generative process and its recombinant structurality. In terms of formal features, the film follows a loose three-part structure, with the beginning and end being relatively fixed, while the path between them is constantly recomposed. This is achieved through meticulous mapping of the footage combined with a sense of narrative that is coded directly into the technology. As Hustwit explains, "It's not just metadata, it's emotional data."[8] The software—which was named Brain One, cleverly anagramming Eno's name—uses a taxonomy of narrative elements to construct a story, establishing its rhythm and sense of progression. Mathematically, it can generate 52 quintillion possible versions before repeating itself. This means that no one, not even the director, can be certain of what's going to be included in a specific rendition of *Eno*. To complicate this further, the material the software draws on is constantly being updated, with newly discovered footage added to the dataset, so that the movie is still evolving after its premiere and first runs of screenings—being, as I write, in its fourth generation.

The challenge of reviewing such an erratic movie arises again when transitioning from a discussion of its form to its content. Of course, I can only speak from my personal experience, having attended one screening at Sheffield DocFest in June 2024. The opening scene showed Eno at home, introducing the concept of generative composition and comparing it to a plant, where you sow the seeds and watch it grow on its own. From there, the software compiled a fascinating assortment of moments from his career presented in a non-chronological order, featuring the stories behind his most acclaimed records, his discovery of the EMS "Synthi" synthesizer in the early 1970s, his collaboration with David Bowie in Berlin, and a reflection on experiencing the past through his notebooks ("paying attention to what

7 *Oblique Strategies*, accessed November 28, 2024, https://stoney.sb.org/eno/oblique.html.

8 "B–1 and the First Generative Feature Film," *Teenage Engineering*, accessed November 28, 2024, https://teenage.engineering/now#B-1.

you've been paying attention to"). Generally speaking, the movie is suffused with a typical "Enoesque" atmosphere—part international wokeism with a touch of old political counterculture, part Apple intuitive user experience with sleek, polished aesthetics. At times, it feels like watching an uplifting version of a Black Mirror episode, where people's relationship with technology is finally enhancing their lives rather than ruining them. We see Eno at his iMac getting angry at YouTube commercials, before listening to doo-wop songs from his childhood and praising the internet for its democratic potential to connect us to objects from our past. In other parts the tone gets rather philosophical, as the composer delves into existential questions such as "Why do we like music?" and "Why do we want art at all?"

As I learned only after the screening, midway through any rendition of the film, there is a scene where a different guest reads one of a dozen cards from the *Oblique Strategies* deck. The text then supposedly influences what follows in the movie, with live editing responding to the card's input and creating a pivotal generative moment. In the version I saw, the reader was multimedia artist Laurie Anderson, who picked a card that read "Do nothing for as long as possible," followed by a few seconds of her silently staring into the camera—arguably, the most Laurie Anderson thing she could have done. The immediately following sequence showed Eno's encounter with new-age musician Laraaji, with whom he would later collaborate on the album *Ambient 3: Day of Radiance* (EG, 1980). Eno first saw him in New York, while Laraaji was playing the dulcimer in Washington Square Park. He simply stood there, listening to the soothing soundscape created by the instrument. After the performance ended, he suggested producing a record for him. Could this be considered an example of doing nothing as an artistic act, or am I seeing a connection between the two sequences where there was none?

This brings us to a key issue concerning the film. Ultimately, it's the audience that seeks out patterns and assigns coherent meaning to *Eno*'s narrative arc. One of the film's greatest strengths is indeed its ability to transform the viewer's experience from passive to active. Being aware of the film's generative nature makes those who watch it more self-reflective about their role. As film critic and scholar Charlotte Kent observes, "What *Eno* made evident ... is that a generative film forces a viewer to be more aware of the contingency of their viewing."[9] The spectator's gaze turns towards itself.

9 Charlotte Kent, "Generative Film's Potential: *Eno*," *The Brooklyn Rail* (September 2024), https://brooklynrail.org/2024/09/art-technology/generative-art-s-potential-em-eno-em-through-my-lens/.

Fig. 1 – Laurie Anderson doing nothing. Still frame from *Eno* (2024). © Gary Hustwit.

Of course, the audience needs to be somehow trained to recognize the technological elements embedded in the film, as they might easily overlook them. Therefore, various techniques are employed to make the technology noticeable. This is sometimes achieved visually through a collage technique, splitting the screen into a digital mosaic that reorders, crops, or repeats elements of a shot. Another approach directly addresses the editing. Each scene selected by the algorithm is in fact preceded by a real-time coding visual, showing the software choosing the sequence that is going to play next from the dataset. Interestingly, it does not only show what we're about to see but also what the software is selecting from and all the alternatives that won't be shown—which will remain only as filenames of choices that were not taken.

Such a manifest editing process clarifies *Eno*'s performative dimension, emphasizing the idea that the public is not merely watching a reproduction of the artwork but participates in something unfolding in a specific time and place—much like attending a concert or a theater piece. The film's performative quality becomes even more apparent in special screenings where it is performed live by Hustwit, using a hardware rendition of Brain One assembled by the Swedish electronics company Teenage Engineering. Looking like a portable synthesizer, B-1 consists of two digital spinning reels—a remediation of an old tape machine—and a few basic controls: Play, Rewind, Record, and Generate, the latter being used to create the film's

Fig. 2 – Gary Hustwit performing *Eno* live at Sydney Opera House. © Jordan Munns.

editing in real-time. Yet, the controller is not intended as a tool for VJs to "remix" the documentary live. It certainly enhances the performative dimension inherent to *Eno*, placing a human performer at the center of the stage alongside the projected film; however, human agency does not take the lead and only serves to assist the self-sustaining generative editing. The performer can influence which major theme to explore, but ultimately it is still the algorithm that determines the specific scenes and their order.

The outcome of this interactive performative practice transforms the generative film into a so-called autopoietic artwork in which content, form, and technology perfectly match. The notion of *autopoiesis*—which combines the Greek words αὐτόσ (self) and ποιεῖν (to make/create)—was introduced by biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in their seminal research on the biological roots of knowledge. In simple terms, it is used to define living beings not as objects of observation, but as self-referential, self-constructing closed systems: "The being and doing of an autopoietic unit are inseparable, and this is their specific mode of organization."[10] The product of any living thing appears then indistinguishable

10 Humberto R. Maturana, Francisco J. Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, revised edition (Boston: Shambala, 1992), 49.

from the thing itself, with no clear separation between the producer and the produced. This can be fruitfully applied to generative art too. Indeed, over the past decade, the concept of autopoiesis has proven useful beyond biology, particularly in the fields of art and music, where it is used to analyze generative works as autonomous entities governed by their inherent processes and systems.[11] *Eno*'s internal order is defined by how the software works and, at the same time, the live editing becomes an integral part of the narrative arc, producing a mirrorlike interplay between the film's content and software. Just like Brian Eno himself, Brain One is the protagonist of a story that is essentially telling itself. Of course, the autopoietic nature of the film does not imply its "livingness." However, its performativity, the way it is presented and interacts with the footage replicate certain lifelike characteristics that are likely to resonate with the audience.

The biological recognition fostered by the film is further enhanced by its biographical subject. Compared to other generative works and despite its recombinant structure, what *Eno* seems to add is a strong sense of life narrative. Although the musician has repeatedly stated he's not interested in a celebration of his career, while watching the movie we relive his life alongside him, experiencing both past and present the way he conceptualizes them. As Eno himself explains:

> My own experience of thinking about the past and how things have evolved is that it changes every time I think about it. There's never one story about your life. Different things become important at different times. Suddenly you realize that something you overlooked in the past was actually a very significant moment.[12]

The whole generative and autopoietic construction seems designed to thoughtfully replicate how time is perceived, in all its complexity and disorienting nature. Various moments in the musician's life are presented seamlessly, almost like a re-enactment of human memory, capturing the way it moves from one temporal point to the other in a constant time travel through life experiences. This rhizomatic temporality is even in-

11 Norbert Herber, "Musical Behavior and Amergence in Technoetic and Media Arts," in *The Oxford Handbook of Interactive Audio*, ed. Karen Collins, Bill Kapralos, Holly Tessler, 364–84 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

12 Interview with Brian Eno and Gary Hustwit, *The Ankler & Pure Nonfiction Documentary Spotlight*, accessed December 16, 2024, https://anklerenjoy.com/documentaryspotlight/eno-film-first-the-ankler-pure-nonfiction-documentary-spotlight/.

tensified in *Nothing Can Ever Be the Same*, an experimental spin-off of Hustwit's film consisting of a generative video installation that recontextualizes raw footage from *Eno* into a massive 168-hour audiovisual work of art. Created by director of programming Brendan Dawes, it originally premiered at the Venice Music Biennale in October 2023 and was shown again a year later at DOK Leipzig. While Hustwit's documentary limits its technological scope to a few manageable elements, *Nothing Can Ever Be the Same* is sprawling: it abandons narrative structure entirely, pushing the generative element to the extreme with glitches, cropping, and unexpected cuts. The result feels like a fever dream, vividly reflecting the fragmentary nature of perception.[13]

But there's something more. Autopoietic artworks are self-sufficient units, yet they still exist in complex environments alongside other entities. A generative film like *Eno* is also an object of observation, a piece of art meant to be watched; still, it interacts with its immediate environment on multiple levels. The software that creates the film, the director who performs it, and the public who attends the screening are all caught in a tight network of relationships, mutually influencing each other's experiences. According to Norbert Herber, who studied the ontological implications of generative technologies, "Perturbations characterize the kinds of interactions that take place between a generative music system, the listener within the mediated environment, and the environment itself. All interactions are recurring, which leads to continuous structural changes."[14] That's how *Eno*'s performativity unfolds: as one exists in the environment of the screening, their presence resonates throughout, potentially affecting every other human or non-human actor also within it. Ultimately, this complex practice informs the very meaning of the film, and from the audience's perspective it is a revolutionary change. *New York Times* critic Alissa Wilkinson explained that *Eno*'s inner sense lies in the performative practice the public engages with the generative technology: "It's about how we, the audience, understand the world around us."[15] Its interactive dimension forces us not only to seek new paths in storytelling, but also to question what is presented to us and relate

13 Unfortunately, I did not have the chance to experience the installation live, but it was described to me by a friend who was at the Venice Biennale in 2023. A brief video extract can be found on Brendan Dawes' website, accessed December 1, 2024, https://brendandawes.com/projects/ncebts.

14 Herber, "Musical Behavior and Amergence in Technoetic and Media Arts," 369.

15 Alissa Wilkinson, "*Eno* Review: Creativity, 52 Billion Billion Ways," *The New York Times*, July 11, 2024.

Fig. 3 – Brendan Dawes and Gary Hustwit in front of *Nothing Can Ever Be the Same*. © Biennale Musica.

it to our own living. In a way, it is still a "matter of time"—specifically Eno's temporality, captured by the live editing and presented in the film, clashing with the viewers' personal experiences.

After the screening I attended in Sheffield, the organizers held a Q&A session with Dawes and the director of photography, Mary Farbrother. As expected, most of the questions were about the film's generative technology. One in particular stood out: a man, who said he had attended both UK premieres of the film—at the Barbican Centre in London and at Sheffield DocFest—used the word "heartbroken" to describe his experience. He felt heartbroken that he couldn't see more of it, that remarkable scenes from the first screening didn't reappear the second time, and that ultimately they were all gone forever. It was an important testimony to how *Eno*'s experience affects other participants: despite the claim that each screening is *unique*, from the public's perspective they are all *partial*. But this is not necessarily a negative thing. Generative practices enable us to develop a constantly shifting perspective on a work of art, yet they also reveal the futility of trying to fully grasp it. By the end of one of *Eno*'s screenings, all that remains are the memories of what we have witnessed. Maybe the

most important lesson this film offers is how to deal with memory, both in its personal and cultural forms. As Eno sings in the song that closes the documentary:

> All I remember if gathered together would be
> Solitary firework flashes over a fathomless sea.
> I tried to recall all the treasures I found in those days
> But the connection is weak and the moment is lost in the haze.[16]

Niccolò Galliano is a PhD candidate in Musicology at the University of Milan. His research, in collaboration with Archivio Storico Ricordi, investigates the industry network of Casa Ricordi (Italy's leading music publishing house) during the interwar years, through the digital mapping of its epistolary exchange. His other research line explores library music production for Italian television during the 1960s and 1970s. His interests include the cultural history of twentieth-century music publishing and the production and consumption of recorded artifacts. In 2022 he worked as a research consultant for the project "Anonymous Creativity: Library Music and Screen Cultures in the 1960s and 1970s" (Leverhulme Project Grant), and in 2024 he was a visiting student at the Digital Humanities Institute at the University of Sheffield. He also serves as an editorial assistant for the journal Sound Stage Screen.

16 Brian Eno, "All I Remember," in *Eno: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, Opal Records 5584956, 2024.

Book Reviews

Megan Steigerwald Ille. *Opera for Everyone: The Industry's Experiments with American Opera in the Digital Age*. University of Michigan Press, 2024. 308 pp. ISBN 9780472904303.

Estela Ibáñez-García

Megan Steigerwald Ille's *Opera for Everyone* is a novel contribution to opera scholarship. In keeping with the so-called Performative Turn in music studies,[1] Ille focuses on the experiences of performers and audiences, creative and collaborative processes such as rehearsals and performances, and opera's ethical and political dimensions, including economics and the legacy of colonialism. She employs an ethnographic approach to explore these aspects. [2] Her main case study is the Los Angeles-based experimental opera company The Industry. She analyzes four of their innovative productions—*Invisible Cities* (2013), *Hopscotch* (2015), *Galileo* (2017), and *Sweet Land* (2020). These productions allow her to reflect on the implications of new models of operatic production for both performers and audiences. The Industry challenges traditional opera by taking performances out of the opera house, blending contemporary listening practices with operatic spectatorship, and confronting the genre's ties to colonialism. This approach highlights the tensions embedded in opera between historical and experimental practices,

1 The Performative Turn involved a shift from positivist epistemology toward meaning-making processes, from structure to culture, and from texts to performances and experiences.

2 According to Steigerwald Ille, "while contemporary and historical operatic performance have long been an object of musicological study, ethnographic methodologies respond to increased critical interest in opera scholarship informed by practitioners. Moreover, this methodological orientation allows me to move away from the primacy of an operatic text that still dominates a significant portion of scholarship focused on performance" (6).

Sound Stage Screen, Vol. 4, Issue 1 (Spring 2024), pp. 133–143, ISSN 2784-8949. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. © 2025 Estela Ibáñez-García. DOI: 10.54103/sss28376.

live and mediated performances, closed and open production systems, and colonial and anticolonial operatic models.

Steigerwald Ille draws on her background as both a vocal performer and an opera scholar to explore experimental operas and reflect on her shifting perspectives: she feels intimidated as a performer yet fascinated as an audience member.[3] Through her ethnographic work, she became a participant-observer during rehearsals and productions, crafting a polyphonic text that gives voice to the multiple participants involved in these works. This collaborative form of scholarship, for her, is the ideal lens through which to view opera, a fundamentally collaborative art form. Collaborative scholarship is especially revealing when it comes to The Industry, a company that reimagines spectatorship to "eliminate that gap between everyday life and art making" (1). The Industry's "site-responsive" productions, as defined by artistic director Yuval Sharon, blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, engaging with the locations as if they were active participants in the performance.[4] By taking opera out of the opera house, Sharon's productions alter expectations, question deep-seated conventions, and raise compelling questions about space, mediation, artistic representation, and reality.

"Opera for everyone" is an expression that encapsulates the main vision of The Industry. As Steigerwald Ille notes in her book's introduction, the phrase originated from a 2014 audio interview with Sharon and later became the company's slogan. It reflects their commitment to challenge opera's historical elitism and the exclusivity often associated with its performance spaces. While seemingly simple, the expression is fraught with complexities. The slogan raises questions about why everyone should be interested in opera and highlights issues related to opera's accessibility—or lack thereof—due to economic, spatial, social, personal, historical, and even musical constraints. Steigerwald Ille confronts these challenges head-on, opening her book with the following questions (5–6):

3 See Kristen Turner, "Megan Steigerwald Ille, *Opera for Everyone: The Industry's Experiments with American Opera in the Digital Age* (U Michigan Press, 2024)," October 25, 2024, in *New Books in Music*, podcast hosted by Kristen Turner, episode 254, https://podcasts.apple.com/in/podcast/megan-steigerwald-ille-opera-for-everyone-the/id425448670?i=1000674415821.

4 According to Sharon, "rather than a background, the location is a character itself, and the productions search for connection and dialogue with the found environment. This process brings immediacy and history to the surface—since, unlike the 'invisible' space of the theater, the site is an inextricable partner in the performance." Yuval Sharon, *A New Philosophy of Opera* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2024), 204.

> Should, or can opera be for everyone, and do operas outside the opera house function differently for "everyone" than those within? Do experimental practices explored by companies like The Industry coexist with notions of accessibility? What structural inequalities in the US operatic ecosystem, including the conditions of performers laboring in traditional and experimental spaces, must change for this statement to be true?

The book is organized into four chapters, framed by an introduction and an epilogue. Each chapter examines a core dimension of The Industry's work—mobile music, operatic economics, experiments with institutionality, and anticolonial opera—through detailed analyses of specific productions in chronological order: *Invisible Cities* (Chapter 1), *Hopscotch* (Chapter 2), *Galileo, War of the Worlds*, and *ATLAS* (Chapter 3), and *Sweet Land* (Chapter 4). The book foregrounds often-overlooked dimensions of opera, such as experiential spectatorship, performer/audience interactions, and the creative and collaborative processes that occur during rehearsals. The result is both refreshing and insightful, emphasizing the "genre's multiplicity" and opera's "polyphonic performances" (7). Yet a latent dimension in the book—complexity—is not fully embraced. Complexity refers to phenomena that *emerge* from a collection of *interacting* objects or entities.[5] The emergent properties of a complex system cannot be observed in its individual components separately, as these properties result from their interconnections. Steigerwald Ille's focus on dynamic relationships and complex systems calls for a more holistic approach.

The book opens with a quote from a radio interview with Sharon, in which he poses the following question: "What if opera is actually an *emerging* art form?" (1).[6] That is, what if we focus on performances rather than canonical texts? Instead of fixed, individual products, we have organic, collaborative processes that unfold in the here and now. He goes even further: what if, instead of re-creation, each performance becomes an opportunity for novelty and imagination? "Opera's inherent complexity and layers of signification give the art form a singular and vital fascination: as a space for a multiplicity of meaning, for indeterminacy and ultimately enchantment."[7]

5 See, for example, Paul Atkinson, "Making Opera Work: Bricolage and the Management of Dramaturgy," *Music & Arts in Action* 3, no. 1 (2010): 3–19, and Giorgio Biancorosso and Roberto Calabretto (eds.), *Scoring Italian Cinema: Patterns of Collaboration* (New York: Routledge, 2025, forthcoming).

6 Italics added.

7 Sharon, *A New Philosophy of Opera*, 88.

According to Sharon, opera is closer to poetry than to narrative. Ambiguity is a core dimension of his productions because, as he rightly observes, live arts require interdependence, and in the theater, "the spectator is our final and most important collaborator."[8] By foregrounding relationality and ambiguity, Sharon focuses on the emergent properties that the complex system of each performance brings to life.

While Steigerwald Ille is clearly aware of the complexity of operatic performance, her analyses occasionally break down the event into discrete components rather than exploring their interconnected dynamics. This mirrors the tension between traditional and innovative perspectives on opera she herself identifies in The Industry's productions.

In Chapter 1, "Opera as Mobile Music: *Invisible Cities*," she examines how the opera draws on contemporary listening modes and digital technologies (specifically, the audience's use of wireless headphones) to reformulate operatic listening and foreground individuated spectatorship. *Invisible Cities* was produced in collaboration with the L.A. Dance Project and took place in Los Angeles Union Station. Both the opera and Italo Calvino's source novel portray Kublai Khan as a skeptical listener and Marco Polo as an unreliable narrator. This premise of distrust, which enhances the ambiguity of communication and the need for interpretation, aligns with the performance setup itself. On one hand, performers in plain clothes and audience members wearing headphones found themselves immersed in the uninterrupted flow of everyday life at the station. On the other hand, commuters and passersby unexpectedly bumped into "invisible" performances by a cappella singers and seemingly spontaneous dance sequences. According to Steigerwald Ille, "the opera was designed around an assumed fluency with mobile modes of musical consumption" (48). She refers in this context to Jonathan Sterne's concept of *audible technique*, defined as "the ways in which listeners assimilate new ways of understanding and interacting with sound in tandem with these same technologies of mechanical reproduction" (49). Sterne explains how new technologies at the end of the nineteenth century detached sound from its source, thereby separating the sense of hearing from the other senses. Referring specifically to headphones, Sterne argues that they "allowed for the isolation of listeners in a 'world of sounds' where they could focus on the various characteristics of the sounds to which they attended."[9] This type of

8 Sharon, 255.

9 Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 24.

detached listening experience can be likened to the white cube paradigm that dominated the display of art during Modernism. Traditionally understood as the erasure of context in the contemplation of art, the white cube in fact created a specific context for art: one in which time and sociality were excluded from the experience of artworks, and viewers became self-conscious of their own role as contemplators.[10] This dimension is central to Steigerwald Ille's reconstruction of The Industry's creative trajectory.

Listening to music through headphones gives the listener the impression of a private auditory space. Some audience members quoted in the book also mentioned that headphones created an immersive, filmic experience, as mobile music aestheticized the surrounding environment. While privacy relates to intimacy, both immersion and cinematic references open up a more complex spatial and audiovisual experience. The use of headphones thus triggered an experience that cannot be reduced to a purely auditory one. To be sure, through the use of headphones, the audience was immersed in a context shaped by the music. However, cinema has also played a key role in the development of new—or evolving—listening practices. Steigerwald Ille acknowledges the multifaceted nature of the resulting experience, but her focus on headphones brings her closer to Sterne's notion of *detached listening* when she argues (60) that

> Sharon's production decision creates a hierarchy in which the shared aural experience is prioritized as the core of the production rather than a consistent visual experience. The performer's voice is separated from her body, and the audience, the staging seems to suggest, does not necessarily need the latter at all times.

Yet by merging a staged sonic dimension with a fluid dramatic setting, Sharon's goal was to break traditional hierarchies rather than create new ones. Moreover, as audience members themselves reported, listening through headphones did not produce a detached listening experience—quite the opposite. The unexpected and suspenseful mingling of staged and non-staged realities in Los Angeles Union Station pushed each listener/commuter to engage in a constant process of meaning-making specific to their spatial, temporal, and existential situation.[11] Listening is a matter of perspective

10 See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, expanded ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

11 See Giorgio Biancorosso, *Situated Listening: The Sound of Absorption in Classical*

and a condition shaped by unique personal circumstances. I agree with Steigerwald Ille that in *Invisible Cities*, "headphones initiate a process of spectatorship." However, I don't believe that "audience members give interpretive meaning to the opera's staging, *regardless* of what visual action is taking place based on where they are in the station at a specific time" (59).[12] Both the action and the ever-shifting locales play key roles in the synchresis that is at the core of *Invisible Cities*' spectatorial experience.

Chapter 2, "Operatic Economics: Liveness and Labor in *Hopscotch*," focuses on an opera that takes issues of mediation, liveness, participatory spectatorship, and performers' experiences one step further. *Hopscotch* is based on a non-linear narrative divided into 24 chapters distributed across three different color-coded routes. The opera incorporated a hybrid set of viewing interfaces for spectators. Some audience members attended and simultaneously recorded/broadcasted live performances from limousines around Los Angeles, while others watched the livestream performance in a space called the Central Hub. The audience also included onlookers scattered throughout different locations in Los Angeles. The performance fostered a dynamic mode of viewership by repeatedly altering the "frames" through which the audience experienced the performance. *Hopscotch* completely broke the fourth wall and fostered an unprecedented level of intimacy—borne out of sheer physical proximity—between performers and audience members. In a reversal of Brecht's alienation effect, it was not the audience who felt alienated by a highly constructed operatic representation, but rather the performers. While the audience seemed comfortable participating in such an unconventional operatic production, "the conflation of proximity with intimacy led to fraught experiences for performers on the other side of the livestream" (74). Steigerwald Ille refers to Edward Soja's work on the role of spatiality in constructing networks of power to "provide a gloss on relationships between performers, audience members, bystanders, and the performative space of LA in *Hopscotch*" (74). She explains the difference between Soja's Firstspace (the built, material environment), Secondspace (imagined or conceptual notions of that environment), and Thirdspace (lived space, merging the former two along with the dimensions of spatiality, historicality, and sociality). I found this reference quite illuminating, as it reintroduced the perspective of complexity in opera. In *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places*,

Cinema (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

12 Italics added.

Soja refers to Jorge Luis Borges's story *The Aleph* as both an inspiration and an apt metaphor to grasp what he means by "Thirdspace." *The Aleph* is an allegory on the infinite complexities of space and time—a place "where all places are." In Borges's story, the narrator feels frustrated because he cannot explain this place using language, as language has a linear dimension, while the Aleph is characterized by simultaneity. According to Soja,

> *everything* comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history.[13]

The paragraph perfectly encapsulates what *Hopscotch* and many of The Industry's productions are about. Steigerwald Ille argues that "*Hopscotch* overlayed Secondspace (imagined) on top of Firstspace (built) to blur the boundaries between when the operatic performance began and reality ended" (83). I, too, see moments of blurred boundaries as good examples of Thirdspace in this production, but I don't think the layering metaphor is apt here. Instead of the imagined being layered on top of the physical, what this production prompted was a merging of realities through lived experiences that dissolved any prior distinctions. The spectators shaped the performance by broadcasting what they were watching and listening to via their smartphones. They also felt like actors in a film while riding in the limousines alongside the performers. For Steigerwald Ille, the audience's sense of control and participation is "an illusion of agency rather than agential power itself" (86). She explains that to ensure consistency across performances, the company had prerecorded videos of each scene during preview week, in case the live feed failed or audience members chose not to record and broadcast the performances they were witnessing to the Central Hub. According to her, this invisible backup plan "invalidates the efforts of the audience members as mediators" (87). However, based on the spectatorial experience and the author's insightful description and analysis of the mediated dimension of this production, I don't see how having these prerecorded videos could invalidate the audience members' gestures. By blurring the boundaries between mediation and

13 Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 56–57.

liveness, Sharon simply—yet decisively—deepened the complexity of the operatic experience. I concur with Steigerwald Ille that the presence of a backup—and backhanded—plan "illustrates the ways in which mediation as *belief* rather than reality played a role in spectator experiences in the production" (87). Yet, to me, this reinforces the conflation of reality and fiction that *Hopscotch* performed, Soja theorized, and Borges articulated in *The Aleph*.

In Chapter 3, "Experiments with Institutionality: *Galileo*, *War of the Worlds*, and *ATLAS*," Steigerwald Ille analyses three productions by The Industry during its three-year collaboration with the LA Philharmonic and explores the tension between the company's innovative aesthetics and the traditional economic systems within which it operated. She distinguishes two types of institutional structures: the LA Phil's closed network, based on replicability and circulation, and The Industry's open assemblage, which fosters experimentation and flexibility. The choice of the terms *network* and *assemblage* in relation to institutional entities—repositories of established orders with existing norms—is productive. In complex systems theory, these terms describe different types of behaviors within any given system. Both a network and an assemblage consist of interconnected components that interact with one another. However, while networks tend toward stability, assemblages are characterized by dynamism. Steigerwald Ille aptly describes the U.S. opera industry "as an ecosystem in which aesthetic, institutional, and economic principles are intertwined" (116). She uses actor-network theory (ANT) to analyze institutional culture, contrasting ANT's bounded networks with Gavin Steingo's fluid assemblages in his model of broken networks.[14] Whereas the LA Phil aligns with the former, The Industry exemplifies the latter. Her analysis reveals the strengths and weaknesses of each model, sheds light on the compromises necessary in co-productions, and hints at how independent companies may also adopt closed models (e.g., Beth Morrison Projects). Open models "prevent the sorts of standardized processes of generic repetition key to closed systems… They have been heavily critiqued, however, for the way they institutionalize forms of economic instability" (132).

Among the three productions analyzed in this chapter, Steigerwald Ille views *Galileo* as a failure since it never made it into a full production. Sharon, however, "interpreted *Galileo*'s postponement and eventual cancella-

14 Gavin Steingo, "Actors and Accidents in South African Electronic Music: An Essay on Multiple Ontologies," *Contemporary Music Review* 37, no. 5–6 (2017): 554–74.

tion as an affirmation of The Industry's flexible processes" (130). *War of the Worlds* is interpreted "as an overt institutional critique of Western art music and the traditional concert hall space" (144). In this case, "a rigid assemblage led to success primarily because Sharon *had* to be in collaboration with the inflexible structure of the LA Phil" (146). Finally, *ATLAS*, an opera composed by Meredith Monk in 1991, moved from being an experimental production that did not fit into a closed institutional system in 1991 to an established one by 2019, due to the influence of Monk's reputation and her rigid creative process.

Chapter 4, "'What You Remember Doesn't Matter': Toward an Anticolonial Opera," examines how *Sweet Land* addresses the entanglement between opera and the legacy of colonialism through a collaborative creative process that deliberately inverted colonial hierarchies. The work tackles not only the historical ties between opera and colonialism but also the violence of settler colonialism and the mechanisms of coloniality. The production process deeply shaped the operatic representation. The creative team consisted of three pairs of multi-racial and multi-ethnic artists (153):

> librettists Douglas Kearney (African American, arrivant), Aja Couchois Duncan (Ojibwe, French, and Scottish, Indigenous, settler), composers Raven Chacon (Diné, Indigenous) and Du Yun (Chinese, American immigrant), and directors Yuval Sharon (first-generation Israeli American, settler) and Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, and Lakota, Indigenous).

According to Steigerwald Ille, *Sweet Land*'s original contribution lies in pioneering a structural change by incorporating a plethora of voices—writers, designers, performers, as well as composers. This truly collaborative production deployed a "strategic reassemblage," following Paperson, of the colonial machine's component parts.[15] Steigerwald Ille provides clear examples of such strategic reassemblage without overlooking the complexity of this process, as "'giving agency' and 'making space,' however, also describe processes within a stable hierarchy in which individuals in power decide to share it" (169). The crucial dimension that allowed this collaborative effort to succeed was trust. As many of the participants stated, after a lifetime of being tokenized and exploited, it took them some time to even accept and embrace the possibility of having their agency acknowledged and valued.

15 See la paperson, *A Third University is Possible* (Minneapolis: University of Minessota Press, 2017).

In this chapter, Steigerwald Ille's self-reflective voice comes more to the fore. She acknowledges her own assumptions and biases, engaging in a process of (self-)realization that mirrored that of the creators and performers during rehearsals. Each person's lived experiences became fundamental sources in the formulation of an anticolonial critique of opera. Steigerwald Ille does an excellent job guiding the reader through the complex process behind this involved production and revealing the intersectional relationships among standard historical narratives, operatic conventions, and systems of subjugation.

Sweet Land is a case in point of a complex adaptive system. First, it is made possible by an ensemble of heterogeneous agents who make individual decisions about how to behave. A highly relevant dimension is that these decisions evolve over time. Second, the agents interact with one another, and their interactions lead to emergent phenomena—new realities that could not have been predicted and cannot be understood by analyzing the individual components. In these types of systems, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. According to Steigerwald Ille, "as a result of this dynamic rehearsal environment, some performers interpreted the rehearsal process itself as a form of social justice. … performers were given the opportunity to rehearse not only the opera, but also the opportunity of self-assertion and dialogic exchange" (186). *Sweet Land* went beyond a superficial understanding of diversity and inclusion, focusing instead on deeply embracing Sharon's question: "How can the process of creating this work of art reflect the society we actually want to create?" (170).

This question brings us back to Sharon's goal of creating "opera for everyone." The Industry's productions encourage audience interaction, create spaces for countercultural composers' music to be performed, and give voice to groups that are usually marginalized. As Steigerwald Ille acknowledges in the epilogue, they have also pushed opera scholars to move beyond the conventions of traditional scholarship and develop a new scholarly genre that blends textual analysis with ethnography and first-person reflection.

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