

# CONTEMPORARY OPERA IN FLUX



EDITED BY YAYOI U. EVERETT

## Contemporary Opera in Flux



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Edited by Yayoi U. Everett

*with a Foreword by Susan McClary*

University of Michigan Press  
Ann Arbor

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The past two decades of the twenty-first century have been a watershed moment for operagoers. Not only has the subject matter for opera expanded in scope and range to reflect contemporary social issues, but new site-specific venues and technologies (live and virtual) have radically changed our modes of attendance. Amidst the global pandemic, people drove around in their vehicles underground to hear Yuval Sharon's *Twilight: Gods* (2020), watched White Snake's virtual/real-time production of *Death by Life* (2021), and attended livestreaming of new operas from the comfort of their homes. Scholarship on opera kept up with the emerging trends. Organizations such as *Yale Opera Study Today* (YOST), University of Michigan, and *Opera America* hosted virtual conferences on new operas by female and BIPOC composers, engaging practitioners and scholars in dialogue with one another. At the Midwest chapter of AMS conference in 2018, after hearing Nicholas D. Stevens's cutting-edge presentation on Ashley Fure's *The Force of Things* and Liza Lim's *Tree of Codes*, I approached him about the idea of collaborating on a publication of essays that document new opera as an artistic incubator for innovative experimentation with media, technology, and site-specific performances. After successfully pitching the collection of essays to Sara Cohen at the University of Michigan Press in 2020, in the fall Nicholas and I organized a virtual conference called *Opera in Flux* with fifteen presenters, which led to a robust exchange of ideas about contemporary opera's engagement with issues of agency (human versus nonhuman), media and technology, gender, sexuality, cultural identity, subjectivity, and so forth. Since then, the volume has gone through several reviews and reassignment of contributors prior to settling on the twelve essays presented here. In the end, we are fortunate to have garnered seasoned scholars who offer distinctive insights into contemporary opera from the perspectives of musicology, media studies, dramaturgy, philosophy, and music theory.

While Stevens stepped down from his role as coeditor in January 2023,

I'd like to acknowledge that the publication of this volume would not have been possible without his stewardship and enthusiasm for all things operatic. I cherish the collaborative spirit that guided numerous Zoom sessions we held over the course of three years to get through editorial rough patches. Special thanks go to Joy Calico and Colleen Renihan for their editorial assistance along the way. And last, but not least in importance, we are grateful to Sara Cohen for shepherding us through negotiations at every stage of the review process.

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Yayoi U. Everett

## FOREWORD

For years I have directed a seminar titled “Opera After *Einstein*.” But as I gear up to teach it in fall 2023, I have had to realize that Philip Glass and Robert Wilson’s *Einstein on the Beach* (1975) now qualifies as “early music.” After several decades during which many composers shunned theatrical work, opera has returned with a vengeance. To be sure, the late twentieth century witnessed a renewed interest, with pioneering contributions by Philip Glass, John Adams, and Kaija Saariaho. But no one could have anticipated the explosion of new work or the increased demand by audiences for performances of something other than the canonic staples that had ruled the stage for so long. Even the Metropolitan Opera—in the post-pandemic, post–George Floyd era—has sought out and produced operas by Anthony Davis and Terrance Blanchard (the first two works by African American composers in the institution’s history). A belated presentation of Saariaho’s *L’Amour de loin* in 2016 was only the second opera by a woman at the Met, more than a century after the production of Ethel Smyth’s *Der Wald* in 1913. But commissions from Missy Mazzoli and others promise to add others to their roster.

European aficionados have long had access to operas by György Ligeti, Salvatore Sciarrino, George Benjamin, Thomas Adès, Olga Neuwirth, Chaya Czernowin, and many others who have radicalized the traditional premises underlying plot, vocal production, and staging. Although several of the new works mounted by the Met and other established US venues adhere to familiar conventions, commissioning programs such as Beth Morrison Projects, Opera Philadelphia, and the Los Angeles Opera actively encourage experimentation. During the pandemic lockdown in 2020–21, they explored new media, first as a way of conveying music to their isolated patrons, but then as new ways of imagining music drama. It’s safe to say that opera—like teaching, dining, the status of cash purchase—will never be the same again.

Responding to this exciting moment in history, Yayoi Uno Everett and Nicholas David Stevens have compiled this collection of essays on new opera.

The publication of *Contemporary Opera in Flux* could not have come at a more perfect time, as composers, audiences, presenters, and scholars are striving to catch up. Of the nine composers in the chapters of this book, perhaps only Steve Reich and Tan Dun have widespread name recognition in North America. Three women—Chaya Czernowin (Israel), Gabriela Ortiz (Mexico), and Ana Sokolovic (Serbia/Quebec)—have studies dedicated to them in this volume. The collection also features chapters on Anthony Davis and George Lewis, pathbreaking musicians who have become increasingly prominent as activists in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Even a telenovela, *Camelia le Tejana*, comes up for serious consideration due to an adaptation in opera, cheek by jowl with the likes of Sciarrino, Charles Wuorinen, and Thomas Hyde.

To paraphrase the Bard, O brave new world, that has such operas in it! This genre has revolutionized musical practices repeatedly over the centuries, from Monteverdi to Mozart and Wagner, and we are now witnessing another such moment. The collection offers expert guidance to anyone seeking basic orientation and penetrating analyses for those who wish to delve far more deeply into the innovative strategies now available in such stage works. In short, *Contemporary Opera in Flux* qualifies as a potential gateway drug, inviting the reader to plunge into new music with abandon and to imagine yet other possibilities. The future of opera looks very bright indeed.

Susan McClary  
Case Western Reserve University

# Introduction

Yayoi Uno Everett and Nicholas David Stevens

## Prologue

We open underground. In April 2021, Chicago's Millennium Parking Garage hosts the Lyric Opera of Chicago's site-specific operatic production *Twilight: Gods*. Seated in her Prius, Yayoi Uno Everett and a companion tune to different FM stations from scene to scene, watching live musicians and actors as recording and transmitting equipment routes their sounds through their car radios. Skeptical of the production's premise of collapsing Wagner's monumental *Götterdämmerung* into six brief excerpts, Everett has come in expecting a visual spectacle and a postmodern mishmash of sounds. When Chicago poet and musician avery r. young appears on screen as one of the Norns and begins his rap retelling of the downfall of the Gods, the skeptic in her fears that the performance will contain little of Wagner's music and poetry from here on. But subsequent scenes prove her wrong, and singers portraying Wagner's characters soon appear steps from audience vehicles. A funeral procession leads driver/viewers along a candlelit route with the "tragic hero" leitmotif blasting through the radio to a Motown dance beat. young delivers a fire-and-brimstone sermon in the manner of an African American preacher, lamenting Siegfried's premature death as if he had been a Black youth felled by gun violence. By the end, stage director Yuval Sharon and the company's hyperreal juxtapositions of contemporary U.S. culture with Wagner's heroic Romanticism cease to seem merely kitschy, but rather illuminating.

What can a staging such as *Twilight: Gods* tell us about opera as of the second decade of the twenty-first century? Following the production's world premiere in the multilevel parking structure of the Michigan Opera Theatre (since renamed the Detroit Opera) in October 2020, at which the local

poet Marsha Music emceed in character as Erda, the Goddess of Nature and mother of the Norns, Sharon shared some thoughts on this question:

It's the part of the *Ring* [*Götterdämmerung*] I've had the hardest time with, but I think about it in relation to COVID and Black Lives Matter, and this call for all these structures that are no longer serving us to be torn apart. This notion that Brünnhilde is this powerful woman, who is the one to dismantle that system so something new can arise, is an incredibly apt and inspiring story for right now.<sup>1</sup>

At the 2021 Yale Opera Studies Today conference, Sharon further advocated “embracing indeterminacy by pairing two seemingly incongruous vocabularies to create something new.”<sup>2</sup>

In narratological terms, Sharon's production disrupts the notion that opera should remain situated in a monolithic cultural moment. *Twilight: Gods* is not a retelling of a music drama, but rather a prismatic, multisensory experience in which audiences wrestle with incongruities at many registers. The narrator role, for instance, which varies from city to city, adds aesthetic and narrative frictions as well as textual indeterminacy. In the Michigan Opera Theatre production, which Nicholas David Stevens attended, Marsha Music performed weary wisdom as the goddess of a world aflame, in contrast to young's fiery intensity as a narrating Norn in Chicago. By rewriting the libretto in a way unique to each city and the poet invited to represent it, Sharon, echoing David Levin, remarks that he aims to “unsettle” established artistic hierarchies and return opera to its “jumbled” origin.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond music and sound, Sharon and company introduce profound changes in the way an audience encounters and interacts with a site of performance and the artists working there. Today's audiences wrestle with broader questions raised by the startling incongruities and gaps between the opera's historical source material and the *mise-en-scène*. As Megan Steigerwald remarks, Sharon's remaking of Wagner invites us to “rethink what it means to access and engage with the operatic genre and indeed, to reckon with its complex history.”<sup>4</sup> One might say the same of any likewise radical staging, even when both the opera text and the performance text are new, and the only historical vestige remaining is the ghost of convention attending the label *opera*. Long staged by and for elites, opera transforms when it becomes a means for rhetorical and symbolic resistance to power.

Moreover, *Twilight: Gods* moves beyond the familiar by transforming the

nature of collaboration and modes of audience participation. Sharon transplants the event from grand halls to the private listening cocoons that many North Americans take for granted as a means to get around. The performances made these cities feel enchanted for hours afterwards, each respective urban waterway something like the Rhine, each everyday Detroit or Chicagoan a potential hero, and the operatic event in turn permeated by the serendipity—a glance, a plane, a pop station briefly caught during interscene turns of the radio dial—of everyday life in the banal environment of a car interior. Under such conditions, one's sense of reality could easily end up in flux, to say nothing of one's definition of *opera*.

*Opera in Flux*: Prior to the seventeenth century, little meaning would have inhered in the joining of the Latin plural noun *opera*, or *work*, to the verb *fluere*, *to flow*, works in waves, effluvious efforts. Yet *Seicento* musicians singularized the former word as it became a name for a growing genre. The latter verb gave rise to the noun *flux*, metaphorically suggesting instability, unpredictability, and successive arrivals of the new. We, the contributors of this volume, aim to preserve something of the original senses of both words submerged in our title, addressing wavelike recurrences of history, the tendency of stable definitions to slip through fingers, the art form's reflection of the conditions from which it emerges, and the directorial and performer-chosen strategies that promote absorption in or alienation from streams of narrative.

*Twilight: Gods* flooded into a vacuum of live opera performance as we wrote, and Everett edited, this volume amid a global pandemic. Rending the stillness of quarantine and helping clarify what this phrase *opera in flux* could mean, *Twilight: Gods* relied on musical and textual tradition (as well as literal texts, such as Wagner's score and libretto) while also revising the kinds of dramaturgy by which old musical deeds could be made newly visible. In Detroit, its mediation of the voice and general reliance on automobiles led Stevens to thoughts of posthumanism; in Chicago, the narrator's hip-hop-inflected framing led Everett to reflect on the subject position by which she interpreted the impassioned sermon following Siegfried's funeral march and to ask if Siegfried's death was meant to conjure Black lives lost to gun violence. The shifts that we and our colleagues document across the volume are, in our view, exciting and worthy of multidisciplinary analysis precisely because the means of staging and storytelling that Wagner gathered under the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* merit renewed attention. Opera has come to sound, look, and feel different from the centuries' worth of proscenium-stage productions that defined this multisensory art form.<sup>5</sup>



In this volume we aim to push the boundaries of contemporary opera scholarship by examining works that disrupt past operatic conventions through innovative deployments of media, technology, dramaturgy, and vocal techniques. Our inclusive aim extends to people, issues, and venues. Our contributors bring attention to groundbreaking operas that engage with relevant sociopolitical issues (racial justice, drug trafficking, homophobia, cultural trauma, hegemonic masculinity) and advance underrepresented works by female (Chaya Czernowin, Ana Sokolović, Gabriela Ortiz), African American (George Lewis, Anthony Davis), Asian (Tan Dun, Dai Fujikura), and experimental or avant-garde composers around the globe (Michel Van der Aa, Steve Reich, Charles Wuorinen, Thomas Hyde, Salvatore Sciarrino). Rather than focusing exclusively on mainstream operas produced at major houses in North America, we include international venues in which new operas have been produced, be it TENT, Rotterdam (Riches's *Singing Machine*), Théâtre des Champs-Élysées (Fujikura's *Solaris*), Museum of Contemporary Arts in Chicago (Lewis's *Afterword*), Suntory Hall in Tokyo (Tan Dun's *Tea: Mirror of Soul*), Teatro Reale de Madrid (Wuorinen's *Brokeback Mountain*), and Cheltenham Music Festival in England (Hyde's *That Man Stephen Ward*).

Focusing on productions involving late twentieth- and twenty-first century scores and libretti (borrowed source material aside), our twelve contributors draw on conversations with members of operatic creative teams and studies of archival material, dipping into a historical record that remains itself in flux as composers, librettists, directors, and designers revisit existing work and create anew. We engage critically with the recent past out of a conviction that, amid scholarly arguments regarding the obsolescence or death of the genre and general public perceptions of the art form as anachronistic or elite, contemporary opera is worthy of study.<sup>6</sup> Whether examined as a convergence of technological and artistic media (or, as Tereza Havelková puts it, a *hyper-medium*), as a set of formal traits and conventions to be de- or reconstructed according to innovative principles, or as a genre laden with historical precedents and audience expectations, opera increasingly encompasses multitudes.<sup>7</sup> It has always appropriated formal, mediatic, and generic elements from beyond itself, from cinematic temporalities to Romantic phantasmagoria, and including the Greek tragedies that inspired Florentine composers to mount through-sung theatrical performances around 1600. We aim to honor the imagination and ambition with which opera creators have approached this incorporative project in recent decades.

Our title may suggest a rare or novel state of fluidity in the twenty-first century, but it is with historiographic humility that we name this book for the ever-flowing collective work of reimagining opera's nature and practices. Sharon's production seemed, in our encounters with it, to crystallize the issues that we and our collaborators gather around in this volume, all the more remarkable given the lack of live opera performance in the United States and around the globe at the time. Now we turn to particular discourses and methodologies that shed light on the approaches that, we argue, have redefined opera in and for the twenty-first century.

## Decentering Human Agency: Posthuman Conditions

Like many operas written, composed, and staged since the 1990s, *Twilight: Gods* troubles lines between human performing forces, multimedia elements, and technologies of staging via both its mise-en-scène and a blending of prosthetically amplified, manipulated, recorded, and broadcast voices. Its elevation of nonhuman actors such as cars and radios to positions of prominence, even centrality, confirms the continuity of the opera world's founding preoccupations with staging technologies and the extensibility of the voice, in place since the late sixteenth-century spectacles that gave rise to the genre. An advocate of self-effacing stagecraft and concealed sound sources, Wagner thus returned to, rather than introduced, technical wizardry as a central artistic concern, as Gundula Kreuzer observes.<sup>8</sup> *Twilight: Gods* at once flouts and flirts with Wagnerian aesthetics of immersion and invisible labor, its musicians often tucked around a corner only to appear when cars roll forward. But it also decenters human performers by fixating on the car in promotional materials and performance alike, triple-cast as pandemic safety enclosure, distinct visual hook for promotion, and aesthetic object all at once.<sup>9</sup>

Opera has brought humans together with gods, ghosts, monsters, and other nonhumans from its inception. Orpheus, one of its earliest and most oft-revived characters, emerges as a distinctive figure in the genre's history in part through his perpetual crossing of human/nonhuman boundaries, in his adventures, his charming of people, animals, and rocks alike with his music, and, in some tellings, his very identity as half-muse or half-god. After 2000, however, nonsentient entities have joined some productions' dramatis personae in a more literal sense. Kreuzer describes *My Square Lady*, a theater piece by the performance collective Gob Squad (who call

it a “robot-reality-opera”), as a case study in the inversion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal. Here singers attempt to teach a real android—the main character—about humanity via music theater.<sup>10</sup> Nonhuman machinery, rather than a character or a singer in such a role, becomes a fellow performer and the piece’s defining figure.

In contrast, Tod Machover’s *Death and the Powers* (2010) depicts a man who uploads a digitized version of his mind into a computer system; in the latter portion of the opera, the singing actor remains offstage as robotic set pieces—new vessels for his character’s consciousness—sing and act as a digitized, mechanized, distributed “self.” Michel van der Aa’s *Upload* (2019–20) offers a nearly identical premise, with baritone Roderick Williams playing an “uploaded” human consciousness who appears via screens. His daughter struggles to acknowledge her father as human when he uploads his consciousness to a digital environment to escape the pain of loss. In both pieces, one discerns a tension between opera’s longstanding fascination with human psychology and subjectivity on one hand, and the experience and agency of things beyond humanity on the other. Few contemporary operas make this tension a defining theme in the way Machover’s and van der Aa’s do. Across this volume, however, we examine opera creators’ efforts to break new ground in heightening the tension between human and nonhuman agencies. In so doing, we suggest that opera in the twenty-first century often betrays a certain self-consciousness around questions of human identity, uniqueness, and bounded subjectivity, whether disavowing or doubling down on human selfhood as the genre’s primary concern.

*Twilight: Gods* only goes so far down this path, replacing Brünnhilde’s steed Grane with a Ford Mustang and transmitting sound live via electronics. In our analysis, however, it exists on a spectrum alongside other operas suggestive of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism, a pair of related conceptual lenses developed to push beyond, respectively, the humanist intellectual tradition and its assumptions of human dominion of the actual and intellectual landscapes. This thematic drift from tradition often accompanies radicalism in the form, mediatic configuration, and vocal strategies of such works. As Jelena Novak writes (chapter 2), many of the nonhuman protagonists she examines—automata modeled on human vocal tracts, hologram/vocaloid characters, screens displaying doubles of fleshly singers, etc.—appear not in traditional dramas, but in *postoperas*, performed or installed artworks that are *operatic* to varying extents.<sup>11</sup> Novak’s coinage riffs on Hans-Thies Lehmann’s concept of the *postdramatic*, a term to which we return

below. It also, however, resonates with *posthumanism*, which in turn helped precipitate a turn from language and semiosis toward ontology, affect, and materiality beyond the human in twenty-first-century academic discourse. Novak takes as case studies pieces in which the human element in opera falls away almost entirely, in the span of performance if not in the attribution of authorship.

Other contributors to this volume raise related questions, asking how screens, audio arrays, live and fixed electronic elements, and ideas borrowed from virtual reality mediate, complicate, or obviate the human in opera. Contributors also examine what happens when composers decenter the human and how even “documentary” opera subverts traditional ideas of singular human identity. Stevens, adopting Novak’s notion of postopera, investigates how composers interested in moving beyond anthropocentrism give voice to nonhuman protagonists at an unthinkable vast scale and in alien forms of communication. The performances that Stevens considers (chapter 1), which draw on works of science fiction and speculative philosophy that foreground nonhuman forms of intelligence and agency, differ in their approaches to vocality for human characters. Each opera in question, though, gives a kind (or many kinds) of voice to an entity that, in its objecthood, collectivity, and spatiotemporal vastness, strains typical understandings of life and consciousness, more ecosystem than character. Such works represent a rising number of postapocalyptic and posthumanist operas amid concerns about the climate crisis and imaginings of an actual future world without humans.

In their own contrasting ways, chapters across the volume reconsider the stability of the human as idea, identity, and central concern of opera. Even with questions of humanity at the heart of a given opera, character remains an optional formal construct, and singing performers may remain anonymous or overshadowed by screen media. Novak writes eloquently of performances that led her to coin the term postopera, many of which have arisen at the intersection of minimalist music and screen media, such as the live/video hybrid works of Philip Glass and Steve Reich.<sup>12</sup> Ryan Ebright’s essay (chapter 3) revisits the roots of one such work in multimedia theater, Reich and Beryl Korot’s *The Cave*. Ebright enumerates the project’s debts to documentary aesthetics, arguing that its creators situate singers as a uniquely human (and operatic) element in a performance that otherwise draws attention toward manipulated video and audio, away from the cast. Plotless and focused on interviewee testimony rather than characters or their emotions, *The Cave* and similar works shift opera’s emphasis a degree further from tradition and

toward audiovisual media saturation. Consider, for comparison, *¡Únicamente la verdad!* (2008), which hews closest to the raw material of a human life of any opera considered in the volume's first half, at least on paper. Yet as Amy Bauer demonstrates (chapter 4) via this work by Gabriela Ortiz and Rubén Ortiz Torres, even a quasi-biographical "videopera" such as this raises profound questions about the nature of personhood by depicting a "person" who may never have existed and who only comes to exist through media. Camelia la Tejana, best known as the subject of a well-known *corrido*, has become a real-world legend in the press, popular fiction, and televisual and cinematic depictions despite it remaining unclear whether "she" bears any ties to the corporeal reality of any actual person, living or dead. Ortiz and Ortiz Torres match this indeterminacy of referent and proliferation of mass-media representations with an array of sounds, images, design elements, and mockumentary conventions that strain the boundaries of opera as much as the figure of Camelia challenges the notion of stable human existence beyond our mediated representations.

### Dramaturgies of Space, Movement, and Materiality of Voice

With such fundamental questions of humanity and its fictional representation simmering on a back burner, we ask how twenty-first-century operas have transformed approaches to dramaturgy, the study of dramatic composition and the representation of the main elements of drama. Our concerns include libretto and music/sound design, but also aspects of performance such as lighting, props, makeup, movement, costumes, choreography, video projection, and film editing. Many dramaturgical innovations have taken root in theater since the 1960s, including the constellation of elements that characterize postdramatic theater, as described by Hans-Thies Lehmann. First among these is language, no longer wedded to the character's speech, but rather given to assuming an "autonomous theatricality" of its own through, for example, projecting words as moving images in Peter Greenaway and Louis Andriessen's *Writing to Vermeer* (1999).<sup>13</sup> Second: in lieu of traditional narrative's chain of events, an atmosphere may dominate through "a kaleidoscopic succession of images and scenes of dream," following Robert Wilson and Philip Glass's iconic nonlinear opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1975).<sup>14</sup> Third, ritualistic movement or ceremony-like actions, inspired by forms of Asian theater, often replace dialogue and dramatic acting, an approach exemplified by Wilson's Noh-inspired aesthetics of slow motion.<sup>15</sup> Fourth, prewar

expressionism's play with the psychological blossoms into a postwar collision of realism with the worlds of the unconscious through dream play, broken syntax, and symbolism.<sup>16</sup> Finally, postdramatic theater intersects with postmodern theater, the latter characterized by ambiguity, process, discontinuity, heterogeneity, pluralism, and deconstruction, by simultaneously including and distancing itself from older aesthetics and norms.<sup>17</sup> Opera's dramaturgical field of possibility has expanded along these dimensions since the 1990s as well. In this volume, we call particular attention to composers who have engaged with the concept of the avatar, composite libretti, unconventional vocalizations, and the spatiality and materiality of sound, including feminist approaches to interpreting vocality.

Alexander K. Rothe (chapter 5) argues that in George Lewis's chamber opera *Afterword* (2015), the singers and dancers become avatars of members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a collective of African American musicians founded on the South Side of Chicago in 1965. Following Uri McMillan's (2015) notion of the embodied avatar, Rothe claims that singers and dancers perform objecthood in a way that rejects stereotypical depictions of Blackness in the mass media, extending the agency of these performers. *Afterword's* singers and dancers shift fluidly between historical characters, eschewing the individual character and psychological development of traditional dramatic theater in favor of a consideration of the community as a whole. Through such means, Lewis disrupts the very notions of character and diegetic "reality" itself, from individual and actual to collective and virtual. Rothe focuses on how this destabilization of identity and other postdramatic qualities of *Afterword* exert an influence on the work's dramaturgy and gestural vocabulary as staged to date.

Virtual representation of collective history also plays a key role in Joy H. Calico's essay on the music theater of composer Chaya Czernowin (chapter 6). Czernowin's experimental opera *Infinite Now* (2017) offers a distinct yet radical audiovisual experience of cultural trauma during World War I through spatial dramaturgy and a composite libretto. Luigi Nono coined the former term in reference to the spatial distribution of mobile sounds through electronic means in *Prometeo* (1981–84), by now a common and essential strategy in many contemporary operas, as Ebright has argued elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Calico (chapter 6) illustrates how Czernowin creates immersive opera by drawing the audience into the inner workings of a person facing a hopeless situation. Here spatialized sounds take center stage as performers re-enact traumas from World War I by speaking or singing alternately in French, Ger-

man, Flemish, and English from Luc Perceval's 2014 play *Front*, intercut with Can Xue's poetry from post-Cultural Revolution-era China, all against a muted tapestry of electronically manipulated sounds. The dual libretti, linked by physical and psychological accounts of displacement and trauma, alternate in the first half, then increasingly converge later. The spatial mobilization of prerecorded sounds and misdirected voices meld together and disrupt one's perceived sense of time and space. Calico deftly analyzes the effects of amplified breath, whispering, and gasps, among other breathy vocalizations, as integral features of the spatial dramaturgy in this opera. The staging she considers responds to Czernowin's composite libretto, score, and spatialized sound with movement dominated by an aesthetic of slowness, reminiscent of Wilson's "theater of images."<sup>19</sup>

The line of inquiry into sonic materiality that Calico highlights next takes us to Tan Dun's world of intercultural theater and opera. Aiming to underscore "ritual" in concert performances, Tan Dun has deployed unconventional vocalizations and extended instrumental techniques, incorporating organic elements such as water, paper, ceramic, and stone in works such as *Orchestral Theatre I-IV* (1990–99), *Water Passion* (2000), *Paper Concerto* (2003), and the opera *The First Emperor* (2005–6). Nancy Yunhwa Rao (chapter 7) uncovers Tan's ritualistic dramaturgy in *Tea: Mirror of Soul* (2002), focusing on the materiality of organic elements and what they symbolize in this inter-Asian tale of love and despair. Rao argues that the sounds generated by water, paper, and the human voice lend material presence to different aspects of spirituality associated with Zen Buddhism and Taoism; for example, the rhythms produced by percussionists in amplified water basins symbolize water's connotation of purity and healing power on the one hand, while the array of physically produced sounds of paper gesture to the fragility of life on the other. The orchestral musicians who flip pages loudly, vocalize, and blow paper bags to simulate the sounds of wind and rustling trees further attest to Tan's *human-body-as-instrument* approach to consecrating sounds with symbolic meaning. In such manners, Tan, in his dramaturgy of ritualized sounds, levels the playing field between pitched and nonpitched sounds and accesses the ceremonial tendencies of much postdramatic theater.<sup>20</sup>

Feminist writings on materiality and vocality have contributed to the interpretation of dramaturgical innovations in opera. Michelle Duncan, a feminist scholar, elevates the material effects of operatic singing as central to analytic inquiry, often overlooked by hermeneutic readings in which the operatic voice is constructed as either synonymous with the authorial voice or as an excessive force that lies outside the interpretive domain.<sup>21</sup> Referring

to Ruth Berghaus's 1991 production of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Duncan claims that the deferral of linguistic reference gives additional weight to gesture and bodily comportment, "embodying the material fluidity of Debussy's lush score."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in recent years, composers, many of them women, have constructed subject positions that aim to empower women by engaging with the materiality of voice/sound in distinctive ways. Kaija Saariaho deploys a wordless choir and electronic soundscape in her opera *L'amour de loin* (2000) to create a circular wash of sounds, which simulates the vastness of the ocean that separates lovers while the circularity and ruptures in the music set the stage for a distinctly feminine expression of desire.<sup>23</sup>

Colleen Renihan (chapter 8) reads Ana Sokolović's opera *Svadba* (2011) from a similar perspective, writing that the opera celebrates the vocality of the six singers through extended techniques that include guttural, onomatopoeic, and nonsense syllables. Spread across the stage, the singers engage in a ritual celebration loosely modeled after a Balkan wedding. Quoting Adriana Cavarero, Renihan argues that the voices become endowed with "a reality and a communicative power that precedes and exceeds the linguistic elements."<sup>24</sup> Infused with humor and playfulness, and at other times somber and contemplative, the women's collective singing builds to a climactic height through sheer volume and intensity. By situating the physicality of bodies and vocal expressions as primary (over reliance on words), Sokolović's opera presents itself as an exemplar of Cavarero's "interrelational plurality," which, according to Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin, introduces pleasure into the body/language and, in turn, "constitutes a utopian feminist space that accommodates difference."<sup>25</sup> On a slightly different note, Jane Forner (chapter 9) reads Lilith in Anthony Davis's *Lilith* as an embodiment of the "dark feminine": speaking back to patriarchy, she surpasses Adam in strength and raw emotional power by adopting fluid styles of vocalization and sonic utterances enhanced at times through electronic amplification. In this comic opera, the biblical Lilith is rehabilitated into a political symbol of feminist liberation movements of the 1960s, as an altogether different instantiation of feminine empowerment that figures into Cavarero's "interrelational plurality."

## Subjecthood and Subjectivity: Trauma, Irony, Dream

With this we turn to the idea of subjecthood and changing conceptions of subjectivity. Subjecthood has long been tied to an anthropocentric view—that is to say, centered around the identity of human subjects—and subjec-



tivity to the perception of who they are and their relationship to the world around them. In the context of globalization, various scholars have argued that the human subject no longer constitutes the locus of thought and action and that subjecthood can be interpreted from multiple lenses of subjectivity.<sup>26</sup> Félix Guattari, in *Three Ecologies* (2000), goes so far as to invert the relationship between subjecthood and subjectivity: rather than the former constituting the latter, subjecthood is seen as an outcome of endpoint processes of subjectification based on social, mental, and environmental ecologies.<sup>27</sup> As a case in point, Tamara Katz argues that the formulation of subjectivity in modernist literature operates on contradictory impulses, marked by a “representational opposition” between realism and abstraction, often giving rise to a fractured narrative style that alternates between different points of view. In *The Waves* (1931), for example, Virginia Woolf jettisons the conventional notion of subjectivity (focusing on the characters’ points of view) in favor of a formal structure in which the cyclical description of waves frames the stories told through multiple narrators.<sup>28</sup> The dramaturgical approaches based on posthumanism and postdramatic theater addressed earlier in this introduction likewise move from realism toward abstraction; in Lewis’s *Afterword*, for example, Rothe argues that the individual and actual zooms outward into the collective and virtual realm through the device of the avatar (chapter 5). Rothe further argues that Lewis’s opera introduces a new historical subject, those groups that dominant culture had previously treated as not-human or not-quite-human (African Americans, Asian Americans, Indigenous peoples, women, the LGBTQ+ community). Similarly, in writing about Davis’s *Lilith*, Forner claims that blues, free jazz, video game music, Cuban jazz, rap, and hip-hop are brought together in the opera in a manner that moves beyond racial coding of stylistic mobility; that is to say, slippage into jazz and blues does not serve as a marker of Blackness, but rather of Lilith’s “dark feminine” subjectivity (chapter 9).

Moreover, in operas that engage with issues of sociopolitical and racial inequities within more traditional formal and narrative frameworks, the subjectivity of an individual is often fractured; a protagonist typically bears the burden of internalizing the source of oppression, which leads to the formation of what Lacan calls a “barred” or split subject. From a Lacanian perspective, the subject suppresses his or her desire in order to cope with societal norms or expectations.<sup>29</sup> In such contexts, music, libretto, and staging often create collisions between realism and fantasy. In Terence Blanchard’s *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* (2019), the protagonist, Charles, expresses his repressed

homosexual desire in a dream ballet at the opening of Act II and later in a soliloquy entitled “A boy of peculiar grace” as his younger self is courted by male dancers on stage.<sup>30</sup> In the operas we consider in the volume’s final chapters, trauma, irony, and dream shape fractured subjectivities; we draw on discourses of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, postmodern irony, and oneiricism to make sense of these reimagined forms of operatic character subjectivity. Edward Venn (chapter 10) argues that Stephen Ward turns to the popular musical style of Dennis Potter to perform his internal narrations of self as a countermeasure to other musical styles he assumes in conforming to the hegemonic masculinity in postwar Britain’s high society. Yayoi Everett (chapter 11) then discusses how the oppressive mountain theme in Charles Wuorinen’s *Brokeback Mountain* subjectivizes Ennis’s traumatic response to the homophobic society around him. Finally, Mauro Bertola (chapter 12) argues that Salvatore Sciarrino, in the monodrama *Lohengrin* (1982), introduces a dreamlike logic of an open-ended non sequitur in which the mentally ill Elsa dwells, unable to achieve the process of subjectivization that will make her whole. As a barred Lacanian subject, she can only exist within her dream world, where she mimics natural and mechanical sounds that include the rushing of the wind, the chirping of a bird, and the ticking of a clock.

## Expanding the Topical Scope: Social Politics, Race, Gender, and Operatic Tropes

In *Opera in a Multicultural World: Coloniality, Culture, Performance*, Mary Ingraham, Joseph So, and Roy Moodley claim that “opera can be grand, elitist, and formal, or comical, quotidian, and flexible, but it is eminently adaptable to the values and belief systems of its creators, producers, performers, and audiences.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, opera has lately emerged as a prominent medium for reflections on social inequity and injustice, often confronting issues of migration, race, gender, and colonialism. Most often, however, the specter of colonialist values and constructions haunt new productions of historical operas; for example, whether to continue with the practice of blackface in Verdi’s *Aida* or yellowface in Puccini’s *Turandot* is no longer a trivial matter.<sup>32</sup> Notwithstanding recent efforts to confront racial inequities, Naomi André writes of Black operas premiered between 1986 and 2005 as forming a “shadow culture” against the mainstream American and South African operas produced during this time.<sup>33</sup>

In the 2010s, American opera houses began to commission African American composers to produce operas in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. “Opera doesn’t have to be European, opera can be made in our image,” remarks Anthony Davis, the composer awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2020 for *Central Park Five*, an opera about the struggles of five Black and Latino youths wrongfully convicted of assault circa 1989. (The young Donald J. Trump appears as a bogeyman urging the death penalty for the young men, as in real life; by the time Davis wrote the opera, the real Trump was the U.S. president.) A new production of Davis’s *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1985), which covers the lifespan of the civil rights activist, was also featured at the Detroit Opera, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and the Metropolitan Opera during 2022–23 after a long absence from the stage. Jeanine Tesori and Tazewell Thompson’s *Blue* (2019), a story that revolves around the killing of a young Black man by a police officer at a protest, is a direct reflection of how American opera has grappled with racism in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests.<sup>34</sup> Previously marginalized experiences of Black Americans are now entering the mainstream of operatic productions. Blanchard’s *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, about a Black youth’s trauma growing up in Louisiana, was featured in both the Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Metropolitan Opera’s 2020–21 seasons. The virtual opera *Death by Life*, sponsored by the Boston-based activist opera company White Snake Projects, received its premiere in May 2021; the work explicitly addresses the mass incarceration of Black people by taking the viewer through an immersive, video-game-like portal styled after a prison. Continuing this work, George Lewis, working with Yuval Sharon, will unveil their hybrid opera project *Comet/Poppea* in 2024 at the Gefen Contemporary at MOCA and The Industry in Los Angeles. The piece merges Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (1643) and W. E. B. Dubois’s science fiction short story “The Comet” into a probing meta-commentary on dystopia, mythology, and power, from the seventeenth century’s dreams of ancient Rome to a speculative imagining of post-apocalyptic race relations just over a century old.

Along with the Detroit Opera, the San Francisco Opera is particularly noteworthy for having commissioned new operas that expand the genre’s topical range and scope, which include, but are not limited to, Bright Sheng’s *Dream of the Red Chamber* (2016), based on an eponymous Qing dynasty novel; Gabriela Lena Franks’s *El último sueño de Frida y Diego* (2023), about the life of the artist Frida Kahlo; and Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels’s *Omar* (2022), based on an autobiography of an enslaved Muslim man, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Music Composition in 2023.

Finally, we would be remiss not to mention women composers who write operas as a means of addressing issues of sexuality, gender, and societal violence. The first two decades of the twenty-first century were a watershed moment in which any sociopolitical movement or mass-mediated event, no matter how controversial or current, could become the topic of a new opera. Paralleling the #MeToo movement, many operas on sexual taboos, assault, or social injustice against women emerged, such as Missy Mazzoli and Royce Vavrek's *Breaking the Waves* (2016), Du Yun and Vavrek's *Angel's Bone* (2016), and Ellen Reid and Roxy Perkins's *p r i s m* (2018). Du Yun and Reid were each awarded a Pulitzer Prize in Music Composition for these operas, as with Giddens and Abels's *Omar*, a sign not just of critical acclaim but of perceived social and cultural relevance. European counterparts addressing violence against women include, but are not limited to, Cecilie Ore and Bibbi Moslet's *Come to the Edge* (2013),<sup>35</sup> centering on the trial of Pussy Riot in Moscow; *Adam and Eve: A Divine Comedy* (2015), a critique of religion's place in society; and Moneim Adwan's *Kalila wa Dimna* (2016), a modern political allegory of corruption and injustice incorporating Arabic and French texts. Kaija Saariaho did not shy away from composing operas on the topic of violence against women and children; following *Adriana Mater*, about the trauma of a woman raped during wartime, *Innocence* (2021) traces the repercussions of an incident of gun violence after which survivors are haunted by memory. As the actions unfold simultaneously within two temporal realms (at a present-day wedding and the time of the school shooting), Markéta, one of the innocent victims, makes ghostly visitations to her mother, who is unable to let go of her child.

Amid these seismic changes in opera's range of subject matter, one wonders whether operatic representations of identity and selfhood have shifted away from the conventions established in nineteenth-century *verismo* and grand operas in new works. The association of voice type (*fach* in German) with character representation provides one kind of yardstick. According to Catherine Clément, characters in nineteenth-century operas map onto voice types as follows: persecuted victim (soprano); heroes of rebellion (tenor); organized opposition (baritone); resistance, witchcraft, and treason (mezzo-soprano); and men of spirit and power (bass).<sup>36</sup> Operas that feature sopranos as victims of tragedy and fate include many of the most-performed works in the canon. Tenor rebels risk their lives for the women they love, while baritones play older men negotiating conflict (or getting in the way of young lovers). Mezzo-sopranos typically portray characters who put themselves in a position of violent contestation, and basses often play great priests and sha-

mans. The identities formed by such character types have been woven into existing tropes of operatic representation.<sup>37</sup>

While familiar tropes of operatic representation have persisted in post-war operas to some degree, there has been a notable shift in voice type associated with the role of persecuted victims. Recent operas have reoriented old operatic discourses of masculinity to showcase men (especially in tenor roles) who, regardless of precise sexuality, are caught in impossible situations for which there is no escape.<sup>38</sup> Take Stewart Wallace's *Harvey Milk* (1996), in which the first openly gay elected politician in San Francisco is sung by a tenor, in a narrative that chronicles his coming-out story from boyhood to the day of his assassination. The happy-go-lucky tenor Jack, in Wuorinen's *Brokeback Mountain* (2014), meets an untimely death because he dares to embrace his homosexual identity in a largely homophobic environment in rural Texas, while his partner, Ennis (baritone), chooses to remain closeted. Everett (chapter 10) argues that Jack, like the heldentenor Siegfried in Wagner's *Ring* cycle (and by extension *Twilight: Gods*), dies prematurely for his fearless and reckless conduct. In Gregory Spears's *Paul's Case* (2013), the young man (a tenor, once again) who is bullied for his queer-coded behavior in Pittsburgh, ends the opera by throwing himself in front of a train in his beloved New York. Thomas Hyde's *That Man Stephen Ward* (2006–7) revolves around the Profumo affair, a sex scandal in England circa 1963; rather than pitting gay against straight men, the shifting dynamics of hegemonic masculinity led Ward to take his own life as a scapegoat for a scandal involving higher-ranking men in British society. Edward Venn (chapter 9) sees this opera as a psychological portrait of a man who ultimately fails in his self-legitimation while attempting to rewrite his own history.

Surveying the broad trajectories that have emerged in opera composition and production as of the early 2020s, one may note a rift between operas that decenter human beings as primary actors or eschew traditional constructions of character and, on the other hand, those that renew opera's exploration of individual psychology and group belonging by expanding the genre's range of represented identities along lines of gender, sexuality, and race. At times, the tension between the two poles manifests within a single work, as with van der Aa's *Upload* and Machover's *Death and the Powers*. At other times, the concept of subjecthood fractures through a postmodern juxtaposition of images and representations, as in *Twilight: Gods*, or through the absence of an actual subject in Bauer's discussion of *¡Unicamente La Verdad!* On the opposite side of the spectrum are operas that focus intently on what it means

to be human and speak directly to the oppression of subject(s) by representatives of normative society. Operas in this latter vein, as the last three essays by Venn, Everett, and Bertola attest, continue the well-established theme of a tragic hero or heroine in opera with a postmodern and postdramatic twist.

## The Volume

Concerns of dramaturgy, posthuman conditions, vocality, and subjectivity unite our contributors' essays in a continuum, from the emphatic posthumanism of Novak's and Stevens's exemplars to the innovative representations and modes of subjective experience in Everett's and Bertola's. Like our opening discussion on *Twilight: Gods*, these essays offer case studies of operas that *disrupt* conventional notions around the staging of operas from yesterday. Dialogues between authors ensue. Essays by Stevens (chapter 1) and Novak (chapter 2) home in on operatic *mise-en-scène* and vocality beyond the human: Novak surveys sculptures, installations, virtual-reality environments, and digital "divas" that bring opera into a tech-saturated Anthropocene, while Stevens examines the influence of science-fiction literature and ecocritical theory on operas depicting non- and more-than-human objects. Ebright (chapter 3) and Bauer (chapter 4) converge on documentary opera, the former foregrounding human concerns of faith, truth, and witness amid an analysis of Reich and Korot's *The Cave* while the latter plays with mediated representations of the legendary, perhaps fictional Camelia la Tejana.

Dramaturgical innovations (including and beyond the eschewal of character) link Rothe's essay (chapter 5), which introduces concepts of the avatar and collective voice in Lewis's *Afterword*, to Calico's (chapter 6), which uncovers the effect of Czernowin's radical approach to vocality and spatialized sounds in *Infinite Now*. Rao's essay (chapter 7) probes aspects of inter-Asian sensibilities in Tan Dun's *Tea: Mirror of Soul* while attending to extended vocality and the materiality of sound, a focus not unlike Renihan's (chapter 8) in a reflection on a wedding ritual among women in *Svadba*. Focusing on narratives of oppression, trauma, and fractured subjectivity, Forner (chapter 9) shows how Anthony Davis deploys a blues-inflected "battle of the sexes" scene to undermine heteropatriarchal norms, Venn (chapter 10) explores a crisis of masculinity stemming from political scandal in Hyde's *That Man Stephen Ward*, while Everett (chapter 11) examines acousmatic expressions of oppression and homophobia in the lives of Wyoming cowboys in Wuorinen's

*Brokeback Mountain* and Bertola (chapter 12) offers examples of fractured operatic subjectivities in Sciarrino's *Lohengrin* and *Superflumina*.

These essays are by no means exhaustive in scope and coverage, but they provide concrete illustrations of the central issues that occupy us in this volume—posthuman conditions, vocality, dramaturgical innovations, and subjecthood—as we respond to shifting discourses in today's opera scholarship. The contributors thus engage each other in robust exchange along such connecting threads such as vocality, mediated representation, and operatic tropes both new and old, as well as new forms of subjectivity and other post-dramatic strategies discussed above. In flux since 1600, opera has adapted to new media and stage technologies, as well as evolving social concerns and discourses. Its representations have ranged from societal oppression and resistance to posthuman collectivity and virtuality. A tentative haze rises over the old, exclusive citadels of power. We offer these essays in the hope that they will illuminate what the future brings.

## Notes

1. Yuval Sharon, "An Operatic Innovator Takes on Detroit," interview by David Allen, *New York Times*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/arts/music/yuval-sharon-michigan-opera-theater.html>

2. Yuval Sharon, "Discussion II: Developing New Themes in Opera," interview by Gundula Kreuzer, Yale Opera Studies Today Conference [Virtual], Yale University, May 8, 2021.

3. Sharon, "Discussion II: Developing New Themes in Opera." David Levin proposes a textual separation between the source materials of opera (the opera text) and elements related to specific production (the performance text) such that the stage director reinforces familiar modes of representation in the source material or, more often than not, *unsettles* the opera text via "strategies of conflict, criticism, or resistance." David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 12.

4. Megan Steigerwald, "Ride of the Spectators: Out of the Opera House and Into the Car," *Lyric Lately*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.lyricopera.org/lyric-lately/ride-of-the-spectators-out-of-the-opera-house-and-into-the-car/>. Steigerwald further contextualizes *Twilight: Gods* as a radical production within traditional operatic institution in Steigerwald, *Opera for Everyone: The Industry's Experiments with American Opera in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024), 207–8.

5. See Alex Ross, *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020) for an assessment of Wagner's posthumous influence on artists. Ross comments that *Gesamtkunstwerk*, although widely cited as Wagner's concept, is "maddeningly vague," becoming a retrospective projection of concerns of the twentieth century—when sound and film technologies allowed for novel media syntheses—onto the nineteenth (355).

6. On operatic obsolescence, see Heather Wiebe (guest editor), *Opera Quarterly* 25 (2009). For a contrasting view on the relationship between the operatic tradition through the early twentieth century and more recent operas, see Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years*, 2e (London: Penguin, 2015).

7. See Tereza Havelková, *Opera as Hypermedium: Meaning-Making, Immediacy, and the Politics of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). On rising public perceptions of opera as inherently elitist since the dawn of cinema as mass entertainment, see Alexandra Wilson, *Opera in the Jazz Age: Cultural Politics in 1920s Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

8. Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 8–12.

9. See the respective program books, available at <https://michiganopera.org/season-schedule/twilight-gods/> for the Detroit production and <https://www.lyricopera.org/shows/upcoming/2020-21/twilight-gods-film/program-book/> for the Chicago version.

10. Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam*, 215–20.

11. Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 3–18.

12. See Novak, *Postopera*, 58–76.

13. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 18. In Robert Greenaway and Louis Andriessen's *Writing to Vermeer* (1999), the letters written by women on stage are projected onto the screen in real time so as to blur the distinction between text and moving image.

14. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 65.

15. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 58.

16. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 65.

17. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 25–27.

18. Ryan Ebright, "Doctor Atomic or: How John Adams Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Sound Design," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 31, no. 1 (March 2019): 85–117.

19. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 58–59. While Wilson's "theatre of images" produces "a peculiar aura of fatefulness as the figures seem to be at the mercy of a mysterious magic," Lehmann argues that it cannot be identified with a specific ideology of fate.

20. Other contemporary East Asian composers writing operas on historical subjects, such as Toshio Hosokawa, Guo Wenjing, Zhou Long, Bright Sheng, among others, incorporate ritualistic elements, but not to the extent Tan has done.

21. Michelle Duncan, "The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body: Voice, Presence, Performativity," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3 (November 2004): 286.

22. Duncan, "The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body," 305.

23. Yayoi U. Everett, "The Tropes of Desire and *Jouissance* in Kaija Saariaho's *L'amour de loin*," in *Music and Narrative in Music Since 1900*, ed. Michael Klein and Nicholas Reyland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 331.

24. Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 152.

25. Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin, eds., *The Voice as Something More: Essays Toward Materiality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 13.

26. See Nina Williams and George Burdon, "Writing Subjectivity Without Subjecthood: The Machinic Unconscious of Nathalie Sarraute's *Tropisms*," *Social and Cultural Geography*, April 20, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2022.2065694>; and Melanie Sehgal, "A Thousand Subjectivities. Rethinking Subjectivity with Félix Guattari and Alfred North Whitehead," Intervention Paper Terra Critica II (Utrecht University, November 23, 2013), <http://terraccritica.net/wp-content/uploads/SehgalTC2-1.pdf>

27. More specifically, Guattari introduces the concept of *ecosophy* at three registers, comprising metal or psychological ecology, social ecology, and environmental ecology, as



intersecting forces that shape subject formations in the globalized age. See Félix Guattari, *Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (New Brunswick: Athlone Press, 2000).

28. Tamar Katz, "Modernism, Subjectivity, and Narrative Form: Abstraction in *The Waves*," *Narrative* 3, no. 3 (1995): 237. The collision between realism and fantasy can also be found in a surrealistic postwar novels such as Abe Kōbō's *Woman in the Dunes* (1964) and *The Face of Another* (1964).

29. In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, a "barred" subject results from the act of suppressing or denying one's own desire in order to cope with societal expectations.

30. See Anthony Tommasini, "Review: 'Fire' Brings a Black Composer to the Met, Finally," *New York Times*, Sept. 28, 2021. The choreographer, Camille A. Brown, created a dream ballet in which Charles is simultaneously terrified and entranced by a vision of alluring, embracing men circling his bed.

31. Mary I. Ingram, Joseph K. So, and Roy Moodley, eds., *Opera in a Multicultural World: Coloniality, Culture, Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1. New operas that foreground coloniality and racial prejudices include Huang Ruo and David Henry Hwang, *An American Soldier* (2014; 2018; 2024) and Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels, *Omar* (2022).

32. See Sophia A. Hall, "Soprano Anna Netrebko Faces Renewed Blackface Accusations over Verona 'Aida' Production," *Classic Fm*, July 11, 2022, <https://www.classicfm.com/artists/anna-netrebko/soprano-blackface-accusations-verona/>

33. Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 177.

34. For an in-depth account of the collaborative process, see Joy H. Calico, "White Snake Projects, *Death by Life* (May 2021), Q&A with Composer David Sanford," *BORN Forum*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.blackoperaresearch.net/forum/2021/05/20/white-snake-projects-death-by-life-may-2021-and-qa-with-composer-david-sanford/>

35. Forner argues that Ore and Moslet establish a dialogue with biblical texts to uncover the collective failures of religion in contemporary society to protect women's rights, evoking *discomfort* as a precondition for spectatorship. Jane Forner, "Distant Past Reimagined: Encountering the Political Present in 21st-Century Opera" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2020), 93.

36. Catherine Clément, "Through Voices, History," in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 22–24.

37. According to Ralph Locke, a paradigmatic plot for exotic operas from *Carmen* to *Madame Butterfly* comprises "a young, tolerant, brave, possibly naive or selfish, white-European tenor-hero" who intrudes into a colonized territory represented by female dancers and an affectionate lyric soprano, pitting himself against a chorus of male savages led a brutal chieftain or priest (bass or baritone). See Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 181.

38. An exception can be found in Laura Kaminsky's chamber opera *As One* (2014), which features a transgender subject who is born male (baritone) and transitions to a female (soprano) as she moves toward self-realization and empowerment.

## Fear of an Envoiced Planet

### *Speculative Arias of the Operatic Hyperobject*

Nicholas David Stevens

“bursts of static came through the headphones against a background of deep, low-pitched murmuring, which seemed to me the very voice of the planet itself.”<sup>1</sup>

The voice of a planet, electronically mediated, fills a void left by expected human speech. How would this scenario, outlined by Stanisław Lem in the quotation above—his aural-only first depiction of the titular alien world in the novel *Solaris* (1961)—play out at the opera? This is no hypothetical question. Between 2011 and 2015, three new operatic adaptations of the novel made their debuts across Europe. A fourth, neglected since the 1990s, returned to stages in 2017. Even canonic fare warped amid *Solaris*’s mysterious gravity: a 2017 staging of Puccini’s *La bohème*, informed by Lem’s plot devices, incensed Regieoper opponents in Paris.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I argue that the sort of planetary voice that Lem conjures in the epigraph above has begun to reverberate in opera beyond adaptations of his novel. Between 2016 and 2018, Ash and Adam Fure debuted early versions of *The Force of Things*, an “opera for objects” that, in evoking voice-bodies and vocality at environmental scales, relates back to *Solaris* in a readily traceable lineage of ideas. The question of how opera might envoice things too vast for humans to comprehend thus became a practical one for twenty-first-century opera creators. I treat the problem of giving planets voice as a way into a broader set of questions: as opera creators decenter or unsettle depictions of humanity in new works and radical productions, what novel configurations of voice, body, and performance space become possible?<sup>3</sup> Can the sublimely vast sing?<sup>4</sup>

Here, Lem's novel *Solaris*—titled for its setting, an exoplanet—sheds light on a diverse set of operas. I first consider the adaptation that makes the most of Lem's descriptions of alien voices: composer Dai Fujikura and librettist Saburo Teshigawara's *Solaris* (2013, revised 2014). I focus on a 2021 staging by Neue Oper Wien, in part because of its wide (if brief) availability via streaming video, and in part due to the real-world resonances afforded by its creative team's scenic and dramaturgical interventions. Among all the operatic adaptations of the novel, Fujikura and Teshigawara's offers uniquely persuasive solutions to the challenge of making a planet sing. Lem's text implies that protagonist Kris Kelvin unlearns distinctions separating him from others and the environment; in Teshigawara's text, Kelvin states as much outright. Fujikura's body doubles and live-electronic vocal prostheses render audible a breakdown of human individuality and autonomy.

Fujikura's live-electronic hybrid voices seem to emanate from singing human(oid) bodies entangled with their environments, less *nonhuman* than *more-than-human*. In the passage quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, Kelvin perceives it at once as a voice and a sonic "background," a contradiction that resolves as the planet erases distinctions between foreground and background, character and setting. In so doing, it recalls the philosophical notion of the *hyperobject*. Scholar Timothy Morton's neologism describes "a bundle of entities massively distributed in time and space that forms an entity in its own right, one that is impossible for humans to see or touch directly."<sup>5</sup> Among Morton's inspirations for this concept: *Solaris*. Influenced in turn by Morton's manifestos and other recent environmentalist philosophical writings, *The Force of Things* meditates on themes of ecological injury and its consequences, distinct from but akin to those latent in *Solaris*. Composer and sound artist Ash Fure brings the hyperobject—the concept through which I frame *Solaris* and Earth alike—into opera.<sup>6</sup>

At stake in this chapter is the range of motivations and strategies for the creation of more-than-human voices in opera and the way such speculative voices guide decision making about music, text, and dramaturgy. Lem's *Solaris* remains central to this inquiry even after I move from Fujikura and Teshigawara's adaptation to the seemingly unrelated *The Force of Things*. In their respective adaptations of Lem's novel, Michael Obst and Detlev Glanert locate the sound or "voice" of *Solaris* beyond human characters' bodies, in the background.<sup>7</sup> These composers decline to envoice the planet as the entangled, more-than-human presence it is; rather, it remains a mirror of humanity, problem to solve, or mere setting. Fujikura, by contrast, renders audible

the sort of foreground/background collapse that makes *Solaris* a *locus classicus* of the hyperobject.

I focus on hyperobject voices rather than *Solaris* adaptations per se—a subject no less worthy of study—in part because notions of planetary voice and agency have become pertinent in another, wider context: that of the climate crisis. The music scholar Andrew J. Chung describes a reduction in atmospheric carbon dioxide around 1610, likely caused by mass death as Europeans invaded the Americas, as one of the first major events in anthropogenic climate change—and as a vocalization. Chung writes, “the lethality of . . . colonial invasions caused the planet itself to gasp. I regard this characterization of atmospheric chemistry in terms of planetary voice as only slightly metaphorical.”<sup>8</sup> In this understanding of history as a composite of “human” and “natural” events so inextricable as to obviate the distinction, anthropogenic climate change and opera history share almost the same timeline. Here, I bring Chung’s notion of planetary voice into the realm of contemporary opera composition.

The novel *Solaris* achieved its peculiar resonance in opera, and *The Force of Things* dared critics to challenge its claim to the genre, as climate activists wondered whether people will ever heed nonhuman and more-than-human voices of warning. At the same time and for related reasons, scholars proposed renovations of such humanist and human-centered (*anthropocentric*) conceits as natural vs. cultural history; vitality as a merely biological quality; and, in J. Martin Daughtry’s case, the voice as a human-, animal-, or even sonic-only phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> By 2021, some opera houses had embraced eco-friendly practices and eco-conscious art.<sup>10</sup> But the Fure siblings’ piece, and even Fujikura and Teshigawara’s (not intentionally environmentalist) opera, pose more fundamental challenges to definitions of opera and vocality.

Ash Fure describes *The Force of Things*, which eschews a fictional plot or characters, as an exercise in centering nonhuman and more-than-human objects, including entities that exceed human comprehensibility in space, time, and vibration: hyperobjects. The piece invites attendees to feel Earth’s distress as their own, not unlike the empathy that Fujikura and Teshigawara’s protagonist develops for *Solaris*. The latter creative team modifies Lem’s text, making the mutual imbrication of humans and their environment audible in singers’ electronically extended voices and words. The Fure siblings, by contrast, configure musicians and objects in a space such that the installation becomes an enveloping, prosthetic vocalic body, with human, nonhuman, acoustic, and electronic vocal organs.<sup>11</sup> In examining both operas’ reinven-

tions of voice/body relationships that have long defined opera, I build on the work of Jelena Novak.<sup>12</sup> The implications of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism—respectively, intellectual projects devoted to moving past the humanist intellectual tradition and humanity’s self-centering in Western philosophy—could be profound for scholars of the voice in music and theater.<sup>13</sup> I maintain, however, that opera has already opened itself to the possibility of more-than-human, mass-assemblage, and hyperobject vocalities.

The composer Matthew Aucoin asserts: “opera is impossible and always has been.”<sup>14</sup> To a rare degree, he writes, its creators have aspired to “unrealizable” artistic syntheses and levels of affective intensity. The more-than-human voice, a key element of any opera fit for Morton’s “time of hyperobjects,” is another in a long line of such productive impossibilities.<sup>15</sup> Posthumanist and post-anthropocentric ideas arrived in opera by varied routes: sometimes via science fiction that has inspired contemporary thinkers (see *Solaris*) and sometimes via those philosophical movements themselves (*The Force of Things*). Regardless of origin, such thinking sends operatic dramaturgy and vocality into states of flux.

## Lem and the Uncanniness of the Self-Humanizing Hyperobject

The title of Lem’s *Solaris* refers interchangeably to an exoplanet and its living liquid surface: “one massive ocean body . . . perhaps sentient on a scale beyond human comprehension . . . at once an environment and a subject,” as Melody Jue puts it.<sup>16</sup> By the time the novel’s events commence, Solaris has been creating copies of human-made objects (“mimoids”) from its own tissue for years. That it has a sensorium and a form of intelligence seem beyond question. The planet, however, declines to communicate and defies comprehension. Readers learn that just prior to psychologist Kris Kelvin’s arrival on Solaris, the scientist Gibarian had bombarded the “ocean” with high-intensity X-rays. Soon after, living manifestations of figures from the scientists’ minds, each a source of deep shame, materialized in the station. These “visitors” never allow hosts to leave their sight. The eruption of human inner torment into embodied social reality pulls readers’ attention from the planet’s alterity toward the affairs of the heart, a more familiar operatic concern and a major reason why many composers and librettists have adapted the novel as a love

story set against a hostile setting, rather than as an exploration of that setting's strangeness, agency, and vocality.

*Solaris*-as-story has proved as fluid in form as its namesake. Cinephiles know a version of its plot from Andrei Tartovsky's film adaptation (*Солярис*, 1972). Obst's opera adaptation made its debut at the 1996 Munich Biennale and has proved a rarity since, although theaters in Linz and Saarbrücken mounted director Hermann Schneider's revival in 2017 and 2018. In 2002, Tartovsky's film resurfaced on DVD just as Steven Soderbergh introduced a Hollywood remake. The first direct translation of Lem's Polish into English emerged in the novel's fiftieth anniversary year of 2011.<sup>17</sup> A wave of operatic adaptations followed: that same year, Torino's Teatro Valdocco gave the premiere of composer/librettist Enrico Correggia's original opera, which awaits revival at the time of writing. Glanert and librettist Reinhold Palm's adaptation first appeared at the 2012 Bregenzer Festspiele, then at Oper Köln in 2014. Fujikura and Teshigawara's piece was completed in 2013, revised in the following year, and given its world premiere at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 2015. It has since had productions in Lausanne, Augsburg, Tokyo, and Vienna. This opera thus became the third adaptation to appear in a four-year span, around the same time the world rediscovered Obst's piece and Guth staged his *Solaris*-inspired *bohème*.<sup>18</sup>

In all adaptations and media, *Solaris* melts individual subjectivity into ambient communal desperation. Gibarian kills himself hours before Kelvin arrives, but returns in the latter's dreams. Snaut (*Snow* in the ubiquitous English translation by Steve Cox and Joanna Kilmartin) seldom appears sober. Sartorius remains locked in a lab, hiding his visitor, a child, from sight. Kelvin's own visitor assumes the form of his late wife Harey (*Rheya* in the Kilmartin-Cox translation; henceforth the japanized *Hari* of Teshigarawa's libretto). It speaks as though a revived version of the real person but lacks her inner life, being not a replica but rather a simulacrum, mediated by *Solaris*'s mimicry and Kelvin's memory.<sup>19</sup> The real Hari killed herself after Kelvin abandoned her. (I refer to the "visitor" character by her human template's name, as do Lem and all librettists.) The scientists preceding Kelvin gazed into an ontological abyss and the abyss literally gazed also into them, rising not just from setting to character but also to author of characters. It creates intermediaries who are at once *of* itself and *of* humanity, erasing distinctions of self/other, subject/object, inner/outer, and environment/occupant.

In describing an alien Other that exists in multiple places and forms at

once, Lem limns the indescribable while also offering a more conventional image of unearthly life: humanoids, *just* far enough from actual humanity to occupy the uncanny valley.<sup>20</sup> Radical alterity unsettles characters and readers in one way; the apparition of familiar faces in a station light years from Earth buffets them in another. By taking many shapes, defying comprehension, and collapsing Jue's dichotomy of "environment and subject," *Solaris* anticipates a philosophical concept over forty years the novel's junior: Morton's *hyperobject*.<sup>21</sup>

Morton advances an "object-oriented" ontology that gives nonhuman and more-than-human assemblages parity with, if not priority over, humans and anthropocentric ways of knowing.<sup>22</sup> That Morton's thought aligns with *Solaris* is no coincidence; the novel clearly fired their thinking. Less than two years before publishing their first writings on hyperobjects, Morton argued, in clearly related terms, that Lem's book anticipated theories about our own planet's vitality.<sup>23</sup> Comparing Lem's descriptions of *Solaris* to the language of James Lovelock and Lynne Margulis's "Gaia hypothesis," which reimagines the earth as a massive organism with quasi-biotic regulative processes, Morton notes, "Gaian language portrays the Earth as telling us that we are harming it, through indirect, emergent messages. . . . *Solaris* communicates in a far more direct way, as a singular being speaking to singular beings."<sup>24</sup> Here Morton suggests that the key difference between Lovelock and Margulis's Gaia and Lem's *Solaris* is the voice as medium of language, facilitator of direct address, and marker of isolable identity. In Morton's interpretation, the creatures appear in response to Gibarian's violent scans, seizing researchers' attention with *anthropomorphic*, or humanized, forms and forcing the aggressors to empathize. From Lem's living planet that hybridizes itself with humanity—among other science-fiction conceits—arose a line of thinking that soon led to the hyperobject. In one passage of their subsequent book *The Ecological Thought*, Morton claims that "ecological crisis has disrupted our normative sense of foreground and background"; cites *Solaris* as prophetic of this paradigm shift; and introduces their first published definition of the hyperobject.<sup>25</sup>

As Chingshun J. Sheu argues, *Solaris* is the perfect Mortonian hyperobject *avant la lettre*.<sup>26</sup> Morton defines the hyperobject through five properties, beyond human-dwarfing scale: *viscosity*, a "sticky" attachment to beings, such as humans, involved in it; *nonlocality*, a refusal to exist solely (or ever) in complete form in the same space as us; *temporal undulation*, or existence on many timescales at once, including unfathomably long (yet finite) durations;

*phasing*, in which an object makes more sense to humans as a process than as a thing; and *interobjectivity*, the mutual relationality linking things across categories of subject and object. Solaris is at once a planet, a living ocean, the mimoids, and the visitors; telepathically hooked into human minds; and ungraspable in age, extent, or agency. No mere background, it makes itself impossible to ignore. It meets Morton's criteria, in part because it appears to have helped inspire said criteria. Its spatiotemporal vastness and ontological alterity render it unthinkable and unrelatable unless embodied as figures from human imagination and memory—tragic ones who, in opera, must sing.

### Fujikura and the Live-Electronic Realization of the Hyperobject Voice

As Anthony Enns observes, no one ever hears a unitary voice of Solaris unmediated.<sup>27</sup> Lem, however, returns to alien voices throughout the novel, his mention of planetary murmurs a foreshadowing of the visitors' speech. Fujikura, in turn, lavishes technical resources on filtering, extending, and multiplying the voices of humans and visitors alike. Like Obst, he developed the electronic elements of his score with composer and sound artist Gilbert Nouno at IRCAM, including fixed sound files and software patches for live processing.<sup>28</sup> As in the novel, and in line with the behaviors of the hyperobject, the assemblage called "Solaris" sounds mostly as an *effect on humans* in this opera, each member of the cast shadowed by uncanny body and electronic doubles. Over time, even "real" humans take on live-electronic planetary vocality.

In the novel, planetary sounds first emerge in the form of a *basso profundo* audio artifact in radio transmissions. Fujikura includes a sound file consisting of low, quiet sounds, intended to prime listeners for the opera subliminally as they take their seats.<sup>29</sup> This optional element recalls Lem's "deep, low-pitched murmuring . . . the very voice of the planet itself," regardless of whether Fujikura intended the reference. Other fixed samples augment the sound of the pit orchestra's player-per-part string section, but most of the electronics consist of live vocal processing patches to amplify and prosthetically extend the sounds of singers, on- and offstage.

At one point in the novel, a disturbing sound, heard through an intercom, emerges from Hari. Its words remain intelligible, but Lem writes that it "[bears] not the slightest resemblance to the human voice."<sup>30</sup> Kelvin remains



shaken by this voice long after hearing it, but aside from its high pitch, Lem—given to extended flights of lyrical description elsewhere in the novel, as Seo-Young Chu observes—declines to describe what makes it so distinctly inhuman.<sup>31</sup> Its very nature as a *voice* that is *nonhuman* may trigger Kelvin's fear, as vocality has long been seen as unique to, even constitutive of, humanity or animality.<sup>32</sup> It may also fall into a sort of vocal uncanny valley, at once like a human voice and not. Drawing on spectralist aesthetics in the corresponding scene of the opera, Fujikura draws high overtones out of Hari's voice. A software patch ("Hari scream") adds inhumanly high pitches atop the soprano's (Act II mm. 466 and 478; Act III m. 337) and a filter sweep over the combined sound.<sup>33</sup> This, then, is Fujikura's solution to Lem's intercom voice.<sup>34</sup> Even under "normal" conditions, however, Fujikura renders Hari's human/nonhuman duality audible by doubling her sung lines out of sync through a patch called "Hari electronics."

Another of Fujikura's vocal filters represents the planet melding minds with Kelvin. The composer divides the Kelvin character across two baritones, one onstage for social interaction and another offstage for inner monologue. He adds a vocoder effect to the latter in a dream implying communion with the ocean (Act III, m. 455). The onstage Kelvin thrashes in his sleep as "his" voice describes dream imagery from offstage. Whispering of "tiny molluscs" and other aquatic phenomena in electronically generated harmony with himself, Kelvin gains something of Solaris's vocalic multiplicity and nonlocality. He fleshes out a vision of oceanic immersion reminiscent of Morton's metaphors for living in a hyperobject: "squishy and mollusk-like . . . as if we were inside a giant octopus."<sup>35</sup> Like Morton, Fujikura and Teshigawara imagine a simultaneous loss and heightening of selfhood in perceiving oneself in an ecological hyperobject, an affect blending the familiar and alien. Alexa Woloshyn argues that electroacoustic vocalities can *queer*, or transgress, binaries between human and nature, voice and environment, or soundscape and listener; they thus *sound queer* in many senses.<sup>36</sup> In this scene, electronic multiplication of the voice sounds the erotic intimacy of man and alien ocean. Like Hari, a sort of queer progeny of these entities, Kelvin too assumes a more-than-human vocality.

Solaris, Jue argues, acts as a mirror: it materializes humans' repressed interiority.<sup>37</sup> Snaut, one of Lem's researchers, introduces this metaphor in a monologue on humans' inability to view alterity as anything more than a reflection of themselves: "[space explorers] are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors."<sup>38</sup> Fujikura and Teshigawara pare

away Lem's minor scientists and visitors and pair each remaining character with a double, a vocal reflection, at once self and Other. Hari has her disembodied echoes and screams; Kelvin has inner and outer selves. The couple in turn becomes an inseparable unit. Snaut (an unheroic tenor) mirrors colleague Gibarian (an archetypal voice-of-warning spectral bass), who has his own live-electronic patch. Both haunt the station—the former figuratively, as a shell of himself, and the latter semi-literally, as the planet projects images of him into the dreams of the living. In the 2015 world premiere production of the opera, Teshigawara's doubling of most of the vocal cast with dancers heightened the uncanny mood and fixation on mirroring.

A staging of *Solaris* by Neue Oper Wien in 2021 offered powerful visual analogues for the terrestrial hang-ups that follow humans to Solaris. Performed live for critics only amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the performance occupied a small semicircular stage in Vienna's Atelierhaus der Akademie der bildenden Künste, in part to enable multicamera recording. I, and others worldwide, watched the resulting film online via streaming video, available on the company's website for several months thereafter. Their programming proved apt: Solaris Station's death-haunted skeleton crew, confined to a pillar-ringed platform with minimal set, resembled quarantining households across the world outside.

The production team behind this *Solaris*—production designer Helen Malkowsky, stage director Kathrin Kemp, costume designer Anna-Sophie Lienbacher, video artist Sophie Lux, “sound director” Christina Bauer, and lighting designer Norbert Chmel—mounted scenic and dramaturgical interventions that put themes of entanglement and mirroring at the fore. A large circular mirror on the floor visually duplicated each singer who stood or lay on it. The “offstage” inner Kelvin, gold-encrusted and clutching a microphone, swanned *onstage* in defiance of the score and libretto, providing a visual double where Fujikura had scored for acousmatic voice. Ordinary yarn played an affecting role: Hari materialized holding a half-knitted pink sweater, a tragic nod to her and Kelvin's lost domesticity as well as an emblem of mental unraveling. In Act III, she unwound it, along with its ball of what reviewer Christoph Irrgeher, attending to the object's connotations of femininity, calls “Damenwolle”: *women's* yarn.<sup>39</sup> Hari, and later Snaut, stretched threads around the innermost ring of columns later in the performance, shrinking the already-small staging area.

As this process of hemming-in proceeded, a circular cutout loomed behind the actors, unattended to despite projections flitting across it (fig. 1.1). This,



Fig. 1.1. Hari (Simona Eisinger) and Kelvin (Timothy Connor) in Neue Oper Wien's 2021 *Solaris*. © Photograph used with permission from Andrej Grilc.

then, was *Solaris*. The circular mirror at center stage, which appears to have fallen out of the void representing the planet, comes to resemble the pool of Narcissus. The planet has spoken, but the scientists hear mostly their own echoes. Teshigawara's final lines for Kelvin, however, suggest in this and every production that Kelvin comes to feel a new affect; he perceives the planet, no mere mirror, as a part of himself and vice versa. An orchestral crescendo to nowhere rises all around as the onstage Kelvin soars to F4 on a text that jettisons Lem's reflective anticlimax in favor of ecstatic resolve: "Having this feeling transcends human knowledge . . . I will stay here, as a new lifeform."<sup>40</sup> The foregrounded figure not only wishes to merge with something once consigned to the background, but also to moot the distinction between these categories. In this opera's final minutes, it transcends the tendency of adaptations of *Solaris* to devolve into a tragic love drama with extraterrestrial *tinta*.

For contrast, consider the most widely accessible 2010s opera performance to feature aspects of *Solaris*'s plot: Guth's 2017 staging of Puccini's *La bohème* for the Opéra national de Paris, as it appears in an audiovisual recording.<sup>41</sup> Rodolfo, Marcello, Schaunard, and Colline become astronauts in a space station above an exoplanet. Mimì, Musetta, and others appear as



Fig. 1.2. Atalla Ayan (Rodolfo) and Nicole Car (Mimi) in Opéra national de Paris's 2017 *La bohème*. © Photograph used with permission from Bernd Uhlig and the Opéra national de Paris.

their hallucinations of the terrestrial past. Guth named *Solaris* as an inspiration for the production.<sup>42</sup> Grafting *bohème's* cast into the scenario of *Solaris*, Guth unsettles Puccini, Illica, and Giacosa's operatic text in David Levin's sense of the verb.<sup>43</sup> An opera known for soaring sentiment takes on disturbing implications amid unfamiliar visual cues and events. In setting up the incongruities of language, sound, and acting typical of Regieoper, Guth independently arrives at strategies similar to those of the Vienna *Solaris*. Mimi enters in Act I with her customary candle, here symbolic of a lost home; body doubles appear with her and Rodolfo, heightening the staging's vocal and visual uncanniness; and the planet always looms, whether through a window, abstracted as Parpignol's balloon, or dominating the stage in Act III. Guth adds sounds of superhuman scale: breathy vocalizations sweep the auditorium between scenes. Any suggestion of planetary agency, however, ends there.

Guth's emphasis on human interpersonal drama is unsurprising for any production of *La bohème*, but is also typical of direct *Solaris* adaptations. One reviewer complained specifically that Obst's work consigns the planet

to the sonic and scenic margins in favor of monologues plumbing the human psyche.<sup>44</sup> Obst's statement on the work notes that the planet, while given a "sound world" all its own, remains a setting.<sup>45</sup> Although Glanert and Palm devote a role in their cast list and the literal, collective voice of a choir to the planet, reviews confirm that in this opera, Solaris's voice mimics or mirrors Kelvin, singing from the wings.<sup>46</sup> Fujikura and Teshigawara's piece, with its electroacoustic vocalities that synthesize human and hyperobject, is thus an outlier. From here, however, I turn from operas that stumble upon the hyperobject via Lem's novel to theories of posthumanist vocality per se, and a speculative realization thereof: *The Force of Things* (2016/2017).

### Shivering Lungs, Wailing Winds: *The Force of Things* Reinvents the Voice-Body

Amid an airborne pandemic and the warming of Earth's atmosphere, J. Martin Daughtry advances a posthumanist redefinition of the voice that stretches the concept beyond humanly audible in- and exhalations from biological life. He includes material and vibrational events that flout detectability by typical human sensoria, at difficult-to-process scales: "[W]e need a posthuman, post-sonorous conception of voice, one that acknowledges the provinciality and contingency of its sounded dimension and highlights its many environmental entailments. With this in mind, I will here be treating voice not as a purposeful sound issuing from a human throat that expresses human thoughts and identities, but rather as a widespread atmospheric phenomenon that is not limited to humans, or even to biological life."<sup>47</sup>

Daughtry, like Morton and other scholars who seek to decenter humanity and transcend humanism, gives urgent political reasons for ditching traditional definitions: "a necessary price to pay . . . as the changing composition and dynamics of air are connected to many of the local and global challenges we face." His explosion of the concept of voice represents a long-anticipated move for voice studies. As early as 2013, Milla Tiainen pointed out that posthumanist philosophical currents, including Morton and cohorts' object-oriented ontology, promised ways to examine how voices enact relationality beyond the bodies of individual human subjects.<sup>48</sup> As Virginie Magnat observes, however, little interaction between voice studies and the "new" posthumanist ways of thinking—many of which, she and others argue, resemble animistic philosophies of Indigenous communities, rebranded as innovations by Western academics—actually followed.<sup>49</sup>

Many a scholar has since assigned voice to ecological hyperobjects in the rhetorical sense of *giving voice to the voiceless*, that is, speaking for something without language. Deborah Wardle, for instance, proposes groundwater as a hyperobject, introducing an analogy that recalls Glanert's vocal writing for the planet Solaris: groundwater calls out "like a choir where harmonies meld and separate according to the range of voices[.]"<sup>50</sup> This is the hyperobject voice as pure metaphor. The political theorist and "new materialist" philosopher Jane Bennett declares, in similar fashion, "I will try to *give voice* to a thing-power."<sup>51</sup> The title of the chapter in her monograph *Vibrant Matter* that advances this goal: "The Force of Things." In their eponymous piece, inspired by the eco-oriented philosophical writings of Bennett, Morton, and colleagues such as Donna Haraway and Christoph Cox, the Fure siblings literalize and push beyond this metaphor of "giving voice."

Morton and their philosophical kin have posited inaction on climate change as, in part, a problem of human attention. Object-oriented and new materialist thinkers, acknowledging debts to posthumanism, argue that the scale of destruction that humans have wrought defies our powers of spatial and temporal comprehension. Hyperobjects fail to register in their entirety in the domain of the senses, also straining cognitive capacities. One of the most remarked-upon pieces of music theater to address climate change, *The Force of Things* follows Morton in construing global warming and pollution plumes, of, for instance, Styrofoam as hyperobjects that need translation into audible, palpable, and visible forms on short timescales for humans to feel their presences. Yet Ash Fure's sounds for the piece remind attendees that all human sensoria have limits. Critic Alex Ross, attending a 2017 performance at Montclair State University, emphasized the role of infrasound in this effect: "Enveloping dread, ambient unease, a kind of sensuous foreboding . . . Fure addresses feelings that are all too familiar in early-twenty-first-century life. . . . For most of the work's duration, twenty-four subwoofers, placed with their cones pointed upward, emit electronic tones that vibrate at a frequency of 10.67 hertz, or around ten oscillations per second. . . . The body is listening even when the ears tune out."<sup>52</sup>

The "opera for objects" places custom instruments, conventional winds played with extended technique, speaker components, and other objects in the hands of musicians—*not* in character—who move in ritualistic solemnity, eschewing language. Opera, for all its diversity, has almost always hewed to conventions such as plot, character, interpersonal drama, and setting. The Fure siblings cut it loose.<sup>53</sup> Their piece exemplifies Novak's concept of *postopera*, adopting selected formal elements, descriptive language, and strategies

for affective attunement from opera while dispensing with other constitutive traits. Novak writes that postopera complicates the question of what “the voice” in a piece even *is*, let alone from where, what, and whom it may emanate.<sup>54</sup> The question I pursue here: How does *The Force of Things* reinvent opera’s historical voice-body relationships for the time of hyperobjects?<sup>55</sup> In offering a partial *dramatis non-personae* of objects that define the piece, I follow Ash and Adam Fure’s posthumanist concept while departing from their chosen descriptive language to date.

Prosthesis has fascinated posthumanists since the movement’s insurgency in the 1990s.<sup>56</sup> I argue that this installation *becomes* a sort of prosthetic voice-body through its audible and palpable vibrations. In 2018, at a performance of *The Force of Things* I attended, the Fure siblings presented visual and sonic elements that suggested real-world referents yet became alien in their scale and ambiguity.<sup>57</sup> Ash Fure called for performers to evoke humanoid and nonhuman forms of vocality along spectra from infrasonic to ultrasonic and quasi-vocal to mechanistic, often out of sync with expected roles of singers and instrumentalists. Essential to the project is immersion as though in a hyperobject: audience members perceive their somatic and sensory limitations, feeling subsumed and pervaded, somewhat like astronauts on Solaris. Condemning the perceived misogyny behind a review of the 2016 world premiere performance, Fure assures readers that, far from the human anatomy to which the critic in question referred, *The Force of Things* arose from “thoughts of the anthropocene, of ‘hyperobjects,’ of timescales impossibly out of sync, of alien materials.”<sup>58</sup>

Although Ash Fure has called *The Force of Things* a “drama,” musicians seldom interact with one another, and no plot becomes apparent.<sup>59</sup> Language remains limited to preperformance addresses in which Ash Fure exhorts attendees to feel catastrophes such as climate change, which unfold on a hyperobject’s scales of time and space, with the sort of fear that would arise were a tiger to stalk through the room.<sup>60</sup> Silences in the opera offer not relief, but the paralysis of standing with a knife to one’s throat.<sup>61</sup> On a webpage for the piece posted in 2023, Fure updates its subtitle from *An Opera for Objects* to *A Climate Opera* and lists one of its guiding questions as: “where is the sonic adrenaline we need?”<sup>62</sup> I read this quotation as a suggestion that the opera creates not just an architectural assemblage, as the Fure siblings describe it, but also a prosthetic voice-body with its own endocrine system, in this case a pathway for transmuting ambient dread into acute fear.

Ash Fure characterizes the piece as “an immersive intermedia work that

wrestles with collective violence, material agency, and the haunting thrust of the anthropocene . . . [and] explores a post-human terrain.”<sup>63</sup> *Anthropocene* denotes an epoch in which human influence on all life and landscapes defines the state of the planet, becoming a permanent layer of death and detritus in the geologic record.<sup>64</sup> In speaking of “post-human terrain,” Fure names but one influence on the piece; post-anthropocentrism is another. Hans-Thies Lehmann, theorist of postdramatic theater, almost predicted *The Force of Things* in sketching a possible “post-anthropocentric theatre”: “Under this heading one could assemble the theatre of objects entirely without human actors . . . and theatre that integrates the human form mostly as an element in landscape-like spatial structures. They are aesthetic figurations that point utopically towards an alternative to the anthropocentric ideal of the subjection of nature.”<sup>65</sup> Many principles of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism—for one, the conviction that one must look and listen past ordinary human experience to render vast phenomena comprehensible—reverberate through Fure’s comments on *The Force of Things*, a posthuman prosthetic apparatus in postoperative form. A program note further explains:

*The Force of Things* . . . wrestles with the animate vitality of matter and the mounting hum of ecological anxiety around us. The project is driven by a desire to tune our focus toward a rate of change (impossibly slow) and a scope of alteration (unthinkably vast) at odds with the scale of human life. . . . [The piece] has a palpable sense of urgency and yet it’s eerily still[.] These moves attempt to train our perception beyond its given boundaries—below the sounds we’re built to hear and through the sensory illusion of stasis that renders us still in the face of collapse.<sup>66</sup>

Chung observes that *Etudes from the Anthropocene*, a predecessor to *The Force of Things*, makes “training” of the listener explicit in the title. It aspires to the condition of listening pedagogy: ear training for planetary swan songs.<sup>67</sup> While each class of object in the opera refers to a limitless range of personal associations for each attendee, I construe each as a specifically *vocal* apparatus, calling Fure’s “sonic adrenaline” into circulation.<sup>68</sup>

**Mouths; throats.** Several minutes into an opera that begins with no humans in sight other than fellow attendees, a pair of singers with megaphones—vocal prostheses that obscure and extend mouths—appear and emit clicks, gasps, and slower inhalation/exhalation sounds, all spatially



and timbrally estranged from the bodies that initiate them. These amplified whispers echo the vocal writing of Ash Fure's sometime composition teacher Chaya Czernowin: "singers snake side-by-side amidst the audience, shouting a warning that sounds like a whisper in a language no one can understand."<sup>69</sup> Holding these amplification devices, reminiscent at once of disaster sites and protests, the singers led audience members at the 2018 production into a second space. Other musicians, sheathed in the plastic coats of scientists or hazmat cleanup technicians, activate speaker drivers, steel cables, and traditional instruments such as a bassoon and saxophone. Sources of sound and infrasound "sing" laments for dying ecosystems, as humans (including Ash Fure, behind the scenes but visible at an electronics station in the 2018 version) remain literally peripheral.<sup>70</sup> The vocalists move on to recognizably human sung tones, with instrumentalists matching them in intensity and, at times, timbre.<sup>71</sup> In a then still-evolving document and instructions that Fure shared with me, a note advises, "try to make the bassoon sound as much like a wailing female voice as possible."<sup>72</sup>

**Vocal cords.** From *Tripwire*, a 2010 installation co-created with Jean-Michel Albert, Ash Fure derived the wires (duly labeled "tripwires" in the above-mentioned performance document) that, attached to speaker drivers at one end and the ceiling at the other, occupy the center of the seating area.<sup>73</sup> They vibrate quickly enough to produce visible waveforms, but slowly enough to not produce pitches; instead, hidden speakers suggest the low tones that might emerge from such massive strings. Performers manipulate them, sometimes slackening them by lifting the speaker cones. The piece ends after performers leave the room and one by one, the wires cease to vibrate: a death scene. From electrical conduits and stabilizing tethers to strings on a mammoth musical instrument, the cables recall dozens of industrial, infrastructural, and artistic objects from everyday life, as well as a seismograph's wavering lines. Their motions, however, inescapably (and intentionally) suggest vitality. I offer the vocal cord—an outdated term for the thus-named part of the larynx, but an image to which I circle back below—as one productive analogue.

**Lungs.** Installation-performances titled *Shiver Lung* and *Etudes from the Anthropocene* appeared in performances led by Ash Fure in 2016, each a partial preview of the full "opera for objects" to come.<sup>74</sup> A subsequent installment in the *Shiver Lung* series clarified one of the title's meanings: slowed to vibrate below human limits of pitch and volume perception, amputated speaker cones resemble inhuman lungs, laboring to breathe under hands that resusci-

tate and/or suffocate.<sup>75</sup> Their dilations and collapses provide the opera with a flutter that ranges from the softness of teeth chattering to the shattering clank of a jackhammer, depending on the objects, from cardboard or foam panels to bar chimes and chains, interacting with them in a given instant.

**Vocal Folds.** For the 2018 performances of *The Force of Things*, the siblings divided a ballet practice hall into an anteroom and a larger space, each swathed in (decidedly nontheatrical) curtains made of drafting paper and synthetic rubber. The clattering that greets attendees arises from the tap of floor-to-ceiling cables, driven by subwoofers, against these towering figures. As the lighting changed, these sculptural pieces looked in turn like sheets of ice, titanic jellyfish, or—in reddish light—hides.<sup>76</sup> In a revealing coincidence, they also resemble the cover art of scholar Nina Sun Eidsheim’s monograph *Sensing Sound*, published months before the 2016 premiere of a version of *The Force of Things* at the 48th Darmstadt Summer Course for New Music.<sup>77</sup> The photograph, from artist Vilde Rolfsen’s *Plastic Bag Landscape* series, calls glacial environments or organic tissue to mind but, as the title suggests, depicts an ordinary shopping bag, at once quotidian and an emblem of plastic pollution.<sup>78</sup> In the context of Eidsheim’s work, the image also recalls the interior of the human throat. If *The Force of Things*’ wires, with their visible waveforms, recall the popular yet anatomically infelicitous idea of vocal “cords,” like those of a stringed instrument, then the curtains, like Rolfsen’s photograph, evoke the terminology of *vocal folds*.

Unintended kinships between Eidsheim and the Fure siblings’ work run deeper, extending to the notion of the voice as but one of many vibratory forces for affective transference and political solidarity across people and things. Ash Fure continues to add components to the piece, such as the talk-box-like “mouthtubes” that appeared in performances at Dartmouth University in 2022. These devices direct instrumental sound into human vocal tracts for live manipulation by mouth, almost inverting the vocoder effect of Fujikura’s *Solaris/Kelvin* dream voice. *The Force of Things*’ reinvention of the voice-body in opera expands as a side effect of its own continual evolution.

Skeptics of posthumanism, object-oriented ontology, new materialism, and fellow-traveler philosophies remain wary of Bennett, Morton, and others’ lack of attention to human difference.<sup>79</sup> In music studies, Chung has critiqued Bennett, Eidsheim, and Fure’s work in this vein, cautioning against theories and artistic rationales that elide fraught histories of the “human.”<sup>80</sup> Other scholars have questioned the novelty of “new” materialist posthumanisms and the implied universal human experience underpinning object-

orientation as a stance.<sup>81</sup> Extreme weather and rising waters have devastated swaths of the so-called global South to a degree far out of proportion to these regions' carbon emissions, for instance—disparities that make no sense without analysis of human societies' power structures.<sup>82</sup> Fujikura and Teshigawara's *Solaris*, like *The Force of Things*, avoids explicit mention of racism or colonialism, despite Lem addressing these issues in his text (to variously trenchant and unfortunate results).<sup>83</sup> Chung argues that the kinds of listening that Ash Fure calls for need not conflict with Indigenous thinkers' advocacy of more-than-human communication, that we need not accept the "flat" ontology of Morton and like-minded writers to listen beyond bounded, discrete human selfhood.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, one must always ask Eidsheim's "acousmatic question" when perceiving a speculative nonhuman or more-than-human voice: regardless of the implied *what*, *who* is it who is speaking (or singing)?<sup>85</sup>

## Precarious Earth, Precarious Opera: Raising Voices

With opera companies concentrated in the places on Earth most inured to fossil fuel consumption, questions about the opera world's sustainability have arisen. Some houses have achieved or moved toward carbon neutrality, prioritizing local artists and events over globetrotting stars and tours.<sup>86</sup> Sustainability scholars, though, have identified other sources of waste and overconsumption in opera, such as the construction and disposal of new sets for lavish productions.<sup>87</sup> I see a greener future for opera in the Viennese *Solaris* or *The Force of Things* than in the Parisian *bohème*. In the former, the production team recognizes the potential for critique latent in Fujikura and Teshigawara's opera, realizing it via humble yet affecting means. *The Force of Things* gathers hacked, reusable found objects that double as visual reminders of pollution and global warming, for instance, *aircraft* cables over *Styrofoam* bridges. Consider, for contrast, the conspicuously expensive spacecraft in Guth's *bohème*.<sup>88</sup>

I do not intend to praise Neue Oper Wien for its ability to, as the cliché goes, *do more with less*. On the contrary: I invite readers to challenge recent efforts to defund it and other companies. In 2021, a jury allocating local government funding for the performing arts in Vienna faulted the city's entire opera scene for "stagnation" and rejected almost all applications for music theater, including Neue Oper Wien's. (Months later, the company would win the German Theater Publishers' annual prize for 2021, precisely for its inno-

vative performances given limited resources.) The company's fate remained uncertain at the time of writing.<sup>89</sup> Opera has, as Megan Steigerwald Ille writes, shown an ability to thrive outside the opera house—see for example, The Industry, the startup-style company that Ash Fure joined as a co-artistic director in 2021. However, even companies such as NOW that provide wide access to socially resonant productions are not safe in a time of arts austerity.<sup>90</sup> New vocalities and dramaturgies for opera can only emerge if artists have the resources to reach for the impossible.

## Notes

1. Stanisław Lem, *Solaris*, trans. Steve Cox and Joanna Kilmartin (New York: Walker and Company, 1970), 3. This translation is based not on the original Polish (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1961) but rather on the first French translation: Lem, *Solaris*, trans. Jean-Michel Jasiensko (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1966). A direct English translation from the original is available in audiobook form: Lem, *Solaris*, trans. Bill Johnston (Newark: Audible, 2011).

2. See for example: Shirley Apthorp, "A Storm of Boos for *La Bohème* at the Paris Opera," *Financial Times*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/96f740fc-d8e0-11e7-9504-59efdb70e12f>

3. The non- or posthuman voice has already become a topic of scholarly discussion. See for example: Jessica Tsun Lem Hui, "Reconfiguring Voice in 'The End: Virtuosity, Technological Affordance and the Reversibility of Hatsune Miku in the Intermundane,'" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 34, no. 3 (November 2022): 364–79.

4. Here I paraphrase Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 21–80.

5. Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017), ebook introduction n46.

6. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

7. Available documentation of Enrico Correggia's *Solaris* opera is limited. Here I refrain from commenting on it.

8. Andrew J. Chung, "Songs of the New World and the Breath of the Planet at the Orbis Spike, 1610: Toward a Decolonial Musicology of the Anthropocene," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76, no. 1 (2023): 65.

9. On the increasing untenability of "nature" and "the world" as categories, see Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 4–7. On the collapse of the idea of a human/cultural "foreground" and environmental "background," see Ian Baucom, *History 4° Celsius: Search for a Method in the Age of the Anthropocene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 95–97. On the mooting of human vs. natural history as a binary, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 197–222. On the speculative extension of vitality to "inanimate" objects, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), vii–19.

10. On “green” practices in opera production, see Rebecca Schmid, “How Opera Is Going Green,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/10/arts/music/opera-sustainability.html>. On environmentalism on the operatic stage, see Kirsten Paige, “Opera’s Inconvenient Truths in the Anthropocene Age: CO<sub>2</sub> and *Anthropocene*,” *Opera Quarterly* 36, nos. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 2020): 99–112.

11. Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 3–40.

12. See Novak, *Postopera*, and Novak, chapter 2 in this volume.

13. For an articulation of a posthumanist opera studies, see Christopher Morris, “Casting Metal: Opera Studies after Humanism,” *Opera Quarterly* 35, nos. 1–2 (2019): 77–95.

14. Matthew Aucoin, *The Impossible Art: Adventures in Opera* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021), ix. In 2023, Aucoin announced a 2024 premiere date for a new operatic work titled *Music for New Bodies*, an ecological-themed piece in which “we hear the voice of the ocean floor itself, speaking with superhuman pressure and force.”

15. Morton’s “time of hyperobjects” and the “after the end of the world” of their book’s subtitle are one and the same. See Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 6–7.

16. Melody Jue, review of *Emerging from Its Elements: Solaris Across Media* by Mark Bould, *Extrapolation* 58, no. 1 (2017): 113–15.

17. Lem, *Solaris* [Johnston translation].

18. Fujikura translated the libretto with the assistance of Harry Ross.

19. For a Baudrillardian perspective on *Solaris*, see Miriam Jordan and Julian Jason Haladyn, “Simulation, Simulacrum, and *Solaris*,” *Film-Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2010): 253–73.

20. The term “uncanny valley,” born of robotics, now refers to any object that invites affinity by anthropomorphism only to elicit revulsion as its not-quite-humanness becomes apparent. See Masahiro Mori, “The Uncanny Valley,” trans. Karl F. MacDorman and Norri Kageki, *IEEE Spectrum*, June 12, 2012, <https://spectrum.ieee.org/the-uncanny-valley> (originally published in Japanese in *Energy* 77, no. 4 (1970): 33–35).

21. Morton fleshes out the hyperobject concept in the eponymous monograph, but its published debut arrived in Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 19.

22. Object-oriented ontology originated with philosopher Graham Harman. Only later did Morton join Harman and the scholar Ian Bogost in the movement.

23. Timothy Morton, “Ecologocentrism: Unworking Animals,” *SubStance* 37, no. 3, issue 117 (2008): 73–96.

24. Morton, “Ecologocentrism,” 81.

25. Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 110–35.

26. Chingshun J. Sheu, “Conceptualizing the Hyperobject in Stanisław Lem’s *Solaris*,” paper presented at International Symposium on Literature and the Environment in East Asia, Taipei, National Taiwan Normal University, October 20, 2018.

27. Anthony Enns, “Mediality and Mourning in Stanisław Lem’s *Solaris* and *His Master’s Voice*,” *Science Fiction Studies* 29, no. 1 (March 2002): 34–52, at 39.

28. Dai Fujikura and Saburo Teshigawara, *Solaris: Opera in 4 Acts* (Milan: Ricordi, 2014), 6–35 [PDF].

29. Fujikura and Teshigawara, *Solaris*, 35 [PDF]. A note on this page indicates that at least some sampled audio came from the soundtrack of Tartovsky’s film.

30. Lem, *Solaris*, 64.
31. Seo-Young Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep? A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 38–40.
32. For discussion of definitions of voice as uniquely human, see Rachel Mundy, *Animal Musicalities: Birds, Beasts, and Evolutionary Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 109–67.
33. Fujikura and Teshigawara, *Solaris*, 6 [PDF].
34. Lem also dwells on Hari's ability to create vibrations—infrasound, felt more than heard—at amplitudes sufficient to rattle a spaceship hatch. Fujikura notes this vibration in a stage direction but provides no sound to match, acoustic or electronic.
35. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 64.
36. Alexa Woloshyn, "Electroacoustic Voices: Sounds Queer, and Why It Matters," *Tempo* 71, no. 280 (2017): 73–79.
37. Melody Jue, "Churning up the Depths: Ecologies of Metaphor in *Solaris* and 'Oceanic,'" in *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, eds. Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 226–42, at 229–30.
38. Lem, *Solaris*, 72. Neue Oper Wien reproduced this scene from the novel in the program book accompanying its production of Fujikura and Teshigawara's *Solaris*, available at <https://neueoperwien.at/solaris/#page/29>
39. Christoph Irrgeher, "Solaris: Die Frau, die aus dem Ozean kam—und sang," *Wiener Zeitung*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/kultur/buehne/2099554-Solaris-Die-Frau-die-aus-dem-Ozean-kam-und-sang.html>
40. Fujikura and Teshigawara, *Solaris*, 27–28 [PDF].
41. As of the time of writing, the production remained available on the streaming site medici.tv: <https://www.medici.tv/en/operas/puccini-la-boheme-opera-de-paris>
42. For Guth's remark, see Agence France-Presse, "Une Bohème intergalactique à l'Opéra de Paris," *RBTF*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.rtf.be/article/une-boheme-intergalactique-a-l-opera-de-paris-9776108>. For a review that calls the *Solaris* reference "obvious," see Laurent Amourette, "La bohème at the Opera of Paris: Hello Houston, We Have a Problem!" *Classicagenda*, December 2017, <https://classicagenda.fr/la-boheme-at-the-opera-of-paris-houston/>
43. David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), ix–36.
44. Detlef Brandenburg, "Houston, wir haben ein Problem: *Solaris*," *Die Deutsche Bühne*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.die-deutsche-buehne.de/kritiken/houston-wir-hab-en-ein-problem-0/>
45. Michael Obst, *Solaris: Kammeroper* program note, available at <https://www.breitkopf.com/work/4961>
46. Guy Rickards, "Copenhagen and Bregenz: Penderecki's *The Devils of Loudun* and Glanert's *Solaris*," *Tempo* 67, no. 265 (2013): 70–86.
47. J. Martin Daughtry, "Call and Response (or the Lack Thereof): Atmospheric Voices and Distributed Selves," *Sensate: A Journal for Experiments in Critical Media Practice* 8, <https://sensatejournal.com/call-and-response-or-the-lack-thereof-atmospheric-voices-and-distributed-selves/>

48. Milla Tiainen, "Revisiting the Voice in Media and as Medium: New Materialist Propositions," *European Journal of Media Studies* 2, no. 2 (2013), 387.

49. Virginie Magnat, *The Performative Power of Vocality* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 124–86.

50. Deborah Wardle, "Groundwater as Hyperobject," *Mosaic* 52, no. 2 (June 2019): 7.

51. Emphasis mine. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2. New materialism, like object-oriented ontology, represents a questioning of fundamental precepts of Western philosophy, often to environmentalist ends.

52. Alex Ross, "Infrasound Opera," *New Yorker*, October 23, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/30/infrasound-opera>

53. Human performers remain present almost throughout, differentiating *The Force of Things* from such automated (post)operatic installations as those of Heiner Goebbels.

54. Novak, *Postopera*, 3–18.

55. Novak stakes her claim of a break from operatic tradition on reinventions of the relationship between performers' bodies and the voice. See Novak, *Postopera*, 3–6.

56. See, for example, N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

57. The performance in question took place at Gelsey Kirkland Arts Center in Brooklyn between August 6–8, 2018, as part of Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival.

58. Ash Fure, "Reflections on Risk: Pigeonholes, Precarity, and the Zero-Sum Game of Time," in *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik* 24, ed. Michael Rebhahn and Thomas Schäfer (Mainz: Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, 2017): 50–54, at 51–52. Elaine Fitz Gibbon has asked whether the radio feuilleton in question represented misogyny, as Fure argued, or rather a misunderstood attempt at reading against the grain. Elaine Fitz Gibbon, "Staging the Anthropocene, Refusing Difference: Problems of Translation in the Premiere of Ash Fure's *The Force of Things* (2016)," paper presented at Society for American Music Annual Meeting, Virtual/Tuscon, March 11, 2022.

59. In a 2016 talk, Fure extolled pre-, non-, and extra-linguistic approaches to meaning making in music. See Ash Fure, untitled position statement delivered at Debate: Darmstadt Forum I—New Conceptualism: A Dead End or a Way Out?, Darmstadt, 48. Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik Darmstadt, August 4, 2016, available at <https://youtu.be/2bhqDjHp2p0?t=2706> [45:06].

60. Ash Fure, remarks cited in Andrew Chung, "Vibration, Difference, and Solidarity in the Anthropocene: Ethical Difficulties of New Materialist Sound Studies and Some Alternatives," *Resonance* 2, no. 2 (2021): 218–41, at 221–22.

61. Ash Fure et al., "Music in the Expanded Field—Darmstadt Summer Course 2016," uploaded December 31, 2016, <https://youtu.be/hzw4i7Fvby?t=240> [04:00].

62. Ash Fure, "*The Force of Things: A Climate Opera*," Ash Fure Artist Page, <http://www.ashleyfure.com/fot-hop>

63. Fure, "Reflections on Risk," 51.

64. Jussi Parikka, "Anthropocene," in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 51–53.

65. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jurs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 81.

66. Ash Fure, “*The Force of Things*,” Ash Fure Artist Page, <http://www.ashleyfure.com/force>

67. Chung, “Vibration, Difference, and Solidarity,” 222–23.

68. Video of Fure and others activating components of *The Force of Things* appear in online documentation posted after the 2022 Dartmouth University performance. Each custom instrument appears under Fure’s own name for it. The videos *Tripwires*, *Hides*, *Monocords*, *Infra-subs*, and *Mouthtubes*, along with a trailer for and full recording of the event, remained available at <https://vimeo.com/user9134679> as of the time of writing.

69. Fure, “*The Force of Things*” [Artist Page]. On Czernowin’s breathy vocalization, see Calico, chapter 6 in this volume.

70. Adam Fure codesigns the sculptural elements and spaces for *The Force of Things*, but he does not perform. In the 2022 Dartmouth University performances, Ash Fure joined other performers at the heart of the installation.

71. One reviewer wrote, “the singers were liberated from their whispery megaphone duties . . . the operatic voice was ready to sing[.]” Seth Colter Walls, “*The Force of Things*, an Indirectly Audible Opera,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/10/arts/music/review-force-of-things-ashley-fure.html>

72. Ash Fure, “internal organization document” for *The Force of Things*, 2018, shared in email to author, August 29, 2019.

73. Ash Fure, “*Tripwire*,” Ash Fure Artist Page, <http://www.ashleyfure.com/tripwire>. The reference to cables in *The Force of Things* as “tripwires” occurs in Fure, “internal organization document.”

74. Ash Fure, “*Shiver Lung*,” Ash Fure Artist Page, <http://www.ashleyfure.com/shiver-lung>

75. Ash Fure, “*Shiver Lung 2*,” Ash Fure Artist Page, <http://www.ashleyfure.com/shiver-lung-2>

76. For a review speaking to their ambiguity of referent, see Rebecca Lentjes, “Ashley and Adam Fure’s *The Force of Things* at Mostly Mozart Festival,” *I Care if You Listen*, August 23, 2018, <https://icareifyoulisten.com/2018/08/ashley-adam-fure-the-force-of-things-mostly-mozart-festival/>

77. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

78. Vilde Rolfsen, “*Plastic Bag Landscapes* 2014–,” Vilde Rolfsen Artist Page, <https://www.vilderolfsen.com/plastic-bag-landscapes>

79. See, for a compelling Black queer feminist critique, Tiffany Lethabo King, “Humans Involved: Lurking in the Lines of Posthumanist Flight,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 162–85.

80. See Chung, “Vibration, Difference, and Solidarity,” 224–37, and Chung, “Posthuman but not Post-Colonial: The Subject of New-Materialism-Inspired Sonic and Vibrational Thought Remains Hegemonic,” paper presented at Society for Music Theory Interest Group Virtual Meeting, November 8, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFXxFpPmO3w>. For an object-oriented philosopher’s response to Chung, see Graham Harman, “Moral Superiority as First Philosophy: In Response to Andrew J. Chung,” *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture* 3, no. 2 (2022): 194–213.



81. See, for example, Alison Ravenscroft, "Strange Weather: Indigenous Materialisms, New Materialism, and Colonialism," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 5, no. 3 (September 2018): 353–70.

82. See Max Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

83. Teshigawara's libretto omits Gibarian's visitor: a Black woman, described in racist and objectifying language. The first production of Glanert and Palm's opera, by contrast, found this character's role expanded.

84. Chung, "Vibration, Difference, and Solidarity," 235–37.

85. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 42 and 102.

86. Schmid, "How Opera Is Going Green."

87. Mercè Roca, Jaume Albertí, Alba Bala et al, "Sustainability in the Opera Sector: Main Drivers and Limitations to Improve the Environmental Performance of Scenography," *Sustainability* 13/22 (November 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132212896>

88. For more on designer Etienne Pluss's set, see: <https://www.scenographytoday.com/etienne-pluss-la-boheme/>

89. Christoph Irrgeher, "Die Neue Oper Wien kämpft ums Überleben," *Wiener Zeitung*, November 28, 2022, <https://www.tagblatt-wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/kultur/buehne/2169804-Die-Neue-Oper-Wien-kaempft-ums-Ueberleben.html>

90. Megan Steigerwald Ille, *Opera for Everyone: Experimenting with American Opera in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024).

## Posthuman Voice Beyond Opera

*Songful Practice of Holograms, Robots,  
Machines, and Vocaloids*

Jelena Novak

While interviewing Philip Glass in Lisbon in 2007, I was curious to hear his opinion on how new technologies have reinvented the protocols of operas and how we experience them. He was intrigued by the radical change in the viewer's consumption of opera brought on by new technologies: "I think when you have a room in your house which projects a three-dimensional image in the room, then you'll have something. But, when you are looking at the screen, it's not good enough. It's going to change. It will be beyond that in fifteen, twenty years. I don't know if I will be around to see it, but for sure it will be."<sup>1</sup>

Twelve years later, I recalled this conversation with Glass—his contemplation of an operatic *hyperreality*—after seeing Michel van der Aa's virtual reality installation *Eight* (2018–19).<sup>2</sup> There I was in the "deserted" Muziekgebouw aan't IJ in Amsterdam, walking through a "mixed reality" opera wearing a VR headset and surrounded by projected humanoid simulacra and their voices. *Eight* took place in a constructed space/installation located in a room so small that only one audience member could visit at a time. There was an uncanny intimacy and chamber-like atmosphere, not least because as a listening spectator, I was alone. Suddenly, all the attention was focused on my reactions—one particular audience member—thrust to the center of the opera/VR/gaming experience.

Technology has not only paved the way for the operatic experience to be transmitted, performed, and/or mediated in ways hitherto unimaginable, but in the process has redefined the ontologies of operatic experience and the

voice. In 1998, an industrial robot choreographed by Åsa Unander-Scharin “sang” music by Claudio Monteverdi in “The Lamentations of Orpheus.” In 2013, a “vocaloid” opera, *The End*, was composed for the hologram personality of Hatsune Miku, performed in some of the most progressive opera houses of the day.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by Martin Riches’s artwork *Singing Machine* (2010–2013), which demonstrated that a machine could sing operatic aria by Tom Johnson called “The Audition” (2019). The operatic roles assigned to holograms, vocaloids, robots, animals, monsters, and singing machines made me think again about Glass’s predictions. New technologies have reinvented the genre of opera, taking it beyond the materiality of the human body. So what does it mean and what does it take to sing beyond human?

The human voice has historically been central to our psychological and social understanding of individuality and selfhood. Hence the voice is intimately entwined with what counts as being “human.” The category of “human” is inherently non-neutral as it indicates access to certain privileges and entitlements, such as being endowed with a voice for speaking and singing.<sup>4</sup> In the 2019 exhibition I co-curated with Kris Dittel entitled “Post-Opera,” we asked, “what kind of voices are recognized as such, within our societal power dynamics, and what are the possibilities for ‘other’ voices to be heard?”<sup>5</sup> Speaking of the “modernist crisis of the voice,” Marcelle Pierson claims that Stockhausen’s vocal treatment in *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1955–56) offers “a different representation of musical humanity,” that is to say, “[humanity] is evoked in a different way by making the voice into a ritual, a system.”<sup>6</sup> Following Pierson, I will define what happens with the voice in the present moment of what I understand to be an anthropocentric knot in the age of posthumanity. I am interested in how different artists work with the posthuman voice in the contexts of (post)opera.

In shedding light on such issues, this chapter focuses on how we might pose the question of what it means to be a human in the context of contemporary opera, and how we can attend to the processes of “becoming” a cyborg, a machine, an animal, and/or a monster through the shifting medium of the singing voice. What is the line that separates a human from a “beyond human” mode of singing? How can we contend with this ever-shifting, ever-fluid border that exists between human and “beyond human”?

The reinvented relationship between the singing body and the voice lies at the core of the most intriguing attempts to question opera as a stable genre. To this end, I will refer to four case studies of (operatic) singing beyond the human:

Kate Miller-Heidke, Livia Kolk, and Nederland Kammerkoor's singing in *Eight* by van der Aa; *Singing Machine* by Riches (singing Johnson's "The Audition"); "The Lamentations of Orpheus" (a "solo choreography for an orange industrial robot to Monteverdi's aria from *L'Orfeo*" (1607))<sup>7</sup>; and the hologram vocaloid Hatsune Miku's singing in Keiichiro Shibuya's opera *The End* (2013).

Allow me to make a short but picturesque digression about voice beyond human by reference to Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915). Kafka illuminates precisely what interests me: how we detect, understand, and hear the human-animal barrier, and how and when we know if this barrier is crossed.<sup>8</sup> Gregor Samsa wakes up one day in his room only to discover that his body has transformed into the body of a huge insect. While his family members try to figure out why he stays in his locked room, he struggles with his new existence, at first trying to pretend that everything is the same as it has been. But at the point when he starts talking to his family through the locked door, they become aware that something is "wrong." Although Gregor believes that his voice and speech are the same as they were when he had human shape, his vocal pitch and articulation become disfigured to those around him. He can still understand human speech, but humans are unable to understand his speech.

Gregor's voice enters the flux of becoming, becoming an animal, and becoming monstrous.<sup>9</sup> When his family hears him, the shock of finally seeing Gregor in a form of an insect confirms the metamorphosis, but it was hearing his monstrous "voice"—the process of becoming animal—that triggers the distress.<sup>10</sup> Gregor Samsa does not sing like the characters from the cases I analyze here. But the effect of vocal metamorphosis from human to "beyond human" follows a similar trajectory.

Nicholas D. Stevens (chapter 1) explains how the posthuman voice produces unease, uncanniness, fear, and/or the urge to simultaneously empathize with and distance oneself from the monstrous voice, whose source may or may not be traced to a human body. Stevens also writes about nonhuman personhood and vocality, the idea that as humanity has been extended to a "beyond human" sphere, we are confronted with the possibility of extending the concept of vocality along with it. I am interested in how we distinguish the process of becoming posthuman: whether "the barrier" exists between human and animals, like in case of Samsa, or involves a technologically mediated person, as in the cases that employ holograms, vocaloids, robots, and singing machines.

## The Translucent Voices of *Eight*

Kate Miller-Heidke, a singer known both for classical/operatic performances and for her career on the pop scene, lent her “real” voice to her virtual hologram double in van der Aa’s *Eight*.<sup>11</sup> On June 10, 2019, when I was in Muziekgebouw aan’t IJ, the building seemed empty of any other human presence. Afterward, I realized that this solitariness served as an introduction to, and was an integral part of the experience of, *Eight* (it was necessary to reserve a fifteen-minute slot for this performance since only one person can experience it at a time). The live performers completely vanish in this piece, although they had previously lent their voices to virtual reality characters. Miller-Heidke’s character in *Eight* was actually multiplied through her various “versions.” She was not present at the performance, but she had been previously filmed, and that recording was used in modified form, with VR projections as a 3D avatar that included her voice.<sup>12</sup>

An assistant invited me to the entrance of the installation and started preparing me for the “performance.” She put a VR headset on my head and added headphones, instructing me not to touch the equipment even if I felt bad or panicked, but instead to raise my hands above my head, a sign to the assistant to come and disengage me from the experience, if necessary. I found myself on a curving path, and a projected 3D image of a virtual older lady (played by Vakil Eelman) appeared and gave a gesture of invitation, indicating that I should follow her; I did. There was so much virtual scenery to see and experience, mostly stunning nature landscapes, and I had to cope with simultaneous feelings of excitement and astonishment.

After the hologram of the older lady had been replaced by that of her younger self, the latter continued to sing and to act as my guide. The transparent, luminescent virtual character resembled Miller-Heidke. She brought me to the edge of a cliff. I didn’t have the courage to approach the edge and my knees felt weak. I couldn’t see my legs when I looked down through the VR headset, but I continued walking. Miller-Heidke’s singing voice was in a kind of pop idiom referring to the vocality of Björk, Dolores O’Riordan (of the Cranberries), or Meredith Monk. Music formed the background to the experience, creating the overall ambience, and singing was present almost all the time. Notably, before entering the installation I was presented with the words of poetry that was going to be sung, including:

I hear time falling  
my breathing happens—it's not mine  
There's something flowing  
that I can't grasp.<sup>13</sup>

The meaning of the sung words was echoed in the atmosphere of the VR spaces and in the vocal expression of sung materials throughout the work.

I remember that at one point I moved a curtain to enter a cave. There I saw shadows, faceless humanoid figures that were bending the sides of the corridor through which I walked. I heard the projected choral music of the Nederlands Kamerkoor and perceived the voices of the choristers as if they were produced by shadows, “ghosts” that inhabited the space of “the cave.” If these ghostly shadows had been moving around in silence, I suppose that they would not have generated the same tension or created the same uneasy atmosphere. The reverberating choral singing in an idiom reminiscent of Gregorian chant, alongside the ghostly apparitions and the shadowy and dark ambience of the cave, created a truly uncanny effect.

The impossibility of identifying the precise source of an acousmatic sound raises an important question. Nina Sun Eidsheim argues that this acousmatic question is “the foundational question asked in the act of listening to a human voice.”<sup>14</sup> She sums it up in this question: *Who is this? Who is speaking?* To this, I would add: *Who is singing?* I would further emphasize that the most foundational question one may ask is whether the singing can be traced to a human source. This opens up a whole spectrum of issues related to the ontology of the voice and its potential to surpass the human sphere.

The climax of *Eight* arrived for me when I saw a projection of a small girl under a table (Livia Kolk, a child soprano), an even younger version of my guide. She invited me to join her. She sang a cappella while staring at me with her translucent blue eyes. Her voice sounded “real,” like a human child, yet the accompanying holographic appearance produced a powerful ventriloquistic effect. Being around her didn't feel comfortable; indeed, it was scary. She looked almost as if she were real, kind of alive, but at the same time I was aware that she was only a simulacrum, and that awareness was decidedly unsettling. I wasn't confident enough to stay there under the table with her, for the situation evoked memories of some unpleasant horror-movie scenes. Instead, I remained half in and half out of that under-the-table space.

I suppose I was experiencing an “uncanny valley” syndrome, which van der Aa defines as the degree of an object’s resemblance to a human being as well as our emotional response to such an object. He suggests that a simulacrum entity appearing almost human will risk eliciting cold, eerie feelings in the viewers.<sup>15</sup> And the effect of the mismatch between the artificial visual appearance of the girl and her “natural”-sounding voice was indeed anything but soothing. The voice that was heard did not *resemble* a human voice; rather it *was* a projected human voice, that of Kolk. Moreover, this naturalized voice was assigned to a visual simulacrum, a kind of apparition resembling a human child.

A mismatch between the voice and the body, such as this gap between the “realistic”-sounding voice of a child and the obvious simulacrum to which van der Aa had matched it, is something inherent to postopera.<sup>16</sup> Depending on the context, sometimes the body appears “natural” and the voice “artificial,” and sometimes vice versa. It is this gap between what we hear and what we see at the same time that produces such rich meaning. This gap is also one of the characteristics of “theatre of absence,” as defined by Heiner Goebbels, who notes that some of its characteristics are anchored in the gap between what we hear and what we see at the same time.<sup>17</sup> He mentions “a separation of the actors’ voices from their bodies and of the musicians’ sounds from their instruments” and “a de-synchronization of listening and seeing, a separation or division between visual and acoustic stage.”<sup>18</sup> That desynchronization is, according to Goebbels, typical for postdramatic theater, where “the spectator is involved in a drama of experience rather than looking at drama in which psychologically motivated relationships are represented by figures on stage.”<sup>19</sup> In the case of the “uncanny valley” effect in *Eight*, this “drama of experience” happens through the gap or desynchronization between what we see and what we hear. Desynchronization is not time-based, but rather is rooted in connection and disconnection with conventions of being human, where the voice “confirms” its own human origins and the projected body denies them. In *Eight*, I experienced the paradox firsthand when I could not identify the simulacrum girl as human even if her humanlike voice persuaded me to do so.

The end of *Eight* revealed the end of a path that seemed to lead to nowhere. Miller-Heidke’s virtuosic vocal abilities, the pop-electronic instrumental music, and the uncanny atmosphere all combined to define the environment of the whole opera. I felt as though I was in NO PLACE, at NO TIME, and with NO PLOT. The experience was similar to a walk-through,

almost like a dream.<sup>20</sup> At one point I even thought that I might actually be the main character of this imaginary opera. With the VR characters performing prerecorded actions with a limited amount of live responsivity to the attendee, it means that the person attending is the only “performer” in a traditional sense. It is hard to be sure that *Eight* happened at all, as no one else witnessed it with me. Still, it didn’t exactly feel as if I were alone. There were voices around, but none of them really confirmed a human presence. The “real world” experience was used here as material for a virtual reality, with the voices and images of existing persons—Miller-Heidke, Kolk, and the choir—serving as the basis for a virtual, beyond human, identity. What I heard instead of the “human voice” was a series of liminal states of becoming: becoming-cyborg, becoming-android, becoming-virtual, where relationships of human with “nonhuman people” become reinvented.<sup>21</sup>

## Voice and the Uncanny: Machines Singing

Typically, only humans are considered to have a voice, while animals are endowed with the capacity to sing; take, for example, whales and birds. A typical definition of voice relates to human body and human linguistic expression, even if animals are sometimes briefly mentioned. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the voice as: “Sound, or the whole body of sounds, made or produced by the vocal organs of man or animals in their natural action; esp. sound formed in or emitted from the human larynx in speaking, singing, or other utterance; vocal sound as the vehicle of human utterance or expression. Also occasionally, the faculty or power of producing this; or concretely, the organs by which it is produced.”<sup>22</sup>

In the increasingly ventriloquistic world we live in, however, hearing voices and singing by machines, mechanisms, animals, and other “nonhuman people” has become commonplace. Curator Kris Dittel and I researched “singing beyond human” in the operatic field in preparation for the exhibition “Post-Opera” (2019).<sup>23</sup> The exhibition included artworks and installations by artists, composers, and performers from the fields of contemporary art as well as opera, presented alongside archival documents and objects concerning early attempts to recreate the human voice by artificial means. We focused on the question of who can have a voice and who can sing. Eventually, we found ourselves in an exhibition space that echoed with the sounds





Fig. 2.1. Martin Riches, the *Singing Machine* (2010–13), with the score of “The Audition” (2019) by Tom Johnson. From *Post-Opera*, TENT Rotterdam (2019).

of singing monsters, animals, machines, sirens, and additional “Others” in a sphere beyond the voice. Consequently, the exhibition dismantled the opera world as one of the last unquestioned bastions of humanism.

One artwork that attracted considerable attention at “Post-Opera” was Riches’s *Singing Machine*. At regular intervals the Singing Machine sings a cappella “The Audition,” an aria that Tom Johnson wrote for this artificial voice. Before this, Riches’s fascination with mechanical speech synthesis had produced other vocalic mechanisms, such as his Talking Machine (1989–91) and MotorMouth (1996–99).<sup>24</sup> The idea for *Singing Machine* came from the composer Masahiro Miwa. Its first outing was a performance of “Finita iam sunt proelia” by Palestrina in four-part harmony, with three of the voices pre-recorded. After this first version of the machine, which he made in Japan, Riches returned to Europe and made a second version. Unlike the first one, it did not attempt to pronounce consonants. The version of the machine that performed in Rotterdam has a range of one octave and the ability to sing only vowel sounds (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*). The sound of the machine’s voice is both impressive and uncanny. It produces its song with a flow of air, a vibrating larynx, and an imitation of a tongue and lips that manages to extend beyond the human body while imitating its vocalizations.

Riches emphasizes the likeness to and imitation of the human voice in *Singing Machine* and MotorMouth as the main concept underlying his voice machines: “These vocal devices are imitative: attempted copies of the human voice. Basically, a ‘mission impossible,’ but worth trying and, since they receive occasional kind words from professional phoneticists, I think they can be counted as brave attempts.”<sup>25</sup> For Riches, the “worth trying” judgment lies in the emotional response of the listening spectator:

Affection is a natural sympathetic response to the pathos of an imitative machine. I could make the imitative machines more realistic. I could give my “MotorMouth” a rubber face mask and glasses like the Waseda Talker no. 7 (refined). Tests with that Japanese speaking machine showed that the rubber mask makes it easier for people to understand it. But it also approaches what is known in animatronics as “uncanny valley.” I prefer the mechanism—and the affectionate response.<sup>26</sup>

In this case, the “affectionate” response is obtained via Tom Johnson’s vocal writing for the machine, which critiques the pomposity of the divas as well as the “unnaturalness” of vibrato in opera singing.

Johnson is best known for minimalist compositions, including operas, in which he critically and ironically engages with operatic institutions and conventions. This is evident in his lyrics for “The Audition” (see fig. 2.2). The machine sings an aria, drawing attention to its own abilities and shortcomings, while questioning the status of the opera singer, the practice of musical auditions, operatic stardom, and the self-importance of the conventional opera world. “The Audition” is itself a miniature yet profoundly affecting operatic scene.

This curious machine, and the miniature operatic scene written for it (as featured at TENT), does not confront us with virtual reality characters, holograms, or vocaloids. With Riches’s *Singing Machine*, the illusion of creating an anthropomorphic entity is not present. Instead, there is a do-it-yourself (DIY) mechanism placed on a pedestal, boldly putting on display a mechanical imitation of voice production in the human body. It uses the motor of a vacuum cleaner (functioning as lungs) to pump air through a glass tube (working as a larynx). The machine looks like an analog device, resonating (ironically enough) with the protocols of a contemporary world that becomes increasingly ventriloquistic through digital means. Still, it is connected to an old-fashioned computer that Riches has programmed to manipulate the mechanism of the machine. The variable height of its air tube and “lip opening” enables it to perform the song.

**The Audition (2019)**  
aria for the singing machine of Martin Riches

Tom Johnson

I must ex - plain.

I have a spech im - pe - di - ment.

I can on - ly pro - nounce vo - wels.

So you have to read the text.

but that's true in all o - pe - ra hou - ses to - day.

and as we have known for a long time

vo - wels sound much bet - ter than con - so - nants.

And I can sing ve - ry fast.

and for a long \_\_\_\_\_ time on one breath.

So per - haps some - one some - day will give me an o - pe - ra - tic role a - ny - way.

That would be love - - - - - ly.

Fig. 2.2. Tom Johnson, "The Audition." Score by Editions 75  
(Courtesy of author).

Riches's machine does not have the sort of superhuman virtuosity that would make it sound cyborg-like, as is the case with the opera *One* by van der Aa.<sup>27</sup> There Barbara Hannigan becomes a vocal cyborg onstage. Her voice is upgraded, enhanced by interventions of her recorded "vocal double." The Singing Machine instead sings Johnson's melody that is very simple, tonal, and leans on the rhythm of the words in the text. The voice's quality is not electric, it is instrumental, it sounds as caricature of contrabassoon sound. Its attempt to imitate the gestures of bel canto singing—that is, producing vocal ornamentation or overemphasizing glissando and vibrato—gives way to an absurd atmosphere, typical of Johnson's operas. In "The Audition," the Singing Machine imitates vocal singing that carries heightened emotion, as in a Romantic operatic aria.

Exploring "the relationship of mimesis and desire that circulates between the human and the machine," Miriama Young writes about the technological replication of the voice by touching on Descartes (as the first philosopher to write of the human body as a machine), automata, speaking machines, and speech synthesis.<sup>28</sup> The mechanical voice is inherently a copy devoid of its original, never tied to a human, physical origin. Moreover, there is a particular purity to its physical form, for the sounding voice object is not subject to the manifestations of human aberration, error, randomness, or decay. The mortal, carnal, fleshly body is bypassed entirely in the machine's rendering of a disembodied, omnipresent, divine, or perfect ideal. Moreover, the abstract and ideal form can be preserved in perpetuity.<sup>29</sup> This disembodiment that Young writes about is present both in the appearance and in the performance of the Singing Machine. It is obvious, hearing the sound of the mechanical baritone, that the voice is not coming from the human throat. Moreover, since the machine only produces vowel sounds, it is not possible to understand the words of Johnson's aria by listening alone. Once we listen with score, however, an unexpected "molding" of the vocal performance takes place, and the words become understandable. In that process, the empathic response grows, and the machine, at least in my perception, moves closer to the human realm even though it performs beyond human.

Commenting on the performance of "The Audition" by Riches's unusual mechanical baritone, Johnson at one point said, "It will not get the role!"<sup>30</sup> But this machine's *raison d'être* was never to replace a human singer in the conventional operatic world. It was meant to sing operatically beyond the voice, beyond the human, and beyond opera. What makes it so intriguing for the audience is that its very existence is based on the striking contrast between

the state of singing and a blatantly mechanical object that denies—at least visually—any pretense of anthropomorphism (an imitation of human action).

“The Lamentations of Orpheus” is a prime example of the uncanny machine voice, first performed by a robot in 1998.<sup>31</sup> The piece lasts for two and a half minutes and was described as a “solo choreography for an orange industrial robot to sing Monteverdi’s aria from *L’Orfeo*, in which Orpheus laments Euridice’s death, vowing to descend to the underworld to bring her back to earth.”<sup>32</sup> The piece exists in two modalities: as an installation where the robot performs the choreography “live,” and as a video recording of the performance.<sup>33</sup> The robot performs the choreography while the aria is heard, with the tenor voice of Carl Unander-Scharin accompanied by an ensemble, all from a recording.<sup>34</sup>

In an honorary mention of choreographer Åsa Unander-Scharin, an anonymous writer posits that the work “implies an interesting relational equality between human and robot, so although as an image it reminds [me] of the famous Pixar Luxo Lamp, it acquires its lifelikeness in a more subtle way.”<sup>35</sup> There is no mention of the singing voice, nor of the very act of singing, although acquiring lifelikeness is deeply connected to the vocal performance and not just to the movement and visuals.

The most interesting questions concerning “The Lamentations of Orpheus” arise from this 170 cm tall, 500 kg robot’s relationship with the singing voice. Although it might not appear to be the case, I claim that it is the robot that actually sings, as its movements are determined by the context of singing. Technically speaking, the tenor voice that is heard is that of Carl Unander-Scharin, as his singing was recorded and projected at the scene of the installation. Symbolically, however, the moment that voice enters the installation, it is “captured” by the ABB Robot IRB 1400’s movements, as the vocal inflections are embodied by the mechanism of the machine. The robot’s choreography, elegant and energetic, is synchronized with the music and the singing, so that the robot assumes the role of singing. So the response to the first question would be that the one who sings is the robot, and that it sings with Unander-Scharin’s voice. Although this voice originates from a human throat, it becomes the voice of the machine. This voice goes beyond human, perpetuated in a continuous act of becoming, fluctuating between the voice produced by vocal organs and the voice that emanates as though from the interior of the machine.

The ABB Robot IRB 1400 thus becomes vocally “alive.” It claims the right to have a voice, a right that is usually the exclusive preserve of the human

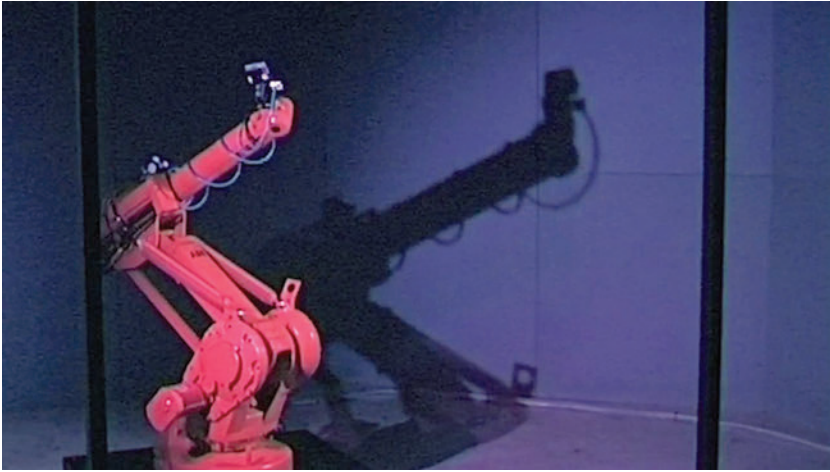


Fig. 2.3. ABB Robot IRB 1400 in “The Lamentations of Orpheus”

domain. But the balance typical for melodic and vocal style used to express affect in early music corresponds with the machine’s supposed emotional restraint. In this aria, the small intervals and slow pace of singing are suggestive of sorrow. And those slow melodic gestures and some jumps are followed and synchronized with movements of the robot. What escapes synchronization with choreography are rich vocal ornaments that build tension and excitement and give fullness to emotional expression. The singing tenor voice, combined with the mechanical choreographed movements, constitutes a moment at which those who are usually not allowed to have a voice finally sing. It is a moment of escape from stereotypes. Critical questions are raised about who owns the voice, both for singing and, metaphorically speaking, for being human, and why.

### Holographic Singing: Hatsune Miku in *The End*

Singing beyond human, in the case of Hatsune Miku in the opera *The End*, takes on a different character from the “translucent” singing in *Eight*, the uncanny and parodic aria of *Singing Machine*, or the machine’s sorrowful singing with a recorded human voice in the case of “The Lamentations of Orpheus.” Here the central character Hatsune Miku’s flat, high, and “plas-



Fig. 2.4. Hatsune Miku singing in *The End* (video still).

tic” voice is implausibly paired with her animated, blue-haired persona. It is intriguing, then, to explore how the vocaloid Hatsune Miku crosses the borders of the human realm through singing.

Hatsune Miku is the name of “the most popular humanoid avatar of the vocal synthesizer VOCALOID,” an item of commercial software that was developed by Yamaha Corporation in a research project led by Hideki Kenmochi in 2000.<sup>36</sup> Vocaloid has been marketed as a “virtual singer in your computer,” a kind of vocal “font” or “engine” that can sing melodies and phrases and be used for the collaborative creation of new songs to replace the live vocal performer.<sup>37</sup> The “Hatsune Miku” vocaloid software was developed by Crypton Future Media and is based on the voice of the Japanese voice actress Saki Fujita. The name of the character comes from merging the Japanese words for first (初 *hatsu*), sound (音 *ne*), and future (ミク *miku*), thus meaning “the first sound of the future.”

The word “vocaloid” amalgamates “voice” and “android.”<sup>38</sup> While an android stands for a robot/machine that is designed to resemble humans, I perceive vocaloid as a voice that is intended to resemble the human voice, though it inevitably fails to do so. A vocaloid was at first just the name for the voice synthesis software, but the company at one point created a visual image for it—a character behind the voice—and this turned out to be a huge commercial success. This is how Hatsune Miku, a virtual sixteen-year-old girl

with blue pigtailed, came to “life.” In effect, Miku grew out of the quest of the voice for a persona to represent it. She became a celebrity and was marketed as a virtual icon. Miku had her first “live” concert in 2009 and since then she has held many sold-out 3D concerts around the world (including one with Lady Gaga), “boasting over two and a half million Facebook friends and singing an incredible repertoire of more than 100,000 user-released songs.”<sup>39</sup> Miku performs at concerts onstage as an animated projection (rear-cast on a specially coated glass screen). Her fame is especially marked in Japan, where she has been described as a “collaboratively constructed cyber celebrity,”<sup>40</sup> and where one online review of her performance was notably titled, “One of Japan’s biggest Pop stars isn’t human.”<sup>41</sup>

Miku has gained international renown as a virtual pop star, singer, and dancer, a virtual icon, and “a pre-recorded hologram gimmick.”<sup>42</sup> But I discovered Miku through the world of opera, after she had sung the principal role in the opera *The End*, for which Keiichiro Shibuya wrote the music.<sup>43</sup> This is how the opera was introduced to the audience of the Holland festival: “Miku begins her journey by asking herself: ‘will I die?’ (. . .) Travelling through a virtual world, accompanied by Shibuya’s score of minimal techno and EDM, modern and contemporary classical music and sound art, Miku goes in search of the paradox of her own existence.”<sup>44</sup>

Wearing clothes designed by the haute couture fashion house Louis Vuitton, Hatsune Miku entered the operatic world, brought some nonhuman voices to that world, and further opened it up to new audiences. Two characters join Miku in this piece: a kind of animal, which resembles a Pokémon character, and the Visitor, who appears as Miku’s double. But no humans perform in this “first Vocaloid opera (. . .) constructed from multi-screen 3D images and electronic sound.”<sup>45</sup> Miku experiences a realistic human drama as she is obliged to confront questions about death, a concept that does not belong to her world. The drama of what it means to be human unfolds, then, in a beyond-human setting.

The aria “Because I Am Imperfect/Theme of Super Animal” points to the posthumanist tendency to question the relationship between the human and the Other: human-animal, human-machine, human-hologram, human-monster. Miku sings about those relationships, and, in turn, her own voice presents itself as a product of the questioning of those relationships in the act of singing. At the beginning of the song/aria we see Miku and the Animal talking if they should “join forces.” Here are the opening lines of the song:<sup>46</sup>



Do you wish to be one again?  
 Then it will be clear to everyone,  
 It will be clear for everyone,  
 You are close to being a human being,  
 But imperfect  
 How close you are to human and how incomplete  
 Shall we join forces again?

In an explosively animated metamorphosis, Miku and the animal are transformed into a flying lion/dragon that has the face and hair of Miku in the lion head and the body and wings of an animal. And the composite entity sings and speaks at the same time. The speaking voice sounds as feminine, and the singing voice is noisy as if it contains spectra of white noise in it, sandy and somewhat childlike, cartoonish, as it is based on high pitches. Those two vocals perform the singing/speaking dialogue together: Miku expresses her concerns of never being able to be as perfect as human.

(. . .)

I am not that far from being a human  
 Because I am imperfect  
 I am just as imperfect  
 I am mortal, like humans  
 My existence has meaning because I am imperfect  
 I am the me I am because I am imperfect.<sup>47</sup>

And then the singing and speaking voice enter into the repetitive loop with the words “If I don’t have any words to speak,” they become entangled, sandy white-noise voice fused together with sonic attributes of a feminine voice. The music turns into a repetitive electronic dance and we see Miku/dragon/lion flying above the illuminated geometry shown on several screens on stage. It flies and floats within a nongravitational field. Feminine voice is in a speech loop, combined with an animal white-noise voice that sings in Japanese. Miku and the Animal are shown in embrace within the jaw of the lion/dragon and they slowly dissolve into separate entities again, which is how the song ends.

Like her visual appearance, Miku’s voice is invented, it is a voice “with a shadow,” so to speak. The element that resembles white noise gives this voice its identity. White noise includes in itself all the audible frequencies in equal

measure. This noisiness of Miku's voice is highly symbolic: it is the voice that can sing the multiplicity. And this multiplicity sings together with the speaking human voice as if the human feminine speech becomes one of the shadows, one of the nuances. This is noisy meta-voice, voice *about* voice that is posthuman, but still keeping itself human in equal parts. It does not produce feelings of fear, discomfort, or unpleasantness. It rather calls for a sense of solidarity and togetherness in the mind of the beholder.

## Conclusion

I am now remembering the conversation I had with composer Ivo Malec more than decade ago. "I think that the time for singing about things has already passed. It is obsolete. Why should one sing about something?"<sup>48</sup> The more I think about Malec's claim, the more provocative and relevant it seems. For Malec, as for most modernist composers, writing melodies was a thing of the past. And Pierson's observations about Nono's and Stockhausen's vocal poetics of modernism brought me back to Malec in its illumination of the connection between melody and voice: "In the middle of the twentieth century (. . .) composers in the West who identified with the tenets of modernism largely stopped writing melodies (. . .) to shift somewhat abruptly toward texture and timbre (. . .) melody and voice are so intertwined as to form a single entity."<sup>49</sup> If paradigmatic examples of the posthuman voice in musical modernism can be traced back to works by Nono and Stockhausen, what would be the equivalent of the posthuman voice when considering songful practice of technological creatures such as holograms, robots, vocaloids, or machines?

Despite their posthuman nature, the voices explored in this chapter are nevertheless not unmelodic; that is, a melodic-posthuman binary is not entirely viable. The singing in *Eight*, for example, is certainly melodic, sometimes resembling an early music singing style and sometimes an indie pop style. What matters in this piece is the melodic utterance of the voices, both solo and choral, so much so that even if words of poetry were to be heard, those words would, I suggest, seem irrelevant. Singing evokes the uncertainty in the experience of going beyond oneself: going too high in VR mountains, or going too low in VR caves, or simply going beyond oneself by extending one's comfort zone and sensorial abilities. The melodic quality of nonhuman or not-entirely-human voices paired with the unique textural and timbral

qualities of holograms is what made them posthuman. Similarly, when industrial robots and singing machines sing, it is the melodic quality of their singing that inevitably (post-)humanizes them. In case of “The Lamentations of Orpheus,” the voice singing Monteverdi’s aria functions as a choreographic score for the industrial robot. Finally, the voice of Hatsune Miku is electronic, but is also presented through a melodic matrix. Its texture is rich and layered, combining white noise and transgendered singing.

Arguably, the “melodic turn” in contemporary opera can be understood to have emerged in parallel with the posthuman turn. Attraction to melody is present not only in these four works I have discussed here, but much more widely. Philip Glass, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, introduces long melodic lines in his operas even since composing *Satyagraha*. What makes this turn peculiar is that this overt melodicism often emerges in instances where the singing voice moves or gestures beyond the human. In these instances, even simple and common-sounding melodies glow and resonate in a very different light.

In an attempt to establish a posthuman, postsonorous conception of voice as “one that acknowledges the provinciality and contingency of its sounded dimension and highlights its many environmental entailments,” J. Martin Daughtry describes vocality as a convergence of five processes: gaseous exchange, atmospheric disturbance, sharing of airborne elements between environments (cross-pollution), durational effects as a result of this sharing and dissolution of boundaries that separate the environments.<sup>50</sup> “My breathing happens—it’s not mine” is one of the verses from Van der Aa’s *Eight*. The entities that reproduce singing voices in the aforementioned cases do not involve breathing: they are not alive, therefore the voices are mediated. Voices in the cases included here are attributed to holograms and industrial robots. Hatsune Miku’s voice is invented. The singing machine presents perhaps the closest example to breathing, its voice mechanically produced in the image of a human vocal and respiratory apparatus.

Of the five aforementioned processes, the “dissolution of boundaries” is the most present and relevant in the cases of posthuman voice discussed here. Voices being multifarious, otherworldly, and silvery (Kate Miller Heidke in *Eight*), immersive and translucent (choir in *Eight*), windy, circussy, and buffo-instrumental (*Singing Machine*), steely and mechanical (robot in “The Lamentations of Orpheus”) noisy, sandy, dusty, and pokemonish (Hatsune Miku), all those choristers of multitude dissolve the boundaries between voice and metal, voice and light, voice and air, voice and movement, voice and

noise, and voice and minerals. Singing translucent VR characters in *Eight*, the instrumental singing voice of the *Singing Machine*, the electric noisy voice of Hatsune Miku, the choreographed sorrowful voice of ABB Robot IRB 1400, they all join this operatic quest for a new vocal relationality. They go beyond the comfort zone of the human realm in opera. Those “nonhuman people” are activists and poets at the same time. Together they fight metaphorically for their voices, for different voices that can also sing and should be given the opportunity to be heard.

## Notes

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1. From the 2007 interview with Philip Glass in Lisbon. This interview was published in Serbian: “Operska kuća je odavno mrtva,” *Teatron* 142 (2008): 83–88, and in Swedish: “Philip Glass tvillingpar—opera och film,” *Nutida Musik* 1 (2008).

2. “Hyperreality is the result or the effect of the process of simulation, i.e., simulacrum that does not originate from reality experienced by senses, but which looks as if it is more real or more natural than that reality. Reality is defeated by imaginary which is more real than the real” (my translation from Croatian). See Miško Šuvaković, *Pojmovnik suvremene umjetnosti [Glossary of Contemporary Art]* (Zagreb; Horetzky; Ghent: Vlees/Beton, 2005), 263. In his *Glossary* Šuvaković extracts a definition of hyperreality from writings of French theorist Jean Baudrillard.

3. It was performed at the Dutch National Opera & Ballet in Amsterdam in 2015 and the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris in 2013, among other venues.

4. This is an argument made at length by Rosi Braidotti in the 2019 monograph *Post-human Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

5. See “Post-Opera,” <https://www.tentrotterdam.nl/en/tentoonstelling/next-up-post-opera/>

6. Marcelle Pierson, “Voice, Music, Modernism: The Case of Luigi Nono and Karlheinz Stockhausen,” in *The Voice as Something More: Essays Towards Materiality*, ed. Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 78, 87.

7. This explanation is derived from *Operamecatronica*, a project run by composer Carl Unander-Scharin and choreographer Åsa Unander-Scharin. A long collaboration between the two resulted in the world’s first choreographed industrial robot “The Lamentations of Orpheus” in 1998. Since then, many interactive robotic art works have seen the light of day, for example, the three-meter-long puppet “Olimpia” or the robotic swan “Robocygne” that moves the audience to tears through its melancholy dance to Carl’s electro-acoustic version of Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*. <https://operamecatronica.com/about-us/>

8. Naama Harel investigates the human-animal barrier in the work of Kafka in inspiring ways. As often happens in posthumanist theory, however, there is a dearth of scholarship around vocality, as if the voice is rendered invisible, a silent attribute excluded from posthuman identity. Naama Harel, *Kafka's Zoopoetics: Beyond the Human-Animal Barrier* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

9. For more about the concept of monstrous voice related to vocals featured in Steve Reich and Beryl Korot's opera *Three Tales*, see my book *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (London: Ashgate, 2015) or "Monsterization of Singing: Politics of Vocal Existence," *New Sound International Journal of Music* 36, no.2 (2010): 101–19.

10. I first talked about the case of vocal transformation of Gregor Samsa in a conference paper "Voicing beyond the Human: Constructing Canine Vocality" exposed at "Human Voice, Animal Voice," conference at Tel Aviv University, organized by Michal Grover Friedlander in December of 2018.

11. See more about the performance of *Eight* at the Holland Festival in Jelena Novak, "Eight, aus Licht, and The Unbearable Lightness of Being Immersed in Opera," *Opera Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (Autumn 2019): 358–71.

12. The music of *Eight* got some kind of afterlife within van der Aa's first indie-pop album "Time Falling" (2020), a collaboration with Miller Heidke. Some music from *Eight* found a place there, for example the song "I Think of Fire." The aesthetics of the "I Think of Fire" music video, featuring Miller-Heidke, plays with the concept of an augmented reality and the aesthetics of arcade games. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTxA7ObINCA> (accessed October 12, 2020).

13. From Michel van der Aa's libretto of *Eight*, Holland Festival program booklet, Amsterdam, 2019.

14. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 1.

15. Jelena Novak, "Music Beyond Human, Conversation with Michel van der Aa," *New Sound International Journal of Music* 55, no. 1 (2020): 14, <http://ojs.newsound.org.rs/index.php/NS/article/view/37/65>

16. See more about this gap in my book *Postopera*.

17. Heiner Goebbels, "Aesthetics of Absence" in *Lectures (How) Opera Works*, ed. Pierre Audi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 159.

18. Goebbels, "Aesthetics of Absence."

19. Goebbels, "Aesthetics of Absence," 156.

20. The Borgesian motive of infinity and dreaming in *Eight* could also be associated with the music video "What a Dream" (from the album *the Time Falling*), based on materials from van der Aa's earlier opera *The Book of Sand*, which also features Miller-Heidke as a principal character. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqfG2bG1Rs0> (accessed August 10, 2021).

21. Here I refer to the presentation "Vocal Becomings" by Kris Dittel delivered at the symposium "Installing the Voice" at TENT, Rotterdam, in May 2019. For the notion of "nonhuman people," see Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017).

22. "Voice," Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/oed2/00278756> (accessed February 17, 2023).

23. The featured artists included Jan Adriaans, Adam Basanta, Paul Elliman, Ho Tzu Nyen, Janneke van der Putten, Martin Riches, and the composers Tom Johnson and Jasna Veličković. “Post-Opera” took place at the Rotterdam exhibition spaces TENT and V2, with the support of the Operadagen Rotterdam Festival. For more information about the “Post-Opera” exhibition and the “Installing the Voice” symposium, <https://www.tentrotterdam.nl/en/tentoonstelling/next-up-post-opera/>, as well as the exhibition booklet: [https://www.tentrotterdam.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/PO\\_BookletB5\\_DEF.pdf](https://www.tentrotterdam.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/PO_BookletB5_DEF.pdf). In “Exhibiting the Voice,” Dittel and I discuss some of the installations and performances that were part of “Post-Opera” in more detail. See Kris Dittel and Jelena Novak, “Exhibiting the Voice,” *Parse Journal* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2021), <https://parsejournal.com/article/exhibiting-the-voice/>

24. For more details about the Talking Machine and MotorMouth see <http://martinriches.de/talkmore.html>, <http://martinriches.de/momomore.html> and <https://vimeo.com/173787687>

25. Andrea Jahn, ed., *Two Measures of Time: Martin Riches* (Stadgalerie Saarbrücken: Kerber Verlag, 2016), 46.

26. Jahn, *Two Measures of Time*, 50.

27. For more about *One* see Novak, *Postopera*, 41–56.

28. Miriama Young, *Singing the Body Electric: The Human Voice and Sound Technology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2020), 79.

29. Young, *Singing the Body Electric*, 77.

30. From the author’s phone conversation with Tom Johnson, February 2019.

31. The video of the piece and further details about it are available at the webpage of Opera Mecatronica: <https://www.operamecatronica.com/the-lamentations-of-orpheus/>

32. Opera Mecatronica: <https://www.operamecatronica.com/the-lamentations-of-orpheus/>

33. The words that the robot sings are in Italian. Here I quote the English translation of that part of the libretto:

You are dead, my life, and I still breathe?  
 You are gone from me  
 Never to return, and I should remain?  
 No, for if verses can do anything,  
 I will go in safety to the deepest abysses,  
 And having softened the heart of the King of shades,  
 I will bring you back with me to see the stars again:  
 Oh, if wicked destiny refuses me this,  
 I will stay with you, in the company of death.  
 Farewell earth, farewell Heaven and Sun, farewell.

Translation quoted from Claudio Monteverdi, *L’Orfeo, Favola in Musica*. Italian libretto by Alessandro Striggio and English translation by Gilbert Blin. See <https://www.earlymusic.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Orfeo-Texts-Translations-for-Web.pdf>

34. I am grateful to my student Noeli Kikuchi at Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, who introduced me to this installation.

35. See <https://operamecatronica.com/the-lamentations-of-orpheus/>
36. Ana Matilde Diogo de Sousa, "A Colaboração Massiva de Hatsune Miku: software Vocaloid como catalisador de criações colectivas, grassroots e multidisciplinares na subcultura otaku." *Revista Croma, Estudos Artísticos*, vol. 2/3 (2014), 121–37. [https://repositorio.ul.pt/bitstream/10451/12237/2/ULFBA\\_PER\\_CROMA\\_N3\\_ANA%20MATILDE%20DE%20SOUSA.pdf](https://repositorio.ul.pt/bitstream/10451/12237/2/ULFBA_PER_CROMA_N3_ANA%20MATILDE%20DE%20SOUSA.pdf)
37. See <http://www.vocaloid.com/en/>
38. de Sousa, "A Colaboração Massiva de Hatsune Miku."
39. See "Global Star Hatsune Miku's First Pop-Opera *The End*," <https://www.hollandfestival.nl/en/program/2015/the-end/>
40. See "Lady Gaga Is Going on Tour with a Hologram," <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/innovation/lady-gaga-going-tour-hologram-n83406>
41. "One of Japan's Biggest Pop Stars Isn't Human," see <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2017-10-29/one-of-japan-s-biggest-pop-stars-isn-t-human-video>
42. Mark Oppener, "Seeking Hatsune Miku," June 10, 2011. <https://www.mybigthoughts.com/on/seeking-hatsune-miku/>
43. I am grateful to Geert Braam (Nationale Opera and Ballet, Amsterdam) who introduced me to this piece.
44. This was a quote from the online program, on the page of Holland Festival. Info is not available there anymore. But it is partly available at: <http://atak.jp/en/news/2015-06-04/> (accessed February 13, 2023).
45. See "Global Star Hatsune Miku's First Pop-Opera *The End*," <https://www.hollandfestival.nl/en/program/2015/the-end/>
46. "Hatsune Miku—The End—Because I Am Imperfect/Theme of Superanimal," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fc9Ns76znmc> (accessed on December 13, 2022).
47. "Hatsune Miku—The End."
48. See Jelena Novak, "Singing in the Age of Capitalist Realism. The Pervert's Guide to (Post)Opera," in *The Sound of Žižek*, ed. Mauro Fosco Bertola (New York: Peter Lang, 2023), 114.
49. Pierson, "Voice, Music, Modernism," 77.
50. J. Martin Daughtry, "Call and Response (or the Lack Thereof): Atmospheric Voices and Distributed Selves," *Sensate: A Journal for Experiments in Critical Media Practice* (April 2021): 8. See <https://sensatejournal.com/call-and-response-or-the-lack-thereof-atmospheric-voices-and-distributed-selves/>

## Steve Reich and Beryl Korot's *The Cave*, Theater of Testimony, and the Documentary Turn in American Opera

Ryan Ebright

American composers and audiences love a true story, if a quick perusal of new US operas of the past four decades is any indication. *Chicago Tribune* critic John von Rhein boldly proclaimed in 1987 that John Adams's *Nixon in China* instituted the new genre of "docu-opera," notwithstanding Anthony Davis's groundbreaking and equally historical *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* a year earlier. The ensuing years have seen operas about political figures such as John F. Kennedy, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Martin Luther King Jr., and Harvey Milk; artists including Frank Lloyd Wright, Frida Kahlo, and Marilyn Monroe; and even athletes and musicians such as Charlie Parker, the boxer Emile Griffith, and the ballplayer Josh Gibson.<sup>1</sup> Such operas, as Linda Hutcheon and Lawrence Kramer have observed, constitute a powerful form of national myth making.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, they feed a broader cultural appetite for authenticity that cultural theorist Daniel Schulze argues is characteristic of a structure of feeling tentatively termed "metamodernism," a successor to postmodernism that "reconstructs concepts of telos, engagement and closure."<sup>3</sup> This desire for realness or authenticity in the face of "the perceived superficiality and fakeness of contemporary culture" has impelled a resurgence of theater, film, and even music that represents or re-enacts the past, either distant or recent, in service of commemoration, memorialization, and the formation of a collective historical consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

In a particular subset of these "docu-operas," the documentary impulse extends beyond the dramatization of historical episodes and figures and into the very materials with which opera is created. Since the 1980s, composers such as Adams and Steve Reich have relied increasingly on documentary



sources in fashioning both staged and nonstaged works, including the former's *On the Transmigration of Souls* (2001), *Doctor Atomic* (2005), and *Girls of the Golden West* (2017) and the latter's *Different Trains* (1988), *City Life* (1995), and *WTC 9/11* (2010). This use of documentary material has profound implications for a musical work, posing thorny questions about authenticity, subjectivity, and aesthetics. With Reich's work on his operas *The Cave* (1993) and *Three Tales* (2002), the question of documentary use is particularly complex. Whereas Adams's documentary impulse in the past two decades often has led him to forego newly penned librettos in favor of textual pastiches that interpolate historical records with poetic sources, the materiality of Reich's approach is more encompassing: text and music—melodies, harmonies, rhythms—derive directly from first-person testimonial “documents” (in this case, recorded speech from interviews), and the screen-dominated mise-en-scène grows out of the visual component of these same interviews.

Despite Reich's insistence that he is adamantly “*not* a man of the theater,” the particular documentary nature of his operas and even pieces like his Grammy Award-winning string quartet *Different Trains* might fruitfully be understood with reference to the tradition of documentary theater, which was experiencing both a resurgence and transformation in the United States during the 1980s and early 1990s when Reich was creating *Different Trains* and *The Cave*.<sup>5</sup> During this era, a “theater of testimony” or “verbatim theater”—derived from oral histories and interviews—began to define American documentary (spoken) theater.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding its status as an opera, *The Cave* encapsulates this shift in the history of documentary theater, both in the understanding of what constitutes a document—in this case, the inherently subjective statements of interviewees—and in how those documents are employed in a theatrical context. Within subsequent operas and oratorios in the United States and abroad, the documentary impulse has opened new avenues for narrative and dramaturgy, as in Gabriela Ortiz's *¡Únicamente La Verdad! (Only the Truth!)* (2008) and Donnacha Dennehy's staged “docucantata” *The Hunger* (2012–16; rev. 2019).<sup>7</sup> With *The Cave*, the reliance on first-person testimony led Reich and video artist Beryl Korot, his co-creator, toward the creation of a multiply mediated theatrical environment that reconfigures the operatic role of singers.<sup>8</sup>

Framing *The Cave* as documentary theater raises a number of hermeneutic possibilities and questions. Even more so than contemporaneous spoken documentary theater, *The Cave* foregrounds the use of audiovisual media and technology, therefore arguably obviating the need to acknowledge the medi-

ated nature of the theatrical material, as is typical in much spoken documentary theater. As Reich succinctly noted, “the basic theater *was* the video.”<sup>9</sup> This technological mediation within the genre of opera, however, poses a significant problem, one that Reich appeared to struggle with during the gestation of his first theater piece: What is the function of the singers, who for many constitute the *sine non qua* of opera? Their vocal and corporeal presence in *The Cave* challenges traditional understandings of operatic subjectivity, as they eschew conventional operatic singing and dramatic characterization. I suggest that amid the technological tapestry created by interwoven video and audio samples of interviewees in *The Cave*, the singers ultimately act as a multivalent conduit between authors and audiences; the recorded and the live; text, speech, and song. This mediative function itself takes place within a broader matrix of mediations that comprises written text, recorded speech, instrumental music, singing, video, and staging, along with relationships between authors, performers, audiences, and documentary materials.

The role of the singers is hardly the opera’s only unconventional element. Premiered in 1993 at the Vienna Festival, *The Cave* is intentionally unorthodox, so much so that Reich and Korot coined their own genre designation: a “documentary music video theater work.”<sup>10</sup> Organized in three acts of decreasing length, *The Cave* examines the story of the biblical patriarch Abraham and his family using texts drawn from the book of Genesis and the Koran, as well as accounts found in the Jewish Midrash and Islamic Hadith commentaries. Reich and Korot interweave these Abrahamic narratives, which are projected onto screens in different languages and sometimes sung (in English) as well, with collaged sections of audiovisual fragments drawn from interviews they conducted with Israeli Jews (act 1), Palestinian Muslims (act 2), and Americans (act 3), who offer subjective commentary on Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac (table 3.1 indicates the structure of act 1; the other acts are similarly interwoven).<sup>11</sup> The dramaturgy of *The Cave*, then, is fundamentally dialogic, arising from the juxtaposition of contrasting contemporary reflections on these foundational figures with historical religious accounts, all of which participate in a process of mutual refraction and mediation. Going a step beyond *Different Trains*, which used a similar audio sampling technique, the interview excerpts constitute the musical *and* the visual basis for the entire work, which plays out via five large video screens, thirteen instrumentalists, and four singers.<sup>12</sup> Created on the cusp of the digital revolution in new media, *The Cave* was a technological and musical marvel in its synchronization of video, speech, and music.

Table 3.1. The Structure of *The Cave*, Act 1, Showing the Interweaving of Narrative and Interview Sections

Text source	Performing forces
Genesis XVI: 1–12	instruments (percussion & typing)
Israeli Responses to “Who is Abraham?” I	spoken by interviewee
Israeli Responses to “Who is Abraham?” II	spoken by interviewees, doubled by instruments
Genesis XI:27 and Midrash Rabbah	singers and instruments
Israeli Responses to “Who is Abraham?” IIIa	spoken by interviewees, doubled by instruments
Genesis XII:1	singers and instruments
Israeli Responses to “Who is Abraham?” IIIb	spoken by interviewees, doubled by instruments
Genesis XII:5, XIII:14–18, XV:1–5, and XVI:1	singers and instruments
Israeli Responses to “Who is Sarah?”	spoken by interviewees, doubled by instruments
Genesis XVI:2–4	handwritten on video screens
Israeli Responses to “Who is Hagar?” I	spoken by interviewees, doubled by instruments
Genesis XVI:5–6	handwritten on video screens
Israeli Responses to “Who is Hagar?” II	spoken by interviewees, doubled by instruments
Genesis XVI:7–12	typing instrument
Israeli Responses to “Who is Ishmael?”	spoken by interviewees, doubled by instruments
Genesis XVIII:1–2, 9–14, XXI:1–3	singers and instruments
Israeli Responses to “Who is Isaac?” I	spoken by interviewees, doubled by instruments
Genesis XXI: 8–20	singers and instruments
Israeli Responses to “Who is Isaac?” II	spoken by interviewees, doubled by instruments
Genesis XXIII	text alone on screens, plus interviewee voiceover
Discussion of Machpelah I	spoken by interviewees, doubled by instruments
Discussion of Machpelah II	spoken by interviewees
Genesis XXV:7–10	chanted by interviewee, with instrumental drone
None	A minor drone (video footage of Cave interior)

In what follows, I briefly survey the documentary impulse as it manifested in Reich's and Korot's works prior to *The Cave* before turning to an overview of documentary theater. Although the practice has flourished in the new millennium, my concern here is to outline the history, materials, and mediating strategies of documentary theater up through the early 1990s in order to establish an aesthetic link between this tradition and *The Cave*. In the final section, however, I focus on where this opera and the broader documentary tradition diverge: in the representational capacity of the performers. Unlike verbatim theater, in which actors embody a Brechtian dialectic between "actor/researcher *and* character/'real person,'" as well as document/body, in *The Cave* the singers do not act, *per se*, maintaining an aesthetic distance from the documentary material that results in a challenge to both opera's and documentary theater's longstanding conventions of drama and mimesis.<sup>13</sup> This in turn prompts a consideration of how notions of realism, authenticity, and subjectivity play out along musical and dramaturgical vectors in the ever-growing body of contemporary American operas inspired by "true stories."

## Reich, Korot, and the Documentary Impulse

Reich's well-known fascination with documentary material stretches back to the early 1960s, when he worked with recorded voices on tape to produce *Plastic Haircut* (1963), *It's Gonna Rain* (1965), and *Come Out* (1966). Through his tape work, Reich would have been familiar with the processes of selecting, transcribing, arranging, and presenting fragments from recorded interviews that he later used in *The Cave*.<sup>14</sup> Reich's continued commitment to a realist or documentary aesthetic in the 1980s is evident in his sketchbooks and notes for both *Different Trains* and *The Cave*. Early tentative titles for *Different Trains* included *True Story*, *Aural History*, *Oral History*, and *Recent History*, and the earliest sketches for *Different Trains* include Reich's imperative that "it is a must to choose the documentary materials first. Their pitches and rhythms will then determine the string music."<sup>15</sup>

The composer placed a similar emphasis on documentary materials for *The Cave*, reminding himself that the success of *Different Trains*, in his opinion, was the result of the documentary, personal nature of the piece. He wrote, "Get people telling about their own lives. This is what you had in *Different Trains* and it worked because it's authentic! Similarly here."<sup>16</sup> The development of *Different Trains* and *The Cave* took place on parallel tracks; the

string quartet, commented Reich, served as “a kind of study for an entire[ly] new kind of music theater—say, a documentary music video theater—which would use real documentary footage manipulated in sound and in video image at the same time as you have live musicians onstage.”<sup>17</sup> Throughout the creation of *The Cave*, Reich referred to *Different Trains* as “theater of the mind,” whereas *The Cave* brought the visual element out of the mind and onto the screen through the work of Beryl Korot.<sup>18</sup>

Korot’s documentary aesthetic is equally apparent in her works preceding *The Cave*. Her first multichannel video art installation, *Dachau 1974*, displays on four horizontally aligned monitors video footage that she had filmed at the Dachau concentration camp memorial site during the summer of 1974.<sup>19</sup> With a temporal structure that rhythmically interweaves footage of Dachau between the four monitors, *Dachau 1974* resonates strongly with Reich’s own early work with tape phasing, as paired channels present identical footage that is slightly out of sync. Korot’s use of multiple channels would eventually inform her work in *The Cave*, which threads together interview footage and abstracted visuals in a similar manner.

The influence of *Dachau 1974* on *The Cave* is not solely technical, however. The earlier work marks an engagement with history—that of the Holocaust—through a documentary focus on the present. Korot concentrates only on the concentration camp as it existed during her visit. “In making this piece,” she explained, “I chose not to use anything about what happened there except the architecture which spoke for itself.”<sup>20</sup> Korot’s focus on the then-present-day architecture of Dachau, rather than its artifacts or historical footage, thus prefigures her and Reich’s own preoccupation with place and the present in *The Cave* (the title of which alludes to the Cave of Machpelah, where the biblical Abraham and Sarah, as well as Adam and Eve, are purportedly buried).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, *Dachau 1974* and its successor, *Text and Commentary*, foreshadow the contrasting narratives at play in *The Cave*, as they both present, in varying degrees, multiple perspectives of the same or similar visual information. “It’s documentary,” Reich noted about *Text and Commentary*, “i.e., what you see is the piece. You walk in, you see the finished linen cloth that [Beryl] wove, you see five screens of video taken with a camera hanging from the ceiling portraying that same action, and then you see on the wall the weaving diagrams. . . . These are all different views of the documentary reality. We share that interest, that fascination with dealing with documentary material, which is very often *loaded*.”<sup>22</sup>

Whereas Korot’s documentary reality in *The Cave* is the visual frame of

each interview recording, Reich's centers on the interviews' sonic element; namely, the speech. For Reich, the appeal of recorded speech lies both in its perceived authenticity—stemming from the (re-)presentation of others' lived experiences rather than his own authorial vantage (i.e., “people telling about their own lives”)—and its multiple meanings. Moreover, the speaking voices themselves denote authenticity through their seemingly unmediated musicality, free of the expressive weight of a composer's melody or a singer's voice. In a 1971 interview, Reich noted that “voices, used as sound, nevertheless have a residual meaning which was also very ambiguous—it could be sporting, or sexual, or political—and immediately seemed to me to be the solution to vocal music.”<sup>23</sup> In his early tape pieces, which were subject to manipulation via various processes, these voices sounded within the realm of the unconscious and the psychological, acting as aural “Rorschach tests.”<sup>24</sup> Sumanth Gopinath, for example, demonstrates how Daniel Hamm's recorded voice in *Come Out* (and Reich's process-based treatment of it) creates multiple potential meanings, conjuring up the specter of midcentury Black urban uprisings in the United States as well as “the oversexualization of African American males in the white racial imaginary.”<sup>25</sup> In *Different Trains* and *The Cave*, however, the voice fragments undergo no such rigorously consistent processes, but rather Reich's own intuitive processes of selection, ordering, harmonization, and counterpoint.

Act 1, scene 13 (“Sarah Casts Hagar and Ishmael Out”), for instance, incorporates seventeen distinct speech samples from eight Israeli Jewish interviewees. Reich doubles the scene's opening speech melody (spoken by Nadine Shenkar, a professor of Jewish art at the Bezalel Academy of Art in Israel) with vibraphone, violin, and cello, while the piano, keyboard sampler, and other vibraphone sustain a harmonic backdrop that hovers ambiguously around E minor (see figure 3.1; sounding speech sample indicated in parentheses), a harmonic abstraction that complements Korot's colorful abstractions of visual details from the camera shot.<sup>26</sup> The string quartet immediately spins out the final three words (“him to go”) into a miniature, imitative web, with the second violin and viola harmonized in thirds. Without words, the instrumental melodies nevertheless retain Shenkar's textual meaning even as they emphasize the purely sonic characteristics of her speech: the distinctive ascending minor seventh inflection of “Sarah” and its descending semitone lean into the first syllable of “wanted,” which conveys the assertiveness of both the speaker and her subject.

In comparison with Reich's 1960s tape works, the speech samples in

♩. = 150

Vibes 1 / Piano / Sampler (Reduction)

Vibes 2 / Violin I  
(Sa - rah want - ed him to go)

Violin II

Viola

Cello  
(Sa - rah want - ed him to go)

7

Vib. 1 / Pno. / Samp. (Reduction)

7

Vib. 2 / Vln. I  
(want - ed him to go) (want - ed him to go)

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.  
(want - ed him to go) (want - ed him to go)

Fig. 3.1. *The Cave*, act 1, scene 13—Sarah Casts Hagar and Ishmael Out, mm. 1–11 (reduced score).

*The Cave* clearly retain their semantic meaning as constructed through language as well as any ambiguous residual meanings that derive from the sonic properties of the samples alone. Moreover, they accrue additional relational meaning from their juxtaposition with one another. The synchronization of speech and image, as well as the instrumental fabric's responsiveness to the colors and rhythms of speech, ultimately position the interview fragments—the “documents”—as both authentic and authoritative, effectively engendering the mise-en-scène and sonic palette with seemingly minimal authorial mediation from Reich and Korot.

### Documentary Theater: History, Materials, and Mediating Processes

The use of documents as the material basis for theater has a rich history that spans much of the twentieth century and gave rise to a new genre: the documentary play. Unlike historical dramas, which typically rely on secondary source-derived facts to help create and tell a story, documentary plays utilize and foreground primary source material; in essence, the sources are the story, arguably even the protagonist. German playwright and director Erwin Piscator's *Trotz Alledem!* (In Spite of Everything!) marked the birth of the genre in 1925; one year later the word “documentary” entered the modern lexicon.<sup>27</sup> Using Piscator's plays as a basis, theater historian Attilio Favorini defines documentary theater as “plays characterized by a central or exclusive reliance on actual rather than imaginary events, on dialogue, song and/or visual materials (photographs, films, pictorial documents) ‘found’ in the historical record or gathered by the playwright/researcher, and by a disposition to set individual behavior in an articulated political and/or social context.”<sup>28</sup> The porousness of Favorini's definition highlights the difficulty in mapping the boundaries of the genre, and over the course of the twentieth century, different terms—Theater of Fact, verbatim theater, tribunal plays, theater of testimony, and Theater of the Real—have been employed in an attempt to capture the various historical nuances and instantiations of the genre.<sup>29</sup> Documentary plays, then, like documentary opera, might be situated along a broad spectrum of authenticity or realism defined in part by materiality and mediation.

The line from Piscator to Reich is surprisingly short, weaving through various twentieth-century avant-garde movements within which documentary theater first developed.<sup>30</sup> Piscator, for instance, worked closely with col-



laborators associated with Expressionism, Dada, the Bauhaus, and the *Neue Sachlichkeit*.<sup>31</sup> Just as the avant-garde informed documentary playwrights, these artists, in turn, influenced future practitioners of the avant-garde. Judith Malina and Julian Beck, cofounders of the Living Theater, studied under Piscator at the New School for Social Research, where he worked in the 1940s. The Living Theater, in turn, inspired American avant-garde theater troupes including Bread and Puppet Theater, El Teatro Campesino, Free Southern Theater, and, perhaps most importantly for *The Cave*, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, with whom Reich worked in the early 1960s.<sup>32</sup>

Within the United States, the tradition of documentary theater has been largely episodic. In the mid-1930s, certain of the Federal Theater Project's Living Newspapers—including *Triple-A Plowed Under* and *Ethiopia* (both 1936)—became the earliest and most visible examples. At mid-century, plays such as Martin Duberman's *In White America* (1963) and Eric Bentley's *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been* (1972) marked a second period of activity that confronted postwar social anxieties.<sup>33</sup> The revival of documentary theater in the century's closing decades, however, saw a new approach toward the genre, in which oral history, rather than transcripts, diaries, and other written documents, became the predominant primary sources. Adopting the practice of using newly made tape-recorded materials (derived from interviews, often conducted by the performers themselves) as the documentary basis for their work, playwrights such as Emily Mann and Anna Deveare Smith contributed to a corpus of documentary plays that includes the former's *Still Life* (1980) and *Annula (An Autobiography)* (1985) and the latter's *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights* (1992) and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994).

Despite differences in materials and mediating strategies, documentary plays often retain the oppositional ethos of the avant-garde, one frequently directed at mass media and mainstream journalism. "Documentary theatre," writes Timothy Youker, "aims to alter audience perceptions about how both documents and the theatre are produced, received, and evaluated . . . [it] presents criticisms of and/or alternatives to the ways in which dominant culture constructs, circulates, and hierarchizes the materials of memory."<sup>34</sup> Korot's comments on the aesthetic of experimentation behind *The Cave* reveal its conceptual kinship to the practices of documentary theater: "*The Cave* was our way of creating a Theatre of Ideas based on the documentary material we had gathered, and in a sense, delivering the news in a whole other context, and through a different type of delivery system . . . in this case to a theatrical audience by musicians and singers interacting with prerecorded documentary material."<sup>35</sup>

Korot's concept of "delivering the news in a whole other context" strongly links *The Cave* to the documentary tradition, as well as to her own work in 1970 as coeditor of a magazine called *Radical Software*. When the opera was created in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Israel-Palestine conflict was very much in the global news owing to the First Intifada. In contrast to mainstream media, *The Cave* offered an oblique perspective on the conflict that Reich and Korot felt was lacking at the time, one that emphasized what they perceived as the religious, even familial, roots of the ongoing conflict.<sup>36</sup>

This cultural critique unfolds alongside the opera's critiques of operatic conventions, both visual and sonic. Korot draws on a television aesthetic in the cinematography of *The Cave*, deliberately maintaining in the interviews a strictly frontal perspective that mimics the camera angles used in television news programs.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, Reich's amplified large chamber ensemble and his preference for a quartet of "early music" voices contributed to the composer's "answer to what music theater can be" in the (post)modern era: a contemporary art form that draws on contemporary technologies and aesthetics.<sup>38</sup> Reich required performers capable of singing with little or no vibrato and with a precision of rhythm and pitch suited to his postminimalist contrapuntal language, in other words a style of vocal production that would be unsuitable for large performance spaces without the affordances of amplification. Unlike his erstwhile colleague Philip Glass, whose operas *Satyagraha* and *Akhmaten* in the early 1980s embraced opera's traditional vocal and orchestral aesthetics even as they upended narrative norms, Reich prescribed a "different kind of artifice" for contemporary opera.<sup>39</sup>

From the recording process of its pre-compositional phases to the time-consuming sampling and editing of audiovisual excerpts during its compositional phase to the meticulous synchronization of sound and image in performance, *The Cave* represented a technological vanguard in the early 1990s. This reliance on technology is typical of the documentary theater tradition, which engages diverse materials, media, and modes of communication. "While documentary theatre remains in the realm of handcraft—people assemble to create it, meet to write it, gather to see it—it is a form of theatre," writes Carol Martin, "in which technology is a primary factor in the transmission of knowledge."<sup>40</sup>

The chronology, materials, and mediating techniques of *The Cave* thus situate the piece within the tradition of oral history-based documentary theater or, in Emily Mann's preferred designation, "theater of testimony." Carey Perloff, the stage director for the first production run of *The Cave*, has pointed to the affinities between verbatim theater and *The Cave*, suggesting

that “the techniques utilized in *The Cave* pioneered techniques that are now quite common in the spoken theater world, so in that sense it was revolutionary.”<sup>41</sup> Unlike much documentary theater, however, *The Cave* is not about a specific event per se, but rather a particular story—that of Abraham and his family—and its enduring influence on divergent narratives of identity. And, rather than placing the words of the interviewees in the mouths of actors who assume the interviewees’ personas, Reich and Korot foreground the documentary footage itself as the primary dramatic element and the interviewees as the *dramatis personae*.

The turn toward testimonial theater in the 1980s might be seen on the one hand as a testament to human presence and subjectivity as the ultimate authentic, and, on the other, as an implicit recognition of objectivity’s elusiveness. Pointing to the growing dominance of the “rhetoric of witness” in theater, Derek Paget suggests that as faith in facts “have drained away from ‘post-documentary’ cultures in mediatized societies” and documents “have become vulnerable to postmodern doubt” and spin, “the witness’s claim to authenticity can still warrant a credible perspective.”<sup>42</sup>

This rhetoric of witness similarly animates Reich’s documentary approach, and the fact that neither Reich nor Korot have indicated any knowledge of or engagement with documentary theater speaks to their work as emblematic of this broader cultural shift. “The *only* way to deal with events like [9/11],” Reich said in 2011, “is to go to the documentary sources that participated in that event . . . the tone of voice, the speech melody, contains within it the *true* intensity of the event, not a dramatization thereof, not a fantasy thereof, but a retelling of a witness.”<sup>43</sup> In *The Cave*, this “retelling” occurs via audiovisual documents, but also through the on-stage voices and bodies of the opera’s singers.

### Singers as Witnesses: Mediating Presence in *The Cave*

Reich’s penchant for testimonial documentation speaks to his unabashedly realist aesthetic. It also reflects his distaste for the mimetic strategies of more conventional theater, and an implication that video recording hews closer to pure reproduction than to mediated representation. To that end, Reich proclaimed, “I don’t really feel comfortable with the idea of singers acting biblical roles. . . . We really have no idea how these 4,000-year-old characters looked, and it’s always rather awkward when someone portrays them. The reality is that Abraham and the others only live in the words and thoughts of

the living.”<sup>44</sup> By eschewing acting in *The Cave*, Reich and Korot largely side-step one of documentary theater’s longstanding theoretical problems: namely the way in which, as Alan Filewod puts it, “‘reality’ collapses into the presence of the actor who stands before us as subject and object, document and documenter, whose authority derives simultaneously from the representation and the erasure of actuality.”<sup>45</sup> But in a theater (or opera) of the real in which reality is constructed through audiovisual technology, where does that leave performers?

During the early compositional stages of *The Cave*, Reich struggled to answer this, unsure of the roles that singers might play in *The Cave*, even as he likely knew that they were needed to fulfill the generic expectations of opera. His notes and sketches show that he initially experimented with having the singers repeat the words of the interviewees in the “talking heads” sections of act 1. Instead, he shifted this role to the instruments, writing that in doing so “the section becomes more abstract and the ‘commentary’ on the meaning shifts to the instruments”<sup>46</sup> (see, again, table 3.1). Months later, he elaborated on this decision to keep the singers in the background: “by limiting the amount of time ANY singer sings and is seen as opposed to when they are silent and unseen (dark) you change something conventional (the duet, trio or quartet of opera/musical) into something less conventional while commenting on the convention itself.”<sup>47</sup> (Notably absent from his list of conventions is the aria.) Thus, in the first act the two sopranos, tenor, and bass sing only a handful of sacred texts. In the second act, they do not sing these narrative texts owing to prohibitions against singing the Koran, and instead musically echo the Palestinian interviewees. The final act combines these two approaches, as the singers both echo the American interviewees and recount still more Abrahamic narratives, all of which are interpolated with increasing frequency and fluidity.

The distinction between these two functions—echo and narrative—is represented musically and even spatially. Throughout act 1, the episodes of narrative text from Genesis unfold as a series of vocal duets in strict rhythmic unison, a compositional decision that minimizes the individual sound of each singer in favor of a collective vocality. In act 1, scene 12, for instance (fig. 3.2), a soprano and tenor sing from opposite sides of the stage, framing the large screens as they recount the biblical story of Abraham and Sarah’s decision to cast Hagar and her son Ishmael into the wilderness. This duet’s rapid succession of constantly changing meters and harmonies recalls Reich’s earlier idiosyncratic approach to text setting in *Tehillim* and *The Desert Music*, and

The musical score is divided into three systems. The first system (mm. 24-27) features a Soprano and Tenor vocal line and a Full ensemble piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 156. The lyrics are: "And she said to A-bra-ham, 'Cast out the slave wo-man". The second system (mm. 28-31) continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "and her son, for the son of the slave wo-man,". The third system (mm. 32-35) concludes the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "shall not in-her-it with my son I-saac.".

Fig. 3.2. *The Cave*, act 1, scene 12—Genesis XXI, mm. 24–35 (reduced score).

the ensemble nature of the music suggests that, as in the earlier pieces (per Marcelle Pierson), “there is no specific subjectivity or presence that could be understood to lie behind the vocal utterances.”<sup>48</sup> And yet, for tenor James Bassi, who performed in the initial production run, although the piece is “staged sitting or standing still,” it nevertheless requires being “focused and purposeful,” in other words, imbued with subjectivity, albeit absent one connected with a traditional dramatic role.<sup>49</sup> Soprano Cheryl Bensman-Rowe, a longtime Reich collaborator, described this as “almost like reporting on a

story instead of being a story”; in fact, the singers were costumed and staged in contemporary attire as if they were newscasters—voices of depersonalized authority in the late twentieth-century televisual domain.<sup>50</sup>

The singers’ echoes of the interviewees in acts 2 and 3 offer a marked musical contrast to the seeming objectivity of the sacred text-settings. Unlike the latter’s strict scansion, the musical echoes are comparatively free, with variations in rhythm, melody, harmony, and texture that offer, in Bensman-Rowe’s formulation, “singing commentary to reflect what the talking heads are saying” (see fig. 3.3). “We were supposed to be like our own talking head,” she recalled.<sup>51</sup> Timbrally and registrally, the often solo voices of the singers typically match the genders of the interviewees, a compositional and dramaturgical move that begins to collapse the interpersonal distance between the singers and the talking heads. On stage, the singers occupy four separate spaces around the screens, emphasizing their individuality. Throughout the final act, however, the vocalists appear spatially and musically as a quartet (above the center screen), presenting both the narrative texts and echoing commentary in short, paired canons. This new formation counterpoints the spatial layout of the screens in act 3; rather than the symmetrical arch design of the preceding acts, one of the five screens is moved upward to break the symmetry.

The vocal presentations of text and commentary have the effect of placing the singers outside the “action” of *The Cave*, positioning them obliquely in relation to the central characters on screen. Like newscasters, they inhabit what audiovisual theorist Jesús González-Requena describes as a “space [that] is radically different from the space of events,” one that constructs “the present of the communicative act itself.”<sup>52</sup> This presentness is both temporal and spatial. As Kevin Barnhurst writes in his expansive study of how the news has transformed in the digital era, “for newscasters, proximity occurs along a direct line from audience to event, and the way they present news attempts to shorten that distance,” collapsing “distant events into real-seeming ‘here’” and “project[ing] events into a televisual present.”<sup>53</sup> To facilitate the construction of this theatrical present, the singers in *The Cave* perform a paradoxical role. “In a piece like *The Cave*,” Bassi reflected, “you don’t use the full bloom of your voice because you’re part of a larger musical texture. Even the singers are sort of cogs, in a way—you’re featured but not, you’re foreground and background at the same time. . . . You’re part of a large, complex organism more than anything else.”<sup>54</sup>

The roles of singer-as-newscaster bring what director Carey Perloff

♩ = 97

Vibes I /  
Sampler /  
Keyboard  
(reduction)

Bass

+Ob. & Eng. Hrn.

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

Is - ma - il is the first born

(Is - ma - il) is the first born

(Is - ma - il) is the first born

(Is - ma - il) is the first born

(Is - ma - il) is the first born

(Is - ma - il) is the first born

first born of Ib - ra - him

first born of Ib - ra - him

(Is - ma - il) is the first born of Ib - ra - him

(Is - ma - il) is the first born of Ib - ra - him

Fig. 3.3. *The Cave*, act 2, scene 4—Sacrifice: Ismael and Ishak, mm. 32–41 (reduced score).

describes as a necessary human presence to what is otherwise an intensely mediated experience:

The singers didn't play characters per se but they embodied the conflicts and ideas articulated by all of the witnesses on the screens. So in a sense, they were the "live witnesses," the human embodiment of the eternal issues and sorrows roiling around the Middle East. It's one thing to see those ideas expounded on video, it's another to hear them live, to realize that even if something being said is controversial or upsetting, it is coming out of the mouth of a real human being standing in front of us.<sup>55</sup>

What Perloff theorizes, then, is a different form of witness, one whose authenticity stems from bodily presence rather than technologically mediated documents. Assistant director Nick Mangano (later the director for the revised production) conceives of the singers' presence similarly and suggests a further level of complexity:

They were witnessing, in a sense, along with the audience. . . . You could look at it as almost a Greek chorus . . . a part of the community, in a way . . . I think what's potent or theatrically viable is the witness of any kind of storytelling . . . having the presence of singers standing there on stage, again witnessing, but also conveying story, basically—narrative and story to the audience—it's a bridge, it just bridges the gap and renders it theatrical.<sup>56</sup>

Mangano's metaphor of a bridge is suggestive. In this interpretation, the singers—and the instrumentalists, for that matter—bridge the chasm between the mediated, documentary video and the audience, in effect rendering the mediated immediate, collapsing the distance but not the distinction between the two poles. Moreover, in Mangano's conception, the singers are simultaneously audience members and storytellers, both witness to the sampled testimonies and bearing witness to the narratives—that is, the sacred texts—that gave rise to these testimonies. They could be said to model what Jenn Stephenson calls performative witnessing, an active, ethical form of audience-witnessing that recognizes and accepts the culpability inherent in the act of witnessing.<sup>57</sup>

Amy Lynn Wlodarski's study of *Different Trains* offers still another conceptual model, in which the singers might function as a kind of secondary witness, a term used in Holocaust studies for "intellectual interpretations of



survivor testimonies that are advanced without the author revealing his or her own subjective standpoint or scholarly agenda.<sup>58</sup> As secondary witnesses, the singers could even be interpreted as representative stand-ins for Reich and Korot, thus bridging the gap between the authors and their audiences. The singers' presence, their corporeality and vocality, throws into relief the collaged, mediated nature of *The Cave*, which purports to objectively present viewpoints that are inherently subjective.

Throughout *The Cave*, Reich and Korot maintain separation between subject and object, document and documenter in the theater (although their authorial roles are obfuscated), whereas in operas like Frederic Rzewski's *The Triumph of Death* (which sets Peter Weiss's 1965 Holocaust-themed documentary play, *The Investigation*) and Adams's *Doctor Atomic*, the layers and levels of mediation from document to performance are more ambiguous.<sup>59</sup> In such instances of documentary music theater, to what extent does music threaten to erase the actuality of documentary materials in the service of song?<sup>60</sup> How are notions of authorship and authority complicated by distinctions between composition and performance? As scholars and critics begin to grapple with American opera's documentary turn over the past few decades, the tradition of documentary theater offers a fruitful point of comparison for formulating these and other questions of realism, materiality, mediation, and authenticity.

## Notes

1. John von Rhein, "It's Perfectly Clear: 'Nixon' Is Great Docu-Opera," *Chicago Tribune*, October 25, 1987.

2. Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, "The Inward Turn: American Opera Revisits America's Past," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 44, no. 2 (2014): 178–93; Lawrence Kramer, "The Great American Opera: *Klinghoffer*, *Streetcar*, and the Exception," *Opera Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2007): 66–80.

3. Daniel Schulze, *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 2.

4. Schulze, *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance*, 8. On contemporary American opera's engagement with history, see Colleen Renihan, *The Operatic Archive: American Opera as History* (London: Routledge, 2020).

5. Steve Reich, phone interview with the author, July 25, 2016.

6. Derek Paget, "The 'Broken Tradition' of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance," in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 224–38; Attilio Favorini, "Introduction: After the Fact: Theater and the Documentary Impulse," in *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1995), xi–xxxix.

7. See Amy Bauer, chapter 4 in this volume.

8. In a related study, Jelena Novak demonstrates how Reich and Korot's subsequent collaboration, *Three Tales*, effectively reinvents the relationship between voice and body in opera. Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (London: Ashgate, 2013), 57–76.

9. Steve Reich, phone interview with the author, July 25, 2016.

10. On the (self-)production process of *The Cave* and questions of genre, see Ryan Ebright, "My answer to what music theater can be: Iconoclasm and Entrepreneurship in Steve Reich and Beryl Korot's *The Cave*," *American Music* 37, no. 1 (2017): 29–50.

11. Table 3.1 reflects the first act structure as it appears in the published libretto and as it was performed during the initial performance run. Steve Reich and Beryl Korot, *The Cave*, production book (UK: Hendon Music, 1993). Several subsequent cuts are reflected in the online edition of the score as well as the 1995 Nonesuch recording; this newer structure is used in this article's music example captions. Steve Reich, *The Cave*, full score (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, undated), <https://www.boosey.com/cr/perusals/score?id=1325>; Steve Reich, *The Cave*, CD (New York: Nonesuch, 1995).

12. On the narrative and harmonic structures of *The Cave*, see Maarten Beirens, "Different Tracks: Narrative Sequence, Harmonic (Dis)continuity, and Structural Organization in Steve Reich's *Different Trains* and *The Cave*," in *Rethinking Reich*, ed. Sumanth Gopinath and Pwyll ap Siôn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 75–92. On Korot's contribution, see Mathieu Duplay, "Le lyrisme du détail dans *The Cave* de Steve Reich et Beryl Korot," *Revue française d'études américaines* 160, no. 3 (2019): 105–15.

13. Derek Paget, "'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Techniques," *New Theater Quarterly* 3, no. 12 (November 1987): 332. On mimesis in opera, see, for example, Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

14. See, for instance, John Pymm, "Steve Reich's Dramatic Sound Collage for the Harlem Six: Toward a Prehistory of *Come Out*," in *Rethinking Reich*, ed. Sumanth Gopinath and Pwyll ap Siôn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 139–57.

15. Sketchbook #39, Steve Reich Collection, Paul Sacher Stiftung. Underlining in original. Despite the composer's claims of merely ceding to the demands of the speech samples in the compositional process, he occasionally took an active directorial role in the pre-compositional phases—i.e., the interviews—to achieve desired inflections or phrasings. See Celia Casey, "From World War II to the 'War on Terror': An Examination of Steve Reich's 'Docu-Music' Approach in *WTC 9/11*," in *Rethinking Reich*, ed. Sumanth Gopinath and Pwyll ap Siôn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 159–76.

16. "Cave-Thoughts to Improve," computer document. Steve Reich Collection, PSS.

17. Tom Surowicz, "Music: The Reich Stuff," *Twin Cities Magazine*, February 1988, n.p.

18. Robert Cowan, "Joining the Real World? Steve Reich in Conversation with Robert Cowan," *CD Review* (n.d.): 85.

19. On *Dachau 1974* and the larger context of early video art, see chapter 2 of Katie E. Geha, "Like Life: Process, Data, and Change 1967–1976" (PhD thesis: University of Texas at Austin, 2012). See also Beryl Korot, "*Dachau 1974*," in *Video Art—An Anthology*, ed. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 76–77; Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 140–67.

20. Ingrid Wiegand, "Multi-Monitors," *The SoHo Weekly News*, March 20, 1975.
21. Initial ideas for *The Cave* focused greater attention on the archeology and architecture of the structures built over the Cave of the Patriarchs throughout history, including the mosque that currently sits above it. On the thirteen-year development of *The Cave*, see Ryan Ebright, "Echoes of the Avant-garde in American Minimalist Opera" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014), 102–26.
22. Reich, phone interview with the author, July 25, 2016.
23. Michael Nyman, "Steve Reich: An Interview," *Musical Times* (March 1971): 230. Marcelle Pierson argues that Reich's treatments of the voice throughout his career represent various attempts at reinvigorating "the 'vocal imaginary' of Western classical music," a "long-standing linkage between 'unified' melody, singing voice, and Rousseauian subjectivity." Marcelle Pierson, "Voice, Technē, and Jouissance in *Music for 18 Musicians*," *Twentieth-Century Music* 13 (2016): 28.
24. Rob Baker, "The Art of Fine Tuning: Conversations with Steve Reich, Lincoln Kirstein, and Peter Brook," *Parabola* 13, no. 2 (1988): 52.
25. Sumanth Gopinath, "The Problem of the Political in Steve Reich's *Come Out*," in *Sound Commitments: Avant-Garde Music and the Sixties*, ed. Robert Adlington (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 137.
26. A photograph of this moment in *The Cave* can be found at <http://levyarchive.bam.org/Detail/objects/64065>
27. Documentary filmmaker John Grierson used the term to describe Robert Flaherty's film *Moana*; Brecht used it to describe Piscator's plays. "Flaherty's Poetic *Moana*," *The New York Sun*, February 8, 1926; Brecht, *Gesammelte Schriften zum Theater*, cited in John Willett, *The Theater of Erwin Piscator: Half a Century of Politics in the Theater* (New York: Methuen, 1978), 186.
28. Favorini, "Introduction," xx. On documentary theater, see *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Roger Bechtel, *Past Performance: American Theatre and the Historical Imagination* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2007); Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).
29. See, for example, Carol Martin, "Introduction: Dramaturgy of the Real," in *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, ed. Carol Martin (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1; Dan Isaac, "Theatre of Fact," *TDR: The Drama Review* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1971), 109–35; Paget, "Verbatim Theatre," 317–36.
30. Timothy Youker, "'The Destiny of Words': Documentary Theatre, the Avant-garde, and the Politics of Form" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012), 1.
31. Youker, "The Destiny of Words," 18.
32. On Piscator, see Gerhard F. Probst, *Erwin Piscator and the American Theatre* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); Judith Malina, *The Piscator Notebook* (London: Routledge, 2012). On Reich's political music from this time, see Sumanth Gopinath, "Contraband Children: The Politics of Race and Liberation in the Music of Steve Reich, 1965–1966" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2005).
33. These plays address, respectively, the history of race relations in the United States and Joseph McCarthy's House on Un-American Activities committee hearings.

34. Youker, "The Destiny of Words," 18–19.
35. Beryl Korot, phone interview with the author, August 19, 2013.
36. On the politics of *The Cave* and its aesthetic of reconciliation, see Ryan Ebright, "'We Are Not Trying to Make a Political Piece': The Reconciliatory Aesthetic of Steve Reich and Beryl Korot's *The Cave*," in *Rethinking Reich*, ed. Sumanth Gopinath and Pwyll ap Siôn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 93–109.
37. The creative team referred to these documentary interview sections as the "talking heads" sections.
38. Steve Reich to Betty Freeman, August 14, 1980, Betty Freeman Papers, Special Collections and Archives, UC San Diego. For Reich, to compose for traditionally operatic (bel canto) voices would be culturally inauthentic. See Reich, "Kurt Weill, The Orchestra, and Vocal Style—An Interview with K. Robert Schwarz (1992)," in *Writings on Music 1965–2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 166–68; Ebright, "My answer to what music theater can be."
39. K. Robert Schwarz, "*The Cave* Walks, but Doesn't Quack, Like an Opera," *New York Times*, October 10, 1993.
40. Carol Martin, "Bodies of Evidence," *TDR: The Drama Review* 50, no. 3 (2006): 9.
41. Carey Perloff, email correspondence with the author, July 16, 2013.
42. Paget, "The 'Broken Tradition' of Documentary Theatre," 235–36.
43. Alex Petridis, "Music Weekly Podcast: Steve Reich. Interview with Alexis Petridis," *The Guardian*, August 12, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/audio/2011/aug/12/music-weekly-steve-reich-audio>
44. Steve Reich, "Jonathan Cott Interviews Beryl Korot and Steve Reich," in *Writings on Music 1965–2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 175. In his notes from September 1989, however, Reich briefly flirted with the idea of having the singers take on different roles. "The Cave—Notes," computer document. Steve Reich Collection, PSS.
45. Alan Filewod, "The Documentary Body: Theatre Workshop to Banner Theatre," in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 62.
46. "Note on development section," Computer document. Steve Reich Collection, PSS.
47. Reich, "The Cave—Notes."
48. Pierson, "Voice, Technē, and Jouissance in *Music for 18 Musicians*," 38.
49. James Bassi, Zoom interview with the author, August 12, 2022.
50. Cheryl Bensman-Rowe, Zoom interview with the author, August 18, 2022.
51. Cheryl Bensman-Rowe, Zoom interview with the author, August 18, 2022.
52. Jesús González-Requena, "The Television Newscast: A Postmodern Discourse," in *Critical Practices in Post-Franco Spain*, ed. Silvia L. López, Jenaro Talens, and Darío Villanueva (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 31, 32.
53. Kevin G. Barnhurst, *Mister Pulitzer and the Spider: Modern News from Realism to the Digital* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 127–28, 160.
54. James Bassi, Zoom interview with the author, August 12, 2022.
55. Carey Perloff, email correspondence with the author, July 16, 2013.
56. Nick Mangano, phone interview with the author, September 23, 2013.

57. Jenn Stephenson, *Performing Autobiography: Contemporary Canadian Drama* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 45–67.

58. Amy Lynn Wlodarski, “The Testimonial Aesthetics of *Different Trains*,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63, no. 1 (2010): 103.

59. On *The Triumph of Death*, see Beate Kutschke, “On Rzewski’s *The Triumph of Death*: Coping with the Holocaust in the 1980s,” *Contemporary Music Review* 29, no. 6 (2010): 643–60.

60. Robert Fink argues that Reich’s logocentric compositional approach in *The Cave* in fact transmutes both writing and song into speech through repetition and audiovisual mediation. Fink, “Repetition, Speech, and Authority in Steve Reich’s ‘Jewish’ Music,” in *Rethinking Reich*, ed. Sumanth Gopinath and Pwyll ap Siôn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 113–38.

## ¡Unicamente La Verdad! (Only the Truth!)

### *Camelia la Tejana's Many Truths*

Amy Bauer

Who was Camelia la Tejana? Murderer? Outlaw drug smuggler? Evangelist preacher? Or simply a fictional heroine brought to life by Ángel González, composer of “Contrabando y Traición” [Smuggling and Betrayal], the renowned 1970 narcocorrido by norteño band Los Tigres del Norte?<sup>1</sup> The fictional Camelia is betrayed by her drug trafficker lover Emilio Varela, whom she has helped smuggle marijuana into Los Angeles. As the transaction is finished, he leaves her with the revelation that he is going to San Francisco with “*la dueña de mi vida*” [“my true love”]. Rather than collapse or fade from view, Camelia kills Emilio and is never heard from again. Or is she? A tabloid photo surfaced in 1986 depicting a woman weeping over her lover’s headless corpse. In following years the Camelia myth grew, fed by lurid tales in the tabloid *Alarma!* and a proliferation of candidates for the “real” Camelia.<sup>2</sup> Her story inspired *¡Unicamente La Verdad!* (Only the Truth! 2007–2010), a “documentary” opera in six scenes written by Mexican composer Gabriela Ortiz (1964–) on a libretto by her brother, the Los Angeles–based multimedia artist Rubén Ortiz Torres (1964–).<sup>3</sup> *Only the Truth* is a nonlinear attempt to chart these various Camelias since 1970, with a libretto compiled solely from existing documents in Spanish and English. Ortiz’s one-act exposition leaves no tale of carnage, dead end, or possible redemption unremarked, and includes an academic lecture on the corrido and a cameo by El Tigre, the original singer of “Contrabando y Traición.”

I will argue that the opera functions as a contemporary analogue of the Mexican American *corrido*: at once epic ballad, purveyor of news, and repository of a nation’s myths. Ortiz’s heterogeneous score weaves allusions to traditional Mexican music alongside modernist harmonic soundscapes,

electronic drones, Weimar-like cabaret numbers, and musique concrète. A kaleidoscopic effect is produced as these musical settings are matched to the *Rashomon*-like views of Camelia's fate,<sup>4</sup> much as the evolution of the corrido into the narcocorrido mirrored the fragmentation of contemporary myth via vastly different media: tabloid newspapers, word-of-mouth, popular song, television, and film. The juxtaposition of both old and new media forms—all of which remain vital in the twenty-first century—establish a disinterested conceptual matrix, which puts into doubt the truth or meaning of any one subject position. In this sense it fulfills several tenets of the postdramatic theater outlined by Hans-Thies Lehmann (discussed in the introduction to this volume). Given that *¡Unicamente!* celebrates the overlap and conjunction of media forms, it could be seen as a meta-commentary on the very existence of postdramatic theater, which Lehmann views as a direct outgrowth of media's omnipresence in everyday life since the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> As Alan Filewod notes (discussed further in Ryan Ebright, chapter 3 in this volume), the notion of reality in documentary opera often dissolves into the presence of the actor before us.<sup>6</sup> *¡Unicamente!* self-reflexively revels in this disruption of reality, its documentary facade questioned by dialogues, hearsay, and imagined scenes that promote ambiguity, pluralism, and discontinuity.

As the narcocorrido has influenced popular print and broadcast media and spawned a cottage industry of academic scholarship, so Ortiz and Ortiz Torres incorporate blogs, newspapers, television interviews, and academic lectures into the opera, with no vantage point given priority over another. Ortiz and Ortiz Torres deliberately chose their music-cultural points of reference.<sup>7</sup> Musical points of reference include Kurt Weill and the fifty-year (and counting) career of the award-winning norteño band *Los Tigres del Norte*, banda and norteño genres of Mexican American border music, and—to my ears—a nod to a longer history of Mexican musical appropriation in American art music, from Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, with its roots in Aaron Copland's danzons, inspired by the music of Carlo Chávez. The drama of Berthold Brecht influenced the libretto, which cites the tabloid newspaper *Alarma!*, a predecessor to the paranoid and conspiracy-laden social media landscape of today, the academic study of Mexican and border culture, the Mexican multimedia conglomerate *Tv Azteca*, and a blogosphere that unites all of the above. Both Ángel González, the composer of "Contrabando y Traición," and Jorge Hernández, the lead singer of *Los Tigres del Norte*, are characters in the opera, along with Elijah Wald (the foremost academic expert on narcocorrido), and various men and women that *TV Azteca* and *¡Alarma!*

have put forth as “proof” that the fictional Camelia actually exists. If *iÚnicamente!* rejects a single narrative voice or position, its direct appeal to a willing audience in the know represents, I maintain, a return to earlier twentieth-century traditions of *Zeitoper*, with greater relevance to contemporary culture than many heralded documentary operas. Furthermore, as I will discuss below, the opera opens new vistas on tragedy, marrying its historical references to Christoph Menke’s notion of a “tragedy of play” and Lehmann’s notions of how tragic irony functions in postdramatic theater.<sup>8</sup> This function is bound to the figure of Camelia, as a woman who not only doesn’t, but from a Lacanian standpoint *can’t*, exist, so that she can ground the cultural signifiers that circulate around her.

### “Contrabando y Traición,” Musica Norteña, and the History of the Corrido

In “Contrabando y Traición,” the fictional protagonist from San Antonio, and her boyfriend Emilio Varela, cross the Mexican American border at Tijuana, with a car whose tires are filled with marijuana. As a Texan, Camelia secures safe passage, and they pull into a famous alleyway in Hollywood to make the drop. After a successful transaction, Emilio announces that he is leaving Camelia for his true love, the “owner of his heart,” in San Francisco. Seven shots later he is dead; the corrido ends with the famous line “Of the money and Camelia / Nothing else was ever known.” But of the fictional Camelia, much remained to be known. “Contrabando” is credited with launching the infamous narcocorrido genre, and its themes entered popular culture in the form of B movies, pop art, and—of course—a narconovela, approximately three hundred times as long as the original song.<sup>9</sup>

Elijah Wald characterizes Los Tigres del Norte as “like Willie Nelson and the Rolling Stones combined,” superstars of a working-class music whose most notorious genre, the narcocorrido, is a starkly “medieval” anachronism.<sup>10</sup> Formed of the brothers Jorge, Raúl, and Hernán Hernández and their cousin Oscar Lara, they came originally from the west Mexican state of Sinaloa, but settled in Northern California.<sup>11</sup> If “Contrabando y Traición” was not the first corrido about smuggling and drug trafficking, it was the first to launch the distinctive genre known as *narcocorrido*. Wald speculates that the success of Ángel Gonzalez’s song was due in part to the fact that he had never written a corrido. As a form typically based on real events, a corrido gained its



sense of authenticity by memorializing places, dates, and subjects by name. Wald's assertion that "Contrabando" "had the colorful, larger-than-life feel of a Hollywood movie" is itself memorialized in the opera's duet between Wald and González (discussed below). As Cathy Ragland reminds us, the corrido arrived at a fraught moment for U.S.-Mexican border relations, as the U.S. government launched a war against undocumented Mexican workers and drug trafficking.<sup>12</sup> The spectacular career of Los Tigres continued to serve as an ironic reflection of their dual role as revered standard bearers for *norteño* and a wider audience that exoticizes their representation in Spain and elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> The self-referential *Corridos prohibidos* (Banned Corridos, Fonovisa, 1989) included a tribute to the assassinated journalist Héctor Félix Miranda that can be read as a "veiled ode to the *corrido* genre itself," as well as a track simply titled "El Corrido" extolling the "voice of the oppressed" and of the patriotic Mexican people.<sup>14</sup> Their Grammy-winning double album *Jefe de Jefe* (Boss of Bosses, Fonovisa, 1997) casts a negative light on both immigrant labor and the drug trade, while betraying an intimate knowledge of the latter's quotidian details.<sup>15</sup>

"Contrabando" itself bears a familiar canción-corrido form: six-line stanzas with a refrain, and it suggests the traditional border ballad of yore with its simple introduction, through-composed lyrics, and singer as impersonal narrator, as shown in a transcription of the first verse in figure 4.1. Small details in early stanzas foreshadow events to come, and the song combines both the solo and border dueto traditions (two male vocalists singing in close harmony with a slightly pinched, nasal quality), with the second voice entering high in his range on the final two lines of each stanza. A three-stress rhythmic pattern in the text flows over a duple meter, not the triple meter typical of corridos, typical of Texas-Mexican conjuntos (ensembles featuring accordion, bajo sexto, bass, and drums, Mexican song forms, and European dance rhythms).<sup>16</sup>

I argue that the opera's success derives from its multileveled awareness of how truth functions in both the Mexican American corrido tradition and the twenty-first-century global media landscape represented by "Contrabando y Traición" and the spectacular success of the narcocorrido. The Mexican American frontier serves as a microcosm of the line that separates the pure truth—*la pura verdad*—from fiction in contemporary narratives of borderland antiheroes. On one level *¡Únicamente!* mirrors the role of the *corrido* as romance, journalism, and reservoir of a cultural imaginary. Corridos' epic narrative style embraced clever wordplay that expressed a complex critique



of authority and political reality. Hence the traditional corrido influenced generations of Chicano/a poets and scholars, who found in its contradictions and hybrid blend of Spanish balladry with Mexican realism the inspiration for their own struggles with a modernist poetic language.<sup>17</sup> The effacement of the *corridista*—the author—reinforced the social, collective nature of the corrido. Yet it was an inherently reflexive form, which placed the central narrative in a meta-narrative frame that drew attention to its performative nature.<sup>18</sup>

Mark Edberg highlights the “propositional” character of a typical corrido narrative, which hinges on moments of violent confrontation in which death is always present, often in the form of a duel between equally matched foes.<sup>19</sup> Within the context of the narcocorrido in particular, the persona of the narco-trafficker in some sense is not complete until either the narco-trafficker is dead or betrayed (which constitutes a symbolic death). The narcocorrido is, quintessentially, a genre of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the poor within a highly stratified society. But it has a far more ambiguous relation to money and power than that suggested by this description, one signaled by its self-deprecating humor and the pre-eminent figure of the border crosser between countries, strata, and gender identifications.<sup>20</sup> If we view “*Contrabando y Traición*” as the primal scene—one that shifts the corrido into a contemporary register—we see both this ambiguity and the “anamorphic presence” of death marked by the contrast between the song’s rhythmic intensity and its vocal, a lament whose laconic vocal performance negates any melodramatic expression, yet which generates an acute sense of foreboding that suffuses the narrative.<sup>21</sup>

### The Many Camelias of *la pura verdad*

Los Tigres’ *Camelia* soon escaped the land of fiction, as she was mysteriously found again and again, and as a proliferation of candidates for the “real” *Camelia* took material form within a media nexus created by tabloid journalism, reality television, and the blogosphere. A photo surfaces in 1986 in the pages of the lurid tabloid *¡Alarma!*, depicting a woman weeping over the headless corpse of her lover Eleazar Pacheco Moreno.<sup>22</sup> In 1999 a journalist from the “real” newspaper *La Jornada*—after various inquiries, intermediaries, and a series of changing phone numbers—obtained an interview with the fifty-year old-*Camelia* María after being smuggled within a sealed car and driven to an unknown location. Her responses meet the interviewers’ par-

ries with well-practiced evasions and misdirection, yet she claims to be the “original” Camelia, one-time partner of Hermilo, names changed to protect the guilty, now involved in import-exports of a perfectly legal variety.<sup>23</sup> In October 2004 on TV Azteca in Mexico City, a journalist interviews Agustina Ramírez as the “real” Camelia la Tejana. She claims that a radio interview in 1977 about her life as a drug kingpin was turned into the corrido. Such testimony brings to mind such infamous figures as the cocaine Godmother Griselda Blanco, also the subject of a movie and two TV series.<sup>24</sup> Agustina maintains a full-time evangelical career, as a reformed Camelia come to Jesus Christ, paying no heed to those who claim to know of her origins much further south of the border.<sup>25</sup>

The opera’s themes—like the corridos that inspired it—reflect aesthetic and political topics that have occupied Latin American cultural studies for a generation. Camelia joins the ranks of famous female killers in Latin American fiction such as Emma Zunz and Antonia Josefa Ramírez, Latin American heroines who have an ambiguous, liminal status, but play central roles in their stories and usually escape the law’s patriarchal reach.<sup>26</sup> In this larger context the drug war becomes but the most recent manifestation of a malevolent violence that operates in Latin America, characterized by many critics as a fundamentally antimodern, Baroque society.<sup>27</sup>

The theme of border crossings takes on multiple meanings, from the literal border between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso to the fusion of “art” and popular music to the rhetorical performance of “truth” and fiction in each scene. Ciudad Juárez has long served as an avatar of violence, especially against women (represented most famously by Roberto Bolaño’s novel *2666*). But the sense of paralysis in the face of senseless violence—that of Ciudad Juárez and the border area in particular—suggests the writings of Jorge Ibarguengoitia, especially his famous *Las muertas*, the desultory and fragmented retelling of the tale of the Poquiánchis sisters, a pair of notorious madams and serial killers. Like *¡Únicamente La Verdad!*, *Las muertas* is a hybrid text: half fiction and half documentary, a testimonial in which the narrative voice “is deprived of all ethical and rhetorical authority.”<sup>28</sup> Although Ortiz Torres shapes his libretto entirely from found sources, the various Camelias and their “witnesses” are allowed to speak for themselves, as the opera’s narrative shifts to meet their gaze.

The opera devotes a scene to each one of these fascinating Camelias, who receive a signature Mexican song genre type and their own public chorus, framed by a male authority figure who comments on each story. These scenes

frame a central passage devoted to Camelia's three "fathers": Ángel González, the corrido's composer, Jorge Hernandez, the lead singer of Los Tigres del Norte, and Elijah Wald, a celebrated writer associated with the narcocorrido genre. The opera begins with a male character given no voice: Eleazar Pacheco Moreno, who—deported, assaulted, and abused—lays his head on the track at the Ciudad Juárez railway station (the only actual death depicted in the opera).

The arch and ironic cast of Ortiz Torres' libretto—assembled entirely from existing interviews and texts<sup>29</sup>—is perfectly complemented by music that registers on several semiotic levels at once, as did the narcocorrido in its retention of traditional forms and instrumentation for lyric commentary with the immediacy of today's news. As the narcocorrido has influenced popular print and broadcast media and spawned a cottage industry of academic scholarship, so Ortiz Torres incorporate blogs, newspapers, television interviews, and academic lectures into his libretto, with no vantage point given priority over another, outside of a kind of Brechtian sense of ironic distance.<sup>30</sup> *¡Alarma!* serves as an obvious predecessor to the paranoid and conspiracy-laden social media landscape of today, while *TV Azteca* represents a slick multimedia conglomerate. Yet their reportage sits alongside that of academic study of Mexican and border culture, and that of a blogosphere that travels freely among the above.

## Crossing the Sonic Border

The opera begins with a collage of sound, music, and images: video of the Mexican National Train Station at the bordering of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas, accompanied by the sound of a train arriving.<sup>31</sup> Thirty seconds in, a menacing low rumble mixes with the high harmonics of a crystal wine goblet, arco harmonics on vibraphone, chorus whispers, and microtonal movement from G $\sharp$ 2–B $\flat$ 2 in contrabass. At 1:22 voices enter, saying "Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua," before lapsing into sibilance that blends with distorted and reverberant voices on tape. After 3:18 the instruments fall quiet, save for the bells that toll A4–C5–G4–D5 as a voice discusses "Camelia," until a C4 in clarinet and trumpet ushers in natural harmonics in low strings, and soft arpeggios in winds and percussion, which—spurred on by a tam-tam—increase dynamics until the tape stops abruptly at 4:20.

At this point in the opera we don't know who or when our protagonist

will arrive (if at all), why we are at the train station, what role “Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua” might play in the narrative, or what kind of music to expect as the curtain rises. Yet the sonic collage that begins *¡Únicamente!* primes the audience to anticipate the opera’s complicated relationship to truth. If such collage practices resist totalization—and thus any coherent political message—they yet suggest a profound historical truth regarding the decay of the polis.<sup>32</sup> Collage in general, in all its mixed representations, creates an empty space, an aporia, where conflicting meanings cannot be resolved. Thus the opera begins without a central authority or viewpoint, and it lacks a coherent visual or oral image that might suggest one genre as its musical ground or one sight-line to represent a singular point of view. The only guarantee we can expect is one of anxiety regarding how to interpret what we experience.

The consequent Obertura explodes as an ostentatiously hybrid gesture. An introduction in a recognizable American post-minimalist vein on a static diatonic chord that emphasizes fourths (o257, B-D-E-A) gives way at letter A to a *norteño cumbia*, a B7 on the offbeats in guitar and accordion over a floating bass line in tuba.<sup>33</sup> As the orchestra gradually rejoins, the dance is interrupted by flights of modernist fancy (mm. 23–29, and the violin solo at mm. 49–54, which sounds like an homage to György Ligeti’s violin concerto), neoclassical excursions (mm. 26–29, 55–62), and Broadway schmaltz (a modulation up a third to E<sub>b</sub>, accompanied by meter changes and stop time, mm. 36–48).<sup>34</sup> The musical representation of each Camelia begins with a *cumbia* given to the faceless woman who, in the *¡Alarma!* photo, was seen crying over the dead Eleazar Pacheco Moreno. The introduction of this first tale begins at rehearsal C on an altered B dominant, as the chorus recounts the horrifying fate of Moreno, complete with onomatopoeic train and track sounds (m. 61 ff). In 2005 El Señor de El Paso recalls that a woman of around fifty-five years old, called Camelia, also known as “La Tejano,” who was a prostitute and drug addict, was seen in the vicinity.<sup>35</sup> The vague import of this story is complemented by its musical accompaniment. A trumpet solo in an additive rhythmic pattern confuses the 4/4 meter; its successive 2, 3, and 4-sixteenth-note units are added and subtracted, in the same way that the opening D-D<sub>#</sub>-E-F cluster adds and subtracts tones to confuse any firm identification of tonal center.

Unlike the anonymous woman in the *¡Alarma!* picture, Agustina Ramírez and Camelia María claim to be incarnations of the legendary Camelia, and each gets her own mythologizing corrido. Agustina Camelia’s tense corrido begins scene 2 over oscillating half-diminished seventh chords a step apart.

The chorus enters first, repeating the fabled history in all its lurid detail. We remain in 4/4 over a more decisive dominant (B<sup>11</sup>), when Agustina herself enters with a fiery *cumbia* rhythm at rehearsal A, augmented by a lyrical bass clarinet solo and strings that sweep up and down four octaves. The accompaniment changes as her aria grows more dramatic, before returning to alternations of the *cumbia* and the oscillating chord section, as though to underscore the reality and the “imagination on the part of the author.” Agustina’s own “message” arrives at the close of Corrido II in a sacred aria extolling her new mission serving Jesus Christ.

The central scene in the opera sees Camelia’s three “fathers” hold forth on the lasting influence and paradoxes of “Contrabando y Traición,” its fame both eclipsing and at right angles to the narcocorrido tradition as a whole. The opera’s hybrid musical heritage comes to the fore here as well, when the narcocorrido’s composer Angel González and Jorge Hernandez, the lead singer of *Los Tigres del Norte*, join the writer Elijah Wald. Much of the text comes from a 1999 interview of Wald with Hernandez that references Gonzalez. The Writer and Composer sing a bilingual duet, which revolves around the shocking success of simply replacing the standard antihero of a corrido with a woman, buoyed by singers entering as an ironic Greek chorus at crucial junctures. When the Writer sings that “Contrabando” gave the formerly “realistic” genre the “larger than life feel of a Hollywood movie,” the chorus sings “They came to Los Angeles and swung over to Hollywood” (A los Angeles llegaron y a Hollywood se pasaron). When the Composer moots his feminist credentials—women in his songs win “all the time” (todo el tiempo)—the chorus assents, repeating “todo el tiempo” in canon. And when the Composer deflects questions about the narco culture represented in his songs as simply a problem of borders all over the world (todas las fronteras del mundo), the chorus agrees.

The duet is followed by a solo aria for Jorge Hernandez as “El Tigre,” fashioned from one paragraph excerpted from that interview and edited; those passages used in the aria are marked in bold, with repetitions and added words in brackets:

Jorge Hernandez: Bueno, lo que pasa yo creo, cuando yo escuché los temas de ellos han hecho de esas canciones, creo que hay dos factores y el regrabar una canción sin ponerle la intención el feeling que se le pone a los temas, **hay canciones que se hacen [cantan] por dinero y [otros que se cantan] canciones que se hacen por sentimiento.** Conozco a los dos interpretes bien,

pero conozco mas a Pepe Cabrera, lo hacen por dinero y el arte, en lo que a mi respecta, **yo no hago esto por dinero, yo lo hago porque yo siento la historia**, le [los] **personaje**, [y] **porque desde niño quise ser actor**, me apodero de los papeles que el interprete o que el personaje quiere decir y creo que ahí es una gran diferencia, **cuando grabas un tema, debes tener [er] imaginación**, de [y hacer] **tu propia película [debes saber], que quieres decirle a la gente y probablemente vaya algo envuelto tu sentimiento para que penetre el público** y no lo cantes por que tienes que ganar un peso, porque tienes que decir, bueno, voy a vender 20 discos, sino simplemente escuchen tu sentimiento, escuchen tu estilo, que es lo que importa, el estilo de interpretar un tema, tenemos dos situaciones que nos llevan. Hay canciones que hacen al artista **y hay canciones que [hacen al] el artista [y hay canciones que las] hace [el artista al artista el artista]** la canción.<sup>36</sup>

Hernandez states that some songs are made for money while others are made for sentiment. He chooses to do it because he feels the story and the character, as he has always wanted to be an actor. He imagines a movie when he records, summoning the proper feeling so that it might penetrate to the public. El Tigre's aria is sung in norteño ranchera style, complete with falsetto on the crucial terms "have imagination," "people," and "artista." But whereas the transcript states that "There are songs that make the artist and there are songs in which the artist makes the song," the aria trails off on "the artist" echoed by the chorus, as shown in figure 4.2.

Who indeed is artist and who is sung in the cycle of violence and retribution launched by one, somewhat nostalgic corrido? And "why," asks the Wald character directly after El Tigre, "did people like the killing of a man by a woman?" Before the final Camelia gets her say, we have a fourth scene devoted to "blogger, cyberpunks, nortecos, and social media." Here the grounded stories of old media spin off into wild fantasies, represented by video and electronic representations of technology, always melding with the orchestra. Camelia Maria's aria begins scene 5 with not so much her own corrido as her own separate suite. A "misterioso" recalls Agustina's vamp; beginning in 4/4 over oscillating perfect fourths a step away, it evokes a hollow sound. The scene is orchestrated in the fashion of a 1960s mystery movie soundtrack, complete with a prominent wind choir and flute obbligato over descending lines in glockenspiel as a journalist begins a relatively straightforward introduction to this new Camelia.<sup>37</sup> As the 4/4 meter gives way to unmetred, chromatic roulades in piano and winds at rehearsal A, synco-



259

Fl. Cl.  
C Trp. Tbn

Perc. I & II

Accord.

El Tigre

que ha-cen al ar-tis-ta y hav can-cio-nes que las ha-

266

Fl. Cl.  
C Trp. Tbn

Perc. I & II

Accord.

El Tigre

ce-el ar-tis-ta

272

Fl. Cl.  
C Trp. Tbn

Perc. I & II

Accord.

SATB Chorus

al ar-tis-ta al ar-tis-ta

El Tigre

(is)-ta (a)

vn, va, vc

tba, cb

arco

Fig. 4.2. The coda of El Tigre's aria, scene 3, reh. F

pated accents intervene, and the journalist begins to question Camelia Maria, who remains elusive. At rehearsal B the chorus enters with a canon on “narcotráfico,” as if to spur on Camelia Maria. Her story is interrupted by a furious *cumbia* rhythm at rehearsal C. But these rhythms fall away as her lengthy aria takes on a mid-twentieth-century expressionistic cast as her answers grow more evasive. A truculent tuba solo eggs on the journalist, until a whiff of the original “Contrabando y Traición” enters with the return of the misterioso music and María’s admonition that “people like to hear stories with strong women.” Camelia María’s corrido brings the old and new media representations full circle, the melodramatic heft of her tale sealed by the last lines of the interview: “Do you know weapons, ma’am. . . . Do you know how to shoot?” “There are things that hands never forget.”

The sober suicide of Eleazar Pacheco is followed by a second electro-acoustic interlude which samples the popular *quebradita* song “La culebra”: the music playing on public loudspeakers when presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio was killed at a political rally in Tijuana in 1994.<sup>38</sup> The opera’s closing scene picks up the beheading, narrating it in gory detail, before shifting to Eleazar’s moving funeral. Yet our heroine gets the last word in a spectral epilogue, where the “real” Camelia appears to sing her original narcocorrido a cappella to the accompaniment of ghostly cow bells and a muted electronic soundscape. She sings in the key of E $\flat$ , the key referenced in the Obertura, but a minor third higher than the C major of the original “Contrabando.”

## The Woman Who Does Not Exist

Despite its swirl of influences and conflicting tales, *¡Únicamente La Verdad!* remains focused on one woman, refracted into many, often conflicted portraits that refuse to coalesce into one individual. It may prove instructive to compare Camelia la Tejana to the two Sciarrino operas discussed by Mauro Fosca Bertola in the final chapter of this collection. Each revolves around a female character: a reimagining of Wagner’s *Lohengrin* centered on Elsa, and *Superflumina*, centered on the experience of an unhoused woman. The audience learns that Elsa has suffered a psychotic break, which locates her at one pole of an uncanny, estranged “night of the world,” unable to achieve full subjectivity. *Superflumina*’s protagonist operates at the boundary of the human, existing both within and outside the law as she shuttles between silent witness to her abjection and an operatic style coterminous with the

state. That both characters are women is significant, yet their gender is subservient to the psychological narrative of *Lohengrin* and the sociopolitical/ethical portrait offered in *Superflumina*. By contrast, Camelia la Tejana overflows the limits of her narrative, as a subject both overdetermined and hollow at its core. Her many guises invert the tragic heroine of European opera, a “decorative jewel” who sings her perpetual undoing.<sup>39</sup> If Bizet’s *Carmen* challenged the docile heroines of the past, so Camelia rejects Carmen’s destiny: she becomes Don José without succumbing to his fate, elevated to the status of legend, never dead, but always, just possibly, still alive to tell her tale. Her avatars—unlike those discussed in Alexander K. Rothe’s chapter on George Lewis’s *Afterword*—are virtual in the predigital sense of the world, as intimations of an ideal Camelia.

As the absent center of *¡Unicamente La Verdad!*, Camelia la Tejana is herself an avatar for the ultimate Other “in the most radical sense, in the sexual relationship.”<sup>40</sup> Camelia can only be glimpsed through anamorphosis via either the symbolic register of names and descriptions or her representation in the imaginary as one of many media images. Her status in these accounts—depersonalized, mythologized, and emptied of all substance—resembles that of the inaccessible and idealized Lady, as discussed in Lacan’s examination of courtly love in Seminar VII.<sup>41</sup> Camelia takes the place of the Thing in a “form of sublimation,” as Lacan notes, one specific to art and the demands of her age.<sup>42</sup> In his view all systems of culture require a grounding signifier, one capable of imparting a consistent meaning to the multifarious elements of which it is composed. Yet only a signifier with “negative” power can break with existing relations and “call something new into life” purely on the basis of its autonomous operation.<sup>43</sup> Woman—as the signifier that bears the clearest trace of the break with the real—serves this function, as the “extimate” center around which cultural signifiers rally. As the sublimated object, woman repeats the primary cut that marked the symbolic’s break with the real.<sup>44</sup> The late medieval culture of courtly love—suffused by melancholy and haunted by death—was grounded by the form of the remote and imperious Lady. Similarly, the inaccessible, dangerous Camelia la Tejana, sets the limits of desire in *¡Unicamente La Verdad!* Absent the mask of traditional femininity, she is able to inscribe division and difference into the world.<sup>45</sup> Where traditional opera featured a dramatic protagonist whose personal subjectivity was assured, *¡Unicamente!* offers a Woman who does not exist: Camelia la Tejana as an absent center, around which manifold narratives and images circulate, tinged with death and melancholy.

The fraught figure of Camelia suggests an answer to Lehmann's follow-up to his work on postdramatic theater, as he asks what tragedy means within "the framework of an artistic institution that transforms everything into entertainment (against which even its radical forms have no protection)."<sup>46</sup> As Lehmann notes, at each moment in the history of postdramatic theater "transgression, the theme of dangerous excess, has proven central," even as it compounds the issues of representation as such.<sup>47</sup> He points out how—in dissolving inherited categories of the dramatic subject—postdramatic theater has reintroduced ancient aspects of ritual and the notion of the subject as "being spoken" as the blank center of a mediatised discourse.<sup>48</sup> This new subjectivity preserves tragedy in postdramatic theater as the only form of representation that fractures the unity of individual experience.<sup>49</sup> This new subjectivity mirrors the media world we inhabit, whose basic pattern is "sensation" and the wholesale dramatization of reality. Such dramatization of both public and individual suffering plays the role in the imaginary once held by tragedy. What happens then, asks Lehmann, to the depth below the surface, the inner reflection that might provide catharsis?<sup>50</sup>

One answer is provided by those stagings that eschew naturalism and mimesis for artifice.<sup>51</sup> Expanding on this, Lehmann draws on the ideas of Christoph Menke regarding the "tragedy of play."<sup>52</sup> The "subject being spoken"—the embodiment of tragic irony—provides the center of all tragedy in a postdramatic vein. Such a view posits tragedy in essence as a deconstruction of the illusion represented by a dramatic subject. Lehmann goes a step further, however, requiring a true "tragedy of play" to implicate the spectator. "For there to be a 'presence of tragedy,' aesthetic play itself and as a whole must be thematized and problematized by such a break, and the spectator must be taken, time and again, to the borderline between 'play' and [that which is in earnest]."<sup>53</sup> If *Camelia la Tejana*—the "subject being spoken" as absent center—grounds the opera's conflicting discourses, she invites the audience to parse the role of truth, fiction and *testimonio* in *iUnicamente!*

## Truth and *Testimonio*

If *iUnicamente!* is an ideal vehicle to express the narrative and performative contradictions of the contemporary corrido writ large, it is in no small part because it reminds us of what opera was in its ideal form: an art of difference that suspends not only the obvious border between normal and abnormal,

but the deeper differences that ground such notions, those between “policing and transgressing, edification and debasement, the symbolic and the imaginary, eros and the death drive.”<sup>54</sup> The cultural import of these themes is borne out by the opera’s reception history. Despite laudatory reviews and the recording’s nomination for a Latin Grammy, some seemed to miss *¡Unicamente!*’s dark wit and trenchant satire. Hence a cable television channel assumed that *Only the Truth* was a straightforward documentary, while the BBC bemoaned the cultural stain produced by the first “drug opera.”<sup>55</sup> Unlike the so-called CNN opera tied to the immediacy of contemporary events, *¡Unicamente!* maintains a necessary distance that ties it more closely to the *Zeitoper* of Krenek and Weill, a celebration of modern life that relied on parody, social satire, and burlesque that drew freely from contemporary popular idioms.<sup>56</sup>

The most recent edition of Eric Salzman’s venerable survey of music theater asks whether the Weill/Brecht model still provides a useful template in the twenty-first century.<sup>57</sup> I offer *¡Unicamente La Verdad!* as evidence that it does. Its many truths are rooted in the timeless function of the corrido; as a cab driver told the composer when she questioned Camelia’s existence, “all corridos tell the truth.”<sup>58</sup> It retains the aspect of *testimonio* or testimonial writing that counters official history, as it recounts *la pura verdad* as an experience of the real different from those produced by nonfiction or documentary fiction.<sup>59</sup> As such, *¡Unicamente La Verdad!* essays not only the borderland of the twenty-first-century Mexican American imaginary, but the border between opera and the highly mediated world in which opera now lives.

## Notes

I would like to thank Stephan Hammel, Alejandro Madrid, Gabriela Ortiz, and Leonora Saavedra for their help with this paper.

1. Angel Gonzalez, “Contrabando y traición,” Peer International Corporation (1973).
2. Just like its namesake, the opera has several titles: *¡Unicamente La Verdad! La Auténtica Historia de Camelia de Texana*; *¡Unicamente La Verdad! (Only the Truth!)*, *the true story of Camelia la Tejana*; *¡Unicamente La Verdad! La Verdadera Historia de Camelia, la texana*; *Only the Truth! a border-crossing video opera*.
3. An earlier version of the opera was performed at the University of Indiana School of Music, August 8–9, 2008. The author saw the production at the Long Beach Opera on March 13, 2013; see Peter Lefevre’s review “Camelia La Tejana: Only the Truth. Long Beach Opera,” [https://www.operanews.com/Opera\\_News\\_Magazine/2013/6/Reviews/LONG\\_BEACH\\_CA\\_Camelia\\_La\\_Tejana.html](https://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2013/6/Reviews/LONG_BEACH_CA_Camelia_La_Tejana.html)
4. I refer here to the classic film by Akira Kurosawa—based on Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s

short story “In a Grove”—in which supposed witnesses to a crime give contradictory, subjective accounts of the event.

5. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), 22–23.

6. Alan Filewod, “The Documentary Body: Theatre Workshop to Banner Theatre,” in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, edited by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 62.

7. Tom Moore and Gabriela Ortiz, “Gabriela Ortiz—An Interview,” *Opera Today*, Feb. 10, 2010, [http://www.operatoday.com/content/2010/02/gabriela\\_ortiz\\_.php](http://www.operatoday.com/content/2010/02/gabriela_ortiz_.php)

8. Christoph Menke, *Die Gegenwart der Tragdie. Versuch über Urteil und Spiel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), cited on pp. 439–40 of Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, trans. Erik Butler (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016).

9. Films include *Contrabando y traición: Camelia la texana*, dir. Arturo Martínez (Hermanos Benítez and Producciones Potosí S.A., 1976), featuring the members of Los Tigres del Norte, and at least five sequels; the narconovela was created by Diego Ramón Bravo, *Camelia la Texana* (Telemundo, 2014), and novelized by Diego Ramón Bravo and Hilario Pea as *Camelia la texana* (Vintage, 2013). The renowned Spanish novelist Arturo Pérez-Reverte was inspired by “Contrabando” to write the five-hundred-page novel *La reina del sur* [The Queen of the South] (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2002), which in turn became a TV series with seasons in 2011 and 2019 (coproduced through Spanish, Columbian, and Mexican studios) and an album by Los Tigres del Norte (Fonovisa, 2002). See also Ryan Rashotte, *Narco Cinema: Sex, Drugs, and Banda Music in Mexico’s B-Filmography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and O. Hugo Benavides, *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas: Telenovelas and Narco-Dramas in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

10. *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas*, ebook (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), chap. 1.

11. Cathy Ragland offers a brief history of the group in *Música Norteña: Mexican Migrants Creating a Nation between Nations* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 142–44.

12. Ragland, *Música Norteña*, 145.

13. Ragland, *Música Norteña*, 166; Helena Simonett, “Los gallos valientes: Examining Violence in Mexican Popular Music.” *TRANS-Revista Transcultural de Música* 10 (2006), <https://www.sibetrans.com/trans/articulo/149/los-gallos-valientes-examining-violence-in-mexican-popular-music>

14. José Pablo Villalobos and Juan Carlo Ramírez-Pimienta, “Corridos and *la pura verdad*: Myths and Realities of the Mexican Ballad.” *South Central Review* 21, no. 3 (2004): 133–35.

15. See Mark Cameron Edberg’s discussion in *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexican Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press 2004), 78.

16. See Jonathan Saucedo, “Smuggling, Betrayal, and the Handle of a Gun: Death, Laughter, and the *Narcocorrido*,” *Popular Music and Society* 37, no. 4 (2014): 427–29; Ragland offers an analysis and transcription of “Contrabando,” in *Música Norteña*, 146–53.

17. Stephen Neufeld and Michael Matthews discuss the role of the Mexican corrido in

general ("Introduction," in *Mexico in Verse: A History of Music, Rhyme, and Power*, ed. Stephen Neufeld and Michael Matthews [Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015], 8); José E. Limón relates this history to the modernist Mexican poetic tradition (*Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems: History and Influence in Mexican-American Social Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). See also Aurelio González, "El corrido: Expresión popular y tradicional de la balada hispánica," *Olivar* 12, no. 15 (2011): 11–36, and Magdalena Altamirano, "De la copla al corrido: influencias líricas en el corrido Mexicano Tradicional," in *La copla en México*, ed. Aurelio González (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 2007), 261–72.

18. Limón, *Mexican Ballads*, 15.

19. Edberg, *El Narcotraficante*, 42, 82. See also Mercedes Zavala Gómez del Campo, "Del duelo a la muerte a traición en el corrido: una cuestión de matices," *Revista de El Colegio de San Luis* 1, no. 2 (2011): 163–82.

20. Edberg, *El Narcotraficante*, 103–6, 113; Ragland, *Música Norteña*, 44, 155; Saucedo, "Smuggling, Betrayal, and the Handle of a Gun," 425. See also María Herrera-Sobek, *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

21. Hermann Herlinghaus, "Narcocorridos: An Ethical Reading of Musical Diegesis," *TRANS-Revista Transcultural de Música* 10 (2006), <https://www.sibetrans.com/trans/articulo/150/narcocorridos-an-ethical-reading-of-musical-diegesis>

22. Juan Pablo Vázquez, "El tren le arrancó la cabeza [The train tore his head off]," *Alarma!* 1191, February 26, 1986, 29.

23. César Güemes, "Camelia La Texana: 'yo no maté a Emilio Varela,'" *La Jornada*, Dec. 28, 1999, cited in Arturo E. García Niño, "¿Atípicas narrativas o expresiones inherentes al espíritu de los tiempos? (Postales para un reacercamiento autocrítico a la narconarrativa)," in *Narcocultura de norte a sur. Una mirada cultural al fenómeno del narco*, ed. Ainhoa Vásquez Mejías (Mexico City: Literatura y Alternativas en Servicios Editoriales S.C., 2017), 38.

24. Discussed in Ainhoa Vásquez Mejías, "Los narcos también lloran: narcoseries y melodrama," in *Narcocultura de norte a sur. Una mirada cultural al fenómeno del narco*, ed. Ainhoa Vásquez Mejías (Mexico City: Literatura y Alternativas en Servicios Editoriales S.C., 2017), 201–19. See also Monika Kaup *Neobaroque in the Americas: Alternative Modernities in Literature, Visual Art, and Film* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012). Sofía Vergara stars in an English language adaptation of Blanco's story in the 2024 Netflix drama *Griselda*.

25. Eugenio Delgado Parra, "La ópera Únicamente la verdad. La auténtica historia de Camelia 'La tejana,' de Gabriela Ortiz: Interpretación crítica a partir del análisis integral de la obra," Research Proposal, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Subdirección General de Educación e Investigación Artísticas, 2013 (unfunded), 5.

26. Josefina Ludmer, "Women Who Kill (Part 1)," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 10, no. 2 (2001): 157–69, and "Women Who Kill (Part 2)," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 10, no. 3 (2001): 279–90.

27. See Persephone Braham, *Crimes against the State, Crimes against Persons: Detective Fiction in Cuba and Mexico* (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

28. Braham, *Crimes against the State*, 73.

29. Rubén Ortiz Torres, cited by Reed Johnson, "Rumor, Legend and a Tabloid Report Sparked 'Camelia la Tejana,'" *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 2013, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-xpm-2013-mar-16-la-et-cm-camelia-la-tejana-narco-opera-20130317-story.html>

30. José Noé Mercado bemoaned both the fact that the libretto reads more like a police report than a literary piece and that it shows no love toward its "clichéd" characters. "La ópera de las Camelias," Blog José Noé Mercado, March 22, 2010, <http://josenoemercado.blogspot.mx/2010/03/la-opera-de-las-camelias.html>; see also "Únicamente la Verdad en el teatro Julio Castillo," *Pro Ópera* 3 (2010): 18–21.

31. Ortiz Torres and the composer shot footage of some of the actual locations mentioned in the journalistic reports. Video projections of actual locations where the events in the story took place mix with video of the singers captured in real time to create shifting borderland encounters of audience, performers, media, spectators, and historical characters that unfold both individual and collective dimensions.

32. Thomas Brockelman discusses the hermetics of collage in *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

33. This B7, with its associated rhythmic expression, returns twice, for "Camelia's cum-bia," scene 1, reh. G, and Eleazar's funeral, scene 6.

34. Marianne Kielen-Gillbert compares the opening of the Obertura to passages in Stravinsky and speculates on their relationship in "Musical Bordering, Connecting Histories, Becoming Performative," *Music Theory Spectrum* 33, no. 2 (2011): 200–207.

35. This testimony is offered in the present tense, collected by Rubén Ortiz Torres from Mario Borunda, in an interview from June 18, 2005, cited in Delgado Parra, "La ópera Únicamente la verdad," 5.

36. Elijah Wald and Jorge Hernández, "Jorge Hernández Interview" (n.d.), <http://www.elijahwald.com/jhernan.html>

37. Examples include Lalo Schifrin's scores for *Joy House* (1964) and *The Venetian Affair* (1966), John Barry's music for *The Ipcress File* (1965) and *The Quiller Memorandum* (1965), and Bernard Hermann's contributions to the original *Twilight Zone* (1959–63).

38. Alejandro L. Madrid, "Mythology, Nostalgia, and the Post-Mortem Imagination in Gabriela Ortiz's ¡Únicamente la verdad!" paper given at the 2015 annual meeting of the American Musicological Society.

39. Catherine Clement, *Opera, Or, The Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 5. In Alejandro Madrid's assessments, the composer's tactics effectively queer operatic conventions; Madrid, "Mythology, Nostalgia, and the Post-Mortem Imagination."

40. Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality. The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Book XX Encore 1972–73*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 81.

41. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960: Seminar VII.*, trans. Dennis Porter, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 139–54.

42. Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 150.

43. Marc de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII*, trans. Sigi Jöttkandt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 179.



44. de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics*, 180.
45. See Alenka Zupančič's discussion of feminine masquerade in *What is Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 25–36.
46. Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 401.
47. Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 411.
48. Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 417.
49. Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 418; Lehmann admits that Brecht held this view, but Adorno and Horkheimer held the position that tragedy requires a unified individual; Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 419–20.
50. Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 422–23.
51. Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 424–25.
52. Christoph Menke, *Die Gegenwart der Tragödie. Versuch über Urteil und Spiel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), cited in Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 439–40.
53. Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 441.
54. Lawrence Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture: Wagner and Strauss* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 40–41.
55. Juan Arturo Brennan, “. . . y nada más que la verdad,” *La Jornada*, March 20, 2010, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2010/03/20/cultura/a06a1cul>; Julian Miglierini, “Drugs Opera Opens in Mexico City,” BBC News, March 12, 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8563528.stm>. See also James Baker, “Is Gabriela Ortiz’s ‘Camelia La Tejana’ an Opera or Documentary?,” Texas Public Radio, March 22, 2013, <https://www.tpr.org/post/gabriela-ortiz-camelia-la-tejana-opera-or-documentary>
56. Suzanne Cook, *Opera for a New Republic: The Zeitopern of Krenek, Weill, and Hindemith* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1988), 4.
57. Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi, *The New Music Theater: Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 263.
58. Moore and Ortiz, “Gabriela Ortiz—An Interview.”
59. Ragland, *Música Norteña*, 180; Villalobos and Ramírez-Pimienta, “Corridos and la pura verdad,” 144.

## Technics and Dramaturgy of the Avatar in George Lewis's *Afterword*

Alexander K. Rothe

An avatar is a visual or sonic representation that stands in for a human being in a virtual environment.<sup>1</sup> Taking into account the rich history of cybernetics, the composer and musicologist George Lewis conceives of the operatic medium as a mixed reality beyond the problematic binaries of human/machine and real/virtual.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Lewis's description of his chamber opera *Afterword* (2015) as a virtual meeting of members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) invites listener-viewers to consider how human expression and technology are inextricably intertwined in today's age of ubiquitous media. As N. Katherine Hayles puts it, "instead of constructing virtual reality as a sphere separate from the real world, today's media have tended to move out of the box and overlay virtual information and functionalities onto physical locations and actual objects. [Today's media] have created environments in which physical and virtual realities merge in fluid and seamless ways."<sup>3</sup> Yet while Lewis takes mixed reality as his point of departure, he nevertheless also draws on the concept of technics as discussed in the writings of French philosophers Bernard Stiegler and Gilbert Simondon. Technics is the making of tools, or the "exteriorization" of human memory, gesture, and aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> According to Stiegler and Simondon, technology is a central part of what it means to be human, and the human and technics are co-constitutive and inseparable.

Since the opera *Afterword* was conceived as a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the AACM, a collective of African American musicians founded on the South Side of Chicago in 1965, it seems especially fitting that Lewis should turn to the memory technics of Stiegler. In the age of mass media (television and radio broadcasting and audiovisual recording

technologies), Stiegler argues, human beings are incapable of creating their own living memories (*anamnesis*) and instead rely on external media technologies (*hypomnesis*), which commodify cultural memory and erase memories that do not conform to the logic of what Deleuze calls “control societies.”<sup>5</sup> There is a great deal of truth in Stiegler’s account of memory technics, particularly his discussion of the politics of memory and forgetfulness as it applies to education and school. One cannot read the news in the United States in the 2020s without noticing how education is at the front line of an ideological battle in which coercive memory technologies (textbooks, state legislation, media campaigns, political rallies, court rulings, etc.) attempt to erase the history of slavery, reproductive rights, and voices of the LGBTQ+ community. Stiegler’s prognosis, however, is not entirely pessimistic. The relationship between living memory and external memory technologies is dynamic and changes over time, and today’s digital networked media have the potential to bring people together and to tell the stories of historically underrepresented communities.<sup>6</sup> Lewis’s opera *Afterword*, which he refers to as a *Bildungsoper*, literally “an opera of education,” demonstrates this aspect of digital networked media by educating a younger generation of musicians and the audience about the history not only of the AACM, but also of the Great Migration, the civil rights movement, and the segregation of the South Side of Chicago and the recording industry.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter argues that at the heart of Lewis’s opera is a dramaturgy of the avatar, which presents singers and dancers as avatars of AACM members, both living and deceased.<sup>8</sup> The avatar is a tool in Stiegler and Simondon’s sense, and it takes the mixed reality of cybernetics as its basis. The opera’s singers and dancers control their avatars as virtual representations, drawing on a digital repository of memories, testimonies, and audiovisual recordings of AACM archival materials. In other words, *Afterword* enacts a technics of memory, and the opera itself becomes a tool for remembering the past. *Afterword* revivifies the act of remembering at the level of the performers and the audience. The embodied avatar performance breathes new life into the AACM archival memory, reactivating past memories for AACM members in the audience and creating new memories for non-AACM members.

*Afterword*’s singers and dancers shift fluidly between historical characters, eschewing the individual character and psychological development of traditional dramatic theater in favor of a consideration of the community as a whole. My analysis will focus on the dramaturgy of the avatar in scene 4 (“First Meeting”) and will also consider the juxtaposition of contrasting musi-

cal styles and sonic gestures as key attributes of these avatars. In doing so, I draw attention to how *Afterword* sheds new light on topics such as postdramatic theater, remediation, immediacy, and hypermediacy.

*Afterword* was premiered on October 16, 2015, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, with staging and choreography by Sean Griffin and Catherine Sullivan. Lewis wrote the libretto, based on the final chapter of his book *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*, in which he depicts a virtual meeting of AACM members both living and deceased.<sup>9</sup> Lewis's chapter interweaves numerous interviews, testimonies, and transcriptions from recordings of past AACM meetings. The opera, like the book chapter, is a performance of AACM archival materials, a digital repository of materials that trace the AACM musicians across the globe.

Lewis's opera *Afterword* creates this virtual meeting by means of three singers, three dancers, and instrumental music. Lewis writes: "The opera eschews a conception in which fixed, authorial characters pose as what Michel Foucault calls "historical figures at the crossroads of a certain number of events" in favor of having music, text, and movement deploy a tricksterish displacement of character onto metaphysical collectivities. Sung and spoken voices, instrumental music, and movement become heteroglossic avatars, in a process described by Toni Morrison and others as the expression of a community voice."<sup>10</sup>

In place of individual ("fixed") characters, *Afterword* deploys a polyphony of voices and instruments as "heteroglossic avatars" in a process of community formation depicted in Toni Morrison's novels such as *The Bluest Eye* (1970). A brief description of Lewis's opera in terms of Hans-Thies Lehmann's theory of postdramatic theater will afford insight.<sup>11</sup>

Lewis's "heteroglossic avatars" correspond with Lehmann's discussion of polyglossia in the works of the German composer and director Heiner Goebbels. In *Roman Dogs* (1991), Goebbels juxtaposes spirituals with texts by Heiner Müller in German, William Faulkner in English, and partly-sung French Alexandrine verses from Corneille's *Horace* (1640–41). In Lehmann's description of Goebbels's work, the polyglossia are "multi-lingual texts" that break up the monologic national language.<sup>12</sup> There is, however, at least one key difference between Lewis's heteroglossic avatars and Lehmann's polyglossia. While Lehmann's postmodern celebration of diversity favors breaking down the theatrical process of communication, Lewis's avatars communicate on a different level, beyond monologic language, at the level of memory, where the opera serves to activate existing memories as well as to create new ones.

Similar insight may be gained by considering *Afterword* in terms of Lehmann's concept of the postdramatic "theater of ceremonies."<sup>13</sup> In the theater of Polish artist Tadeusz Kantor, "there is a search here for a 'state of non-being' and non-continuous plot structure, but instead repeatedly expressionistically condensed scenes, combined with a quasi-ritualistic form of conjuring up the past [. . .]. It is a theater *after* the catastrophe (like Beckett's and Heiner Müller's texts); it comes from death and stages a 'landscape beyond death' (Müller)."<sup>14</sup> Like Lehmann's "theater of ceremony," Lewis's opera is a virtual meeting beyond the physical constraints of death, as members, both living and deceased, gather to celebrate the AACM's anniversary and discuss its hopes for the future. And as in Kantor's and Müller's work, *Afterword* has a scene set in a cemetery (scene 3). Moreover, *Afterword* eschews the unity of place and time in traditional dramatic theater, as well as the linear plot in which one event clearly follows another in a continuous chain of events. Rather, *Afterword* is episodic in its ordering of scenes, each of which is like a *tableau vivant* based on the AACM's fifty-year history (not to mention the opera's reference to historical periods preceding 1965 and also in the future.) But unlike the Kantor and Müller works, which express a postdramatic melancholia over life's loss of meaning, *Afterword* depicts a world in which words and actions have meaning and a positive outcome.

Here I think we come to the core of what makes Lewis's opera such an insightful example of postdramatic theater: while Lewis rejects character and psychological development of traditional dramatic theater, he upholds the agency of the individual AACM musicians. Most importantly, Lewis's opera introduces a new historical subject (subjectivity), those groups that dominant culture had previously treated as not-human or not-quite-human (African Americans, Asian Americans, Indigenous peoples, women, the LGBTQ+ community). Especially from the 1960s onward, these groups articulated their histories with such force and persuasion that Fredric Jameson speaks of the emergence of a new type of subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> A key model for Lewis here is Anthony Davis's opera about Malcom X (*X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, 1985), which is a milestone in the history of opera, a signal "that maybe opera can go beyond valorizing people who are already being valorized by society."<sup>16</sup> In the section that follows, I argue that we may gain a greater appreciation of Lewis's opera by considering its compositional models. Specifically, I look at three operas that influenced *Afterword* in their incorporation of features of the avatar.

## Genealogy of the Avatar (Operatic Models for *Afterword*)

Beth Coleman describes the genealogy of the avatar as a transformation of its reference to Hindu mythology (for instance, the god Vishnu appearing in the human avatars of Rama and Krishna) to the usage designating a digital image controlled by a human in a virtual setting.<sup>17</sup> Between these two stages, there is a third meaning of avatar, which emerged in the English language at the end of the eighteenth century: avatar as an allegorical figure that personifies or embodies a principle.<sup>18</sup> This section elaborates on how the genealogy of the avatar is reflected in three of the compositional models for Lewis's *Afterword*.

Anthony Davis's *Amistad*, premiered at the Lyric Opera of Chicago in 1997, features a libretto by Thulani Davis based on historical events surrounding the 1839 slave revolt aboard the Spanish ship *Amistad*. The opera depicts the heroic story of the revolt and its leader Cinqué, who along with the other Mende captives eventually gained their freedom. The plot describes how the Yoruba trickster god Esu-Elegba descends to earth as an avatar taking multiple human forms: first he appears as himself, stirring up the slave revolt (Esu-Elegba can only be seen by Mende captives); then he appears as former U.S. president John Quincy Adams's servant, before finally appearing as a court translator. At the opera's conclusion, Esu-Elegba decides to remain in the United States, where he will fight as an abolitionist.<sup>19</sup>

Composed in 1985, Anthony Braxton's *Composition No. 126 (Trillium-Dialogues M)* is based on the composer's own *Tri-Axium Writings*, a three-volume work of sociomusical commentary published in 1985.<sup>20</sup> Like the other operas that make up Braxton's twelve-opera *Trillium* series, *Composition No. 126* is a fictional sketch between avatar-like characters who sing passages from the *Tri-Axium Writings*. According to Graham Lock, the *Trillium* operas may be conceived as virtual reality performances, and some of Braxton's scores actually include virtual maps.<sup>21</sup> These virtual settings, however, are imagined in the mind's eye, not experienced in the physical space via staging and costumes. In this respect, Braxton's operas are more like the early days of role-playing games before the advent of computer simulation. What makes the characters of *Composition No. 126* so avatar-like is how Braxton instructs the performers to minimize the psychological development of their individual characters and instead focus on the philosophic values they are made to embody. Here we see a foreshadowing of Lewis's dramaturgy of the avatar, where the characters are visual representations controlled by the per-

formers in real time. Braxton, however, focuses more on how the characters are allegorical figures of his philosophical system. This contrasts with the performers of Lewis's *Afterword*, who shift between different historical figures or past AACM members in a more mimetic way without being confined to the character depiction of traditional opera.

Brian Ferneyhough's *Shadowtime*, premiered at the Munich Biennale in 2004, features a libretto by Charles Bernstein as well as texts by Ferneyhough, both of which draw on the life and writings of Walter Benjamin. The fourth scene ("Opus Contra Naturam") describes the descent of Benjamin's avatar into the underworld, where he encounters various historical figures and shades, both living and deceased.<sup>22</sup> By avatar, we mean that Benjamin's character moves beyond Benjamin's own historical reality and enters the hyperreality of Hades. Ferneyhough writes: "The piece [. . .] is to be accompanied by a silent film projection encompassing the chaotic intersection of scenes from fin-de-siècle Berlin cabaret, medieval labyrinths, and images from the hyperdissimulatory environment of present-day Las Vegas."<sup>23</sup> In Ferneyhough's opera, Hades is a virtual meeting of sorts, a hypertext at the crossroads of a number of different media (opera, film, and photography). Without a doubt, this idea of a virtual meeting between figures both living and deceased influenced Lewis's *Afterword*. But unlike Benjamin's avatar, which has a clear connection to the historical figure of Benjamin and was meant to be recognized as such by the audience, the avatars in Lewis's opera remain unnamed in the libretto, and the relationship between the avatars and historical figures is much more fluid.

### Dramaturgy of the Avatar in the Musical Score and Libretto of *Afterword's* Scene 4

What makes the dramaturgy of the avatar in Lewis's *Afterword* unique is that it proceeds from the premise that this opera is a media technology (*hypomnesis*) that revivifies the embodied act of remembering (*anamnesis*). My analysis of the music and libretto of scene 4 ("First Meeting") demonstrates how the dramaturgy of the avatar can accomplish the task of revivifying living memory. In addition to discussing compositional details, I also consider the avatar performance in terms of remediation, immediacy, and hypermediacy. Lewis describes scene 4 in his program notes as follows: "The sung texts are drawn largely from the audio recording of the founding AACM meeting in May

1965. As the musicians speak frankly among themselves, hopes, fears, aspirations, and a gradual self-realization dovetail with a general understanding, sung by the tenor, that music composed by the members themselves could play a major role in reconnecting them to their ancestors, as well as fostering social, political, and cultural change.<sup>24</sup> At the AACM's founding meeting on May 8, 1965, musicians gathered to discuss how they could survive in an environment in which Black musicians were increasingly being pushed out of the South Side of Chicago.<sup>25</sup> At the conclusion of the scene, they vote in favor of promoting their own compositions, a key moment in the opera's larger narrative of self-sacrifice, community building, and self-determination.

By depicting this historical meeting in *Afterword*, Lewis follows what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin refer to as the "logic of immediacy," which dictates "that the medium should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, we as listener-viewers of *Afterword* feel as if we are eavesdropping on the meeting, like a fly on the wall. This effect of "actually being there" is multiplied by the nature of opera as a medium, where we are in the same physical space as the performers. *Afterword* makes the AACM's history "present" in all senses of the word by allowing the audience to see this history unfold in real time. This is however only one aspect of *Afterword*, and the effects of presence, proximity, and immediacy are placed in opposition to the equally powerful effect of the hypermediacy of the avatars. By focusing on the performer's body as a site of meaning, the avatars' hypermediacy draws attention to opera's theatricality, that is, the operatic medium as a site of representation.<sup>27</sup>

The libretto of scene 4 does not specify the names of the musicians who participated in the AACM's founding meeting, which contributes to the namelessness of the avatars appearing on the stage.<sup>28</sup> The three vocal parts are labeled in the libretto as "soprano," "contralto," and "tenor." But the audience at the Chicago world premiere on October 16, 2015, many of whom were members or family and friends of the AACM, would have known which musicians were being quoted in the libretto.

Comparing the libretto for scene 4 with a transcript of the audio recording of the AACM's founding meeting, I have traced the source of each line.<sup>29</sup> Lewis quotes the meeting directly, although the meeting was much longer in duration (approximately 110 minutes) than its depiction in the opera. The following musicians are quoted in the libretto here: Muhal Richard Abrams, Philip Cohran, Steve McCall, John Groden, Melvin Jackson, Fred Berry, Jerol Donavon, Roscoe Mitchell, Ken Chaney, John Coleman, Jodie Chris-



tian, Betty Dupree, and Gene Easton. As chairman of the meeting, Abrams is quoted most frequently, and his words appear in the parts of all three singers. But since Abrams is the first to speak and the contralto begins the scene, the contralto is associated with Abrams's character. The soprano voice is initially linked with Philip Cohran and Steve McCall, but this connection changes throughout the scene. The turning point in the scene occurs when the tenor voice performs Gene Easton's monologue, urging his fellow musicians to reconnect with their ancestors by promoting original, creative music.

The fact that the characters in the libretto remain unnamed, along with how the performers shift between depicting different historical figures, gives rise to the effect of hypermediacy. The dramaturgy of the avatar emphasizes the *process* of representation by drawing attention to the operatic medium. The performers are in control of their avatars, much like human users are in control of their digital representations in a human-computer interaction. In this way, the dramaturgy of the avatar rejects the character depiction of conventional drama, the "fixed" individual characters that Lewis describes in his program notes.

These two contrasting aspects of *Afterword's* scene 4, the immediacy of seeing the AACM's founding meeting unfold in real time and the hypermediacy of the avatar performance, is a perfect example of Bolter and Grusin's double logic of remediation.<sup>30</sup> A remediation is the representation of a medium within a different medium. Lewis's opera *Afterword* remediates the final chapter of his book *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, much as that chapter is itself a remediation of AACM archival materials. Moreover, Lewis's opera remediates the operatic tradition of composing an opera on the subject of the magical powers of music to effect change on the human ethos (the Orpheus myth).

There is another aspect in which *Afterword* is a remediation: Lewis refers to his opera as a "*Bildungsoper*—a coming-of-age opera of ideas, positionality, and testament."<sup>31</sup> In other words, Lewis's opera is a remediation of the *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age novel, along with the narrative formula associated with it. According to Jennifer Heinert, the bildungsroman has traditionally been associated with dominant cultural values, coded as "white."<sup>32</sup> In the bildungsroman, Heinert states, a young hero ("a white, male propertied citizen") is confronted with a series of obstacles that, once overcome, lead him to embrace the values of the dominant culture.<sup>33</sup> Instead, Lewis's remediation presents a critical revision of the traditional bildungsroman, a revision that deconstructs the genre's values, assumptions, conventional narrative techniques, and the people that it normally depicts (upper-middle-class white male citizens). In *Afterword*, the development of the community (the

AACM, the South Side of Chicago) is even more important than that of the individual. Like the bildungsromans of Toni Morrison, especially *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Lewis rejects the linear and teleological trajectory of the traditional bildungsroman in favor of the juxtaposition of multiple narratives and historical moments. In doing so, *Afterword* presents listeners with a positive model of development that does not reduce African Americans and women to the role of the Other.

The double logic of remediation is also evident in the music used to depict the avatars in *Afterword's* scene 4. The scene's musical form provides a sense of immediacy akin to the experience of driving a race car: we are constantly in motion, and there's a sense of excitement of not knowing what's around the corner. The scene's musical form divides into three parts: an opening fanfare or call-to-attention (mm. 1–74); a discussion about original, creative music (mm. 75–163); and a final section in which the fanfare-like music returns and the musicians decide to take a vote (mm. 164–223).

An arch map reveals the geometric proportions in the musical form of scene 4.<sup>34</sup> As can be seen in figure 5.1, Lewis uses the golden ratio at multiple levels in the musical form: the smaller divisions of the first part, as well as the larger second and third parts.<sup>35</sup> The golden ratio is also present in the individual tempo markings given for each rehearsal letter (refer to fig. 5.2).<sup>36</sup>

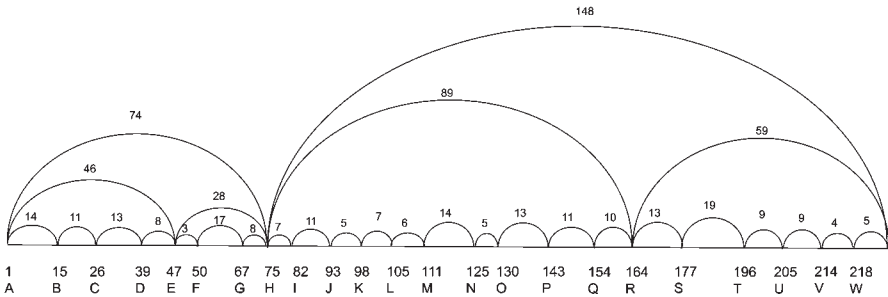


Fig. 5.1. Arch Map of *Afterword*, scene 4 (adapted from Tywoniuk 2019, 49).

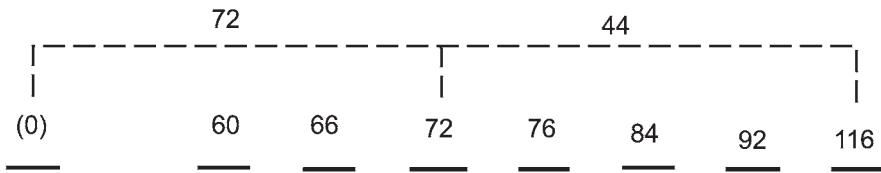


Fig. 5.2. Tempo Proportions in *Afterword*, scene 4 (adapted from Tywoniuk 2019, 60).

Yet it seems remarkable to me that Lewis would incorporate these geometric proportions into his musical form, since notated durations are not identical with clock time, and the listener is unlikely to hear the proportions as such. While the musicians performing the score may be aware of the geometrical design, the listeners nonetheless do not hear it. Be that as it may, the discovery of the golden ratio in scene 4 is important because the musical form is the framework in which the avatars appear. If we take Lewis's idea of *Afterword* as a virtual meeting as our basis, the musical form is the platform in which the avatar performance takes place. While the musical form provides the listeners with an aesthetic feeling akin to driving a race car, the feeling is slightly different for the performers. Gilbert Simondon describes a similar example as a "phanero-technics" in which the form and its materials are made evident to the viewer, as demonstrated in Le Corbusier's architecture and the Garabit viaduct on the Truyère.<sup>37</sup> Simondon discusses the simple pleasure of seeing these proportions as a perceptual blending of technics and aesthetics ("techno-aesthetics"). My own point here is to emphasize how the musical form can be perceived differently by the performers versus the audience. In both cases, the form's effect of immediacy contributes to the presence and immediacy of the avatar performance.

Another key aspect of scene 4 is how the instrumental music takes on virtual attributes in tandem with the avatar performance. Robert Hatten has written about how music may exhibit a virtual agency of its own, independent from the composer and performers, and this is certainly the case in *Afterword*.<sup>38</sup> The music's first virtual attribute is the transformation of an initial chord.<sup>39</sup> As shown in figure 5.3, m. 1 features a dense vertical sonority built on  $C_2$  in the piano: above the  $C_2$ -cluster in the piano are an augmented second between the horn and cello and an open-spaced chord played by the violin, flute, and clarinet.<sup>40</sup> Lewis's rapid transformation of this initial chord results in a state of sonic flux, and the singers' avatar performance seems to hover over an impenetrable force field.

The music's second virtual attribute is the juxtaposition of contrasting musical styles, especially those types of music referred to in the libretto ("jazz standard," "creative music," and "ancestral music"). As shown in figure 5.4, the opening section of scene 4 incorporates an altered version of the fanfare musical topic, which is frequently used by opera composers to signal the onset of an important event.<sup>41</sup> Here the fanfare music literally calls the singers and their avatars to attention for the AACM's founding meeting.

The next musical style is the jazz standard, which appears at rehearsal C.

m. 1

Violin  $\sharp$   $\alpha$

Flute  $\alpha$

Clarinet  $\flat$   $\alpha$

Cello  $\alpha$

Horn  $\flat$   $\alpha$

Piano  $\flat$   $\alpha$   $\alpha$

---

m. 15

Violin  $\alpha$

Flute  $\alpha$

Clarinet  $\alpha$

Cello  $\alpha$

Horn  $\sharp$   $\alpha$

Piano  $\flat$   $\alpha$   $\alpha$

---

m. 26

Flute  $\alpha$

Clarinet  $\alpha$

Horn  $\sharp$   $\alpha$

Violin  $\sharp$   $\alpha$

Piano  $\flat$   $\alpha$   $\alpha$

Cello  $\alpha$

---

m. 167-168

Flute  $\alpha$

Violin  $\sharp$   $\alpha$

Clarinet  $\alpha$

Piano  $\flat$   $\alpha$   $\alpha$

Horn  $\flat$   $\alpha$

Cello  $\alpha$

Piano  $\flat$   $\alpha$   $\alpha$

Fig. 5.3. Initial chord and transformations in *Afterword*, scene 4

SECTION 1		
Rehearsal letter(s)	Style	Gesture and/or motive
AB	Fanfare/call-to attention	Fanfare motive (m. 1)
CD	"Jazz standard"	Motivic reference to the standard "All the Things You Are"
E	"Creative music"	Short scalar melodic bursts ("small instruments")
FG	Melody-accompaniment atonal	Sustained chords; string tremolo and glissando

SECTION 2		
Rehearsal letter(s)	Style	Gesture and/or motive
H	Creative music	Rising frequency bands in the strings
IJK	Melody-accompaniment atonal	String glissando, tremolo
L	Soul	Low tom-tom strikes; layering of ostinatos, syncopated chords
M	Creative music	Short "smears" (m. 113); "stretch" gesture (m. 117)
NO	Melody-accompaniment atonal	Sustained chords, tremolo, heavy bow pressure
PQ	Creative music	Rising frequency bands in the strings; vibraphone swirls; "stretch" gesture

SECTION 3		
Rehearsal letter(s)	Style	Gesture and/or motive
R	Fanfare	Varied fanfare motive (m. 167)
S	Melody-accompaniment atonal	Sustained chords, tremolo; vocal climax on "sound-conscious musicians" (m. 195)
T	"Ancestral music"	Percussive sounds on strings, winds, and horn
U	Melody-accompaniment atonal	Strings, heavy bow pressure
VW	Creative music	Layering in the winds and horn; glissando and frequency bands in the strings

Fig. 5.4. Musical styles, motives, and gestures in *Afterword*, scene 4

When the soprano sings “We thought of all the things we are / What everybody would like to do,” the melodic line includes a motivic reference to the jazz standard “All the Things You Are,” composed by Jerome Kern and with lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein.<sup>42</sup> In addition to being a playful reference to the text (“We thought of all the things we are”), the jazz style also refers to the self-sacrifice of the AACM musicians, who gave up performing jazz standards in favor of composing their own original compositions. The third musical style is “creative music” and appears at rehearsal E (“What point are we on now? / Original music?”), which features short melodic bursts, or sonic gestures. The gestures at m. 47 resemble the “little instrumentals” frequently used by AACM members, including small percussion instruments, bells, and found objects. The music at rehearsal F and G is in an atonal melody-accompaniment style. The fifth musical style is R&B music and appears at rehearsal L (“The other music is already being presented / Record companies / Disk jockeys / Everyone is promoting it.”) The instrumental music contains a low tom-tom, suggesting that the industry was beating the drum for this music, and perhaps literally beating it into people’s heads. At rehearsal T, Lewis introduces the musical style of ancestral music, which coincides with Gene Easton’s monologue (“Getting closer to the music our ancestors played”). The tenor voice is accompanied by various sound gestures (*col legno battuto* in the strings, flute with tongue ram, clarinet with slap tongue, and horn playing air sounds with percussive tonguing), which invites the listener to make a strong connection between the ancestral music and creative music.

Lewis’s juxtaposition of contrasting musical styles results in a strong feeling of hypermediacy. Bolter and Grusin’s discussion of montage and photo-collage may be equally applied to the music here. Bolter and Grusin write, “A viewer confronting a collage, for example, oscillates between looking at the patches of paper and paint on the surface of the work and looking through to the depicted objects as if they occupied a real space beyond the surface.”<sup>43</sup> This oscillation between looking *at* the medium and looking *through* the medium at the images that are depicted in it is similarly evident in Lewis’s treatment of musical style. Lewis’s “exploring of the interface” (Bolter and Grusin) involves a sophisticated attention to the acoustic properties of the musical surface while simultaneously inviting the listener to experience the semantic and associative meanings of the different musical styles.

The oscillation between the musical surface and the representation of the individual musical styles cultivates what Bolter and Grusin describe as a “mobility of observation.”<sup>44</sup> Like early nineteenth-century technologies

such as the diorama, phenakistoscope, and the stereoscope, which drew the observers' attention to their desire for immediacy, Lewis's use of musical style encourages listeners to change their perspective and to alter the way they see the performers and avatars on stage. This is none other than what Tereza Havelková alludes to as the "critical possibilities contained within hypermediacy, including operatic spectacle," which is to reconfigure how the audience views and listens.<sup>45</sup> The mobility of observation also proves to be true for the avatar performance, which invites viewers to oscillate between seeing the performer and the depicted character (avatar). In both cases, Lewis's opera serves as a memory technology that blasts the listener-viewer free from control societies in favor of creating new living memories.

### Dramaturgy of the Avatar in the Production of *Afterword's* Scene 4

Any discussion of the dramaturgy of the avatar would be incomplete without considering the scene's staging and performance. According to the cultural historian Uri McMillan, the embodied avatar is a way of performing objecthood that destabilizes conventional, stereotyped depictions of Blackness.<sup>46</sup> It is a performance mode that highlights the body as a site of meaning and that extends the agency of the performers. McMillan's notion of the embodied avatar may be fruitfully applied to the staging and choreography by Sean Griffin and Catherine Sullivan.

Director, composer, and artist Sean Griffin is the director of Opera Povera, a performance and design consortium that he created in 2010.<sup>47</sup> Griffin has directed six unique stagings of Lewis's *Afterword*, and my analysis of scene 4 will focus on the world premiere performance at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art on October 16, 2015.<sup>48</sup> What makes *Afterword's* world premiere performance different from Griffin's other five stagings of this opera is that it incorporates three dancers in addition to the singers, who also function as dancers. The complex choreography of the world premiere, created by Griffin and visual artist Catherine Sullivan, is especially relevant for considering the dramaturgy of the avatar and its attention to the human body as a site of meaning.

Griffin states that his collaboration with Lewis on *Afterword* was unusual in that Lewis presented Griffin with a completed, fully notated musical score.<sup>49</sup> Griffin explains that his gestural and choreographic language for



Fig. 5.5. Production photo of *Afterword*, scene 4, world premiere performance on October 16, 2015, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. (Courtesy of Opera Povera.)

*Afterword* emerged in the process of rehearsals with the singers and dancers. Sullivan also worked independently with the dancers, which also shaped the final choreography. After a morning of rehearsals, Griffin would meet Lewis for lunch, at which time Lewis would “share books, photographs, and textile designs from Egypt and Africa related to the mythology of the AACM.”<sup>50</sup> Griffin then incorporated these pictures into his costumes and stage design, creating a type of living memory. These conversations were supplemented by Griffin’s own personal experiences with AACM members, many of whom he had known for decades. Lewis pays tribute to Griffin by quoting him in the libretto for act 2, scene 1 (“Ariae”) of *Afterword*: “We can take anything / Make anything out of it.”<sup>51</sup>

Griffin describes the complex layering of meaning in scene 4’s choreography, beginning with the rapid tilts of the seated dancers (31:31): “[The beginning of scene 4] shows the swaying of gravity that pulls people around. It’s like a large orb that circles around the room—like an energy from a different planet.”<sup>52</sup> Griffin refers to this planet as “an abstract Africa” that returns in a later scene. Additionally, the dancers’ gestures are derived from album cov-



ers of the AACM. When the libretto states, “We are gathered here to form an association” (34:32), the singers and dancers form a tableau based on an AACM album cover.<sup>53</sup> At the world premiere, many AACM members were in attendance and several commented to Griffin that they recalled and recognized particular scenes and images.

Several other moments in the choreography should be mentioned. At 32:13, the singers and dancers are seated around a table as in a meeting. Contralto Gwendolyn Brown stands at the head of the table as the avatar of Muhal Richard Abrams, the chairman of the first AACM meeting. All three singers’ movements become more naturalistic here, to emphasize the text they are singing. When a given singer’s avatar speaks, he or she walks freely about the space, as if literally taking the floor. When soprano Joelle Lamarre’s avatar declares, “Now is the time / This is an awakening” (41:03), she removes her blond wig—a symbol of liberation from white societal expectations and notions of beauty. At 41:44, the dancers kneel as if in prayer. When tenor Julian Terrell Otis performs the avatar of Gene Easton at 42:32 (“Original means / Sound-conscious musicians”), both the singers and dancers begin to move freely about the space.

Griffin also highlights how the singers and dancers add spoken interjections, which are not notated in the score or the libretto. These interjections contribute to the sense of a community voice that Lewis mentions in the program notes.

The multiple temporalities in the choreography are an important aspect of the avatars’ hypermediacy. For example, the linear, dramatic time of the singers contrasts with the cyclical time of the dancers, who repeat the same or similar gestures. The costumes also contribute to the multiple temporalities. In scene 4, the costumes are more or less in keeping with the time period described in the libretto (the mid-1960s); some of the other scenes, however, include historical costumes (for example, a soldier’s uniform in scene 1). As Griffin puts it, the avatars move forward and backward through time, stretching from ancient Africa to the future circa 2055.<sup>54</sup> *Afterword’s* staging of multiple temporalities is in keeping with Lehmann’s concept of the “archaeological kaleidoscope” in postdramatic theater in general and Wilson’s works in particular: “Without restraint his theater tableaux mix times, cultures, and spaces.”<sup>55</sup>

A third feature of the avatar is its ability to move between the media involved in opera. For instance, at 42:25 (“Getting closer to the music our ancestors played”), the avatar is not limited to the singer, as when the dancers become soloists. The percussive sound gestures of the instrumental music

radiate outwards to enliven the dancers, who take on a meaning of their own. At such moments of hypermediacy, the thick web of visual and sonic signifiers creates an experience akin to what Daphne Brooks calls “spectacular opacity”—dense and opaque performances that “confound and disrupt conventional constructions of the racialized and gendered body.”<sup>56</sup> This profound experience of hypermediacy is exactly what McMillan has in mind when he states that the embodied avatar subverts negative stereotypes and extends the performer’s agency.

A choreomusical analysis of scene 4 reveals several further insights. The music and dance may be synchronized at one level while contesting each other at another level. The quick and irregular pacing of the dancers’ side tilts (31:31) highlights the fast tempo of the music. When the tempo slows down at 32:13, the movement of the dancers and singers similarly decreases in speed. The dancers’ gestures and postures, however, have no direct relationship here to the sung and spoken text (“original music / only / this will have to be voted on”), instead they anticipate the tableau based on the AACM album cover at 34:32 (“We are gathered here to form an association”). At 40:00, there is a strong audiovisual downbeat, creating what Stephanie Jordan describes as “visual capture,” or movement that draws extraordinary attention to the musical events.<sup>57</sup> The dancers’ sudden slack posture and downward movement coincides with the onset of the AACM-like small percussion sound gesture in the vibraphone and violin (m. 150). The movement highlights a shift in the music that would otherwise be much less apparent.

Finally, the production’s lighting design creates a play of shadows on the background screen, a visual reference to Plato’s allegory of the cave. This effect of hypermediacy seems to be a direct reference to the projection of the hyperreal simulation of Hades in Ferneyhough’s *Shadowtime*. The iconography of Griffin’s staging is slightly different here. In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates describes the philosopher’s duty to help guide fellow citizens from the cave of shadows into the daylight of the truth.<sup>58</sup> The message here is of service, community building, and self-sacrifice, which is in keeping with the narrative of scene 4. The lighting and stage design of *Afterword* encourage the viewers to contemplate the deeper significance of the events unfolding on the stage. As Griffin states, “there’s a whole [visual] language related to the imaginary part that lives through the whole piece through references.”<sup>59</sup> In sum, the scene demonstrates the politics of hypermediacy to change the audience’s perception and cultural assumptions away from the stereotypes and racial prejudices of today’s dominant media culture.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue that the dramaturgy of the avatar is at the heart of Lewis's opera *Afterword*, which presents singers and dancers as avatars of AACM musicians, both living and deceased. The avatar is a tool or visual representation controlled by a human in a virtual setting, one that extends the agency of the performer. Given today's understanding of virtuality beyond the real/virtual binary, Lewis's *Afterword* enacts a virtual meeting through its lively engagement with a digital repository of AACM archival materials. Lewis's opera illuminates aspects of postdramatic theater and opera alike by considering new historical subjects. Making an observation that can be equally applied to postdramatic theater, Naomi André states that a great deal remains to be done in terms of addressing the perceived whiteness of opera by confronting the history of opera as a segregated space, and by decentering and decolonizing "Eurological" narratives of opera.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Lewis's *Afterword* draws attention to the political potential of hypermediacy to enable a perceptual change and reactivate living memory in the face of what Deleuze refers to as today's control societies. In this respect, Lewis's opera is a powerful example of memory technics in the age of digital networked media.

While technics attends to the making of tools and the constitutive role of technology for humanity, it nevertheless relies on technology's function as a supplement, prosthesis, and extension of agency. A fruitful line of inquiry would be to apply the concept of "coevolution"—the influence that humans and technology have on one another in their evolution—to Lewis's compositions that incorporate electronics, in particular his *Recombinant Trilogy*.<sup>61</sup>

Be that as it may, cultural historian Alexander Weheliye highlights how nonwhites have traditionally been excluded from the category of the Human.<sup>62</sup> This observation is particularly relevant to the study of technics, which focuses on the inseparable relationship between technology and the human being (the "Human"). While Lewis's *Afterword* contributes a great deal to the much-needed task of incorporating the concept of race into the consideration of technology and the Human, future research on Lewis's music will need to move beyond the Human to evaluate alternate modes of being along with Weheliye's idea of "racializing assemblages"—that is, how "the idea of racializing assemblages construes race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans."<sup>63</sup>

Ultimately, the chapter demonstrates how the dramaturgy of the avatar in

*Afterword* moves beyond the kinds of cyber discourse that depict Blackness as the “anti-avatar of digital life.”<sup>64</sup> Such discourse turns a blind eye to a long history of African American technoculture. By drawing attention to the historically situated sociopolitical and material aspects of memory technics and discourses of race, the avatar is one such way of highlighting the technological agency of African American artists beyond racism and the stereotypes of dominant media culture and control societies.

## Notes

1. My definition of avatar here is based on Beth Coleman, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011). I nevertheless have a broader view of avatar than Coleman, who defines avatar as a digital representation controlled by a human being within a human-computer interaction. My understanding of avatar is more in keeping with that presented by Uri McMillan, who focuses primarily on how artists perform and manipulate embodied images in performance art. Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

2. For a brief introduction to cybernetics, see N. Katherine Hayles, “Cybernetics,” in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 145–56. On George Lewis’s understanding of cybernetics, see especially George E. Lewis, “The Virtual Discourses of Pamela Z,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 1, no. 1 (2007): 59. See also George E. Lewis, “Improvising Tomorrow’s Bodies: The Politics of Transduction,” *Emisférica* 4, no. 2 (2007), [http://www.hemi.nyu.edu/journal/4.2/eng/en42\\_pg\\_lewis.html](http://www.hemi.nyu.edu/journal/4.2/eng/en42_pg_lewis.html). I’m also indebted to the work of Lucie Vágnerová. See Lucie Vágnerová, “Sirens/Cyborgs: Sound Technologies and the Musical Body” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2016).

3. Hayles, “Cybernetics,” 148.

4. Bernard Stiegler, “Memory,” in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 67. On technics and music, see Michael Gallope, “Technicity, Consciousness, and Musical Objects,” in *Music and Consciousness: Philosophical, Psychological, and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. David Clarke and Eric Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47–64. On opera and technicity, see Jonathan Sterne, “Afterword: Opera, Media, Technicity,” in *Technology and the Diva: Sopranos, Opera, and Media from Romanticism to the Digital Age*, ed. Karen Henson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 159–200.

5. Stiegler, “Memory,” 78–81. According to Gilles Deleuze, corporations and computers control today’s societies. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3–7.

6. Stiegler, “Memory,” 83.

7. George Lewis refers to *Afterword* as a “*Bildungsoper*” in George Lewis, “Program Notes for *Afterword*,” 71st Ojai Music Festival, Libbey Bowl, June 9, 2017. Lewis writes here, “*Afterword* is not a history of the AACM, but a ‘*Bildungsoper*’—a coming-of-age opera of ideas, positionality, and testament.”

8. Music dramaturgy refers to how the music shapes and structures the drama and performance of an opera as a whole. See Christopher B. Balme, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 149.

9. Lewis refers to the final chapter of his book as a “virtual AACM meeting, sampled from the many self-critical musings that I heard in my interviews with my colleagues and friends in the collective.” George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 498.

10. George Lewis, “Program Notes for *Afterword*,” *71st Ojai Music Festival*, Libbey Bowl, June 9, 2017.

11. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006). Lehmann’s book originally appeared in German in 1999. My discussion of postdramatic theater is mainly limited to Lehmann’s chapter “Panorama of Postdramatic Theatre” (pp. 68–133).

12. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 147.

13. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 71.

14. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 71.

15. Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” *Social Text* 9/10 (Spring-Summer 1984): 181.

16. Alexander K. Rothe, “Boundaries: An Interview with George Lewis,” *Van Magazine*, June 22, 2017, <https://van-magazine.com/mag/george-lewis/>

17. Coleman, *Hello Avatar*, 44.

18. Coleman gives an example: “To say ‘she is the face of innocence’ captures the sense of someone personifying or embodying a principle. Through its evolving uses, avatar has consistently given a face to the abstract or untouchable.” *Hello Avatar*, 44. Further discussion of allegory is beyond the scope of this chapter. On the use of allegorical theater in contemporary opera, specifically Robert Ashley, see David Gutkin, “Meanwhile, Let’s Go Back in Time: Allegory, Actuality, and History in Robert Ashley’s Television Opera *Trilogy*,” *Opera Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2014): 5–48.

19. See George E. Lewis, “The Dancer of All Dancers: Anthony Davis and *Amistad*,” liner notes for *Anthony Davis: Amistad, An Opera in Two Acts*, New World Records, Anthology of Recorded Music, 2008.

20. Anthony Braxton, *Tri-Axium Writings* (Oakland: Synthesis Music, 1985).

21. Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 186–89.

22. Brian Ferneyhough, “Program Notes for *Opus Contra Naturam*,” Flanders Festival, October 2000. *Opus Contra Naturam*, though premiered in 2000, was conceived as part of Ferneyhough’s opera *Shadowtime*. [http://www.editionpeters.com/resources/0001/stock/pdf/opus\\_contra\\_naturam.pdf](http://www.editionpeters.com/resources/0001/stock/pdf/opus_contra_naturam.pdf).

23. Ferneyhough, “Program Notes.”

24. Lewis, “Program Notes for *Afterword*.”

25. The AACM’s founding meeting is described in greater detail in Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, 97–105. See also Paul Steinbeck, *Message To Our Folks: The Art Ensemble of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 9–34.

26. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 6.

27. On opera's hypermediacy, see Tereza Havelková, *Opera as Hypermedium: Meaning-Making, Immediacy, and the Politics of Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1f.
28. George Lewis, "Libretto for *Afterword*," 71st *Ojai Music Festival*, Libbey Bowl, June 9, 2017.
29. George Lewis provided me with the unpublished transcript. "First AACM Meeting—Saturday, May 8, 1965" (unpublished manuscript, last modified October 26, 2017), Microsoft Word file.
30. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 5.
31. Lewis, "Program Notes for *Afterword*."
32. Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert, *Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 15.
33. Heinert, *Narrative Conventions*, 14.
34. My incorporation of arch maps is indebted to Derek Tywoniuk, "Context, Time, Texture, and Gesture in George E. Lewis's *The Will to Adorn*" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2019), 46–83.
35. Since the meter remains the same throughout the entire scene (4/4), the ratios refer to the measure counts in the musical score. The golden ratio is evident in the smaller divisions of the first part: mm. 1–47 (46 measures) plus mm. 47–75 (28 measures) equals mm. 1–75 (74 measures). The second and third parts also approximate the golden ratio: mm. 75–164 (89 measures) and mm. 164–223 (59 measures) equals mm. 75–223 (148 measures). The ratio is three measures short of the golden ratio, but this may be corrected by beginning the third section three bars later at m. 167, which is exactly where the fanfare material from the beginning of the scene returns.
36. Scene 4's opening tempo is 116 bpm, which is 44 bpm faster than 72 bpm. The individual tempo markings also consist of a number of superimposed arithmetic sequences: 60, 66, 72; 76, 84, 92; 60, 72, 84; 60, 76, 92. 7.
37. Gilbert Simondon, "On Techno-Aesthetics," trans. Arne De Boever, *Parrhesia* 14 (2012).
38. Robert S. Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 8.
39. David Metzger describes a similar procedure in Kaija Saariaho's works *Du cristal* and . . . *à la fumée*, though in Lewis's case the transformation occurs much more quickly, resulting in a greater state of sonic flux. David Metzger, *Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 187.
40. An altered version of the m. 1 sonority appears at m. 15, though the piano cluster chord is transposed down to G1 (note also the quarter-tone compression of the previous horn-cello dyad and the removal of the accidentals in the open-spaced chord above it). When Lewis's initial chord returns in m. 26, it is mainly compressed into the mid-range (D3-E4). The transformation of these vertical sonorities continues throughout the scene until mm. 167–168, when the C2 chord on the piano returns.
41. On the fanfare musical topic, see Raymond Monelle, *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 33–38.
42. The musical quotation of the standard "All the Things You Are" may also be interpreted within the framework of Henry Louis Gates's notion of the Signifying Monkey,

where signifyin(g) refers to repetition with a signal difference. The practice of musical signifyin(g) is elaborated upon in Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). For a reading of *Afterword*, scene 4 in terms of musical signifyin(g), refer to my *AMS Musicology Now* post: Alexander K. Rothe, "The Sound of Empathy in George Lewis's *Afterword*," *Musicology Now*, last updated May 11, 2018. <https://musicologynow.org/the-sound-of-empathy-in-george-lewiss-afterword/>

43. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 41.
44. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 37.
45. Havelková, *Opera as Hypermedium*, 33.
46. McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 11.
47. <https://www.seangriffin.org/about>
48. A video of *Afterword*'s world premiere at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art is available on the Web. My time listings correspond with this video: <https://vimeo.com/148533728>. For a contrasting staging of *Afterword*, see Griffin's staging at the Ostrava Days Festival in August 2015, which incorporated elaborate assemblage-based set designs—giving the set design a much greater independence than in the other *Afterword* stagings. The Ostrava staging is documented in a YouTube video of the death scene (act 2, scene 3): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDR\\_uPR7x3g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDR_uPR7x3g)
49. Sean Griffin, interview by author, Los Angeles, July 22, 2020.
50. Griffin, interview.
51. Lewis, "Libretto for *Afterword*."
52. Griffin, interview.
53. The time stamp refers to the video recording cited in note 48.
54. Griffin, interview.
55. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 79.
56. Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 8.
57. Stephanie Jordan, "Choreomusical Conversations: Facing a Double Challenge," *Dance Research Journal* 43, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 50.
58. Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 240–49.
59. Griffin, interview.
60. Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 6. I adopt the term Eurological from George Lewis to refer to musical discourse that focuses primarily, in many cases exclusively, on Western Europe, the United States, and Canada.
61. For a recent book on coevolution, see Edward Ashford Lee, *The Coevolution: The Entwined Futures of Humans and Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).
62. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 9.
63. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 4.
64. Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 1.

## Dramaturgies of Trauma

*Chaya Czernowin's Infinite Now*

Joy H. Calico

Imagine that the hall, the whole space of the hall, is the inside of a head/heart/body. The audience is immersed in the working of the head/heart/body of a person who finds themselves in a difficult or hopeless situation, a person who is struggling to find their footing. The hall becomes an acoustic space where the outside is reacted upon, digested, dreamt, in an attempt to figure it out, and to survive.

—CHAYA CZERNOWIN<sup>1</sup>

This opening epigraph is composer Chaya Czernowin's description of her opera *Infinite Now* (2017), and while she does not use the word "trauma," she certainly could have. This chapter focuses on two dramaturgies used to create a traumatic immersive audience experience: the composite libretto and the use of sound design to determine one's experience of theatrical space. Dramaturgy refers to the ways in which an opera's constituent elements—musical and poetic form, instrumentation, vocal *Fach*, stage direction, *mise en scène*, and, in this case, libretto and sound design—determine audience experience and contribute to "telling the story" (the latter being loosely defined, since experimental opera may lack conventional narrative). These devices may serve numerous purposes, but in *Infinite Now*, their attributes of fragmentation, disorientation, and forced intimacy communicate the cultural trauma of two horrific, large-scale events from twentieth-century history: World War I in Europe and the Cultural Revolution in China. Cultural trauma is defined as "a specific form of collective trauma, affecting collective identity, where groups of individuals feel similarly affected by a fracturing of the existential security that a firm sense of identity affords."<sup>2</sup>



*Infinite Now* was an international co-commission from the National Theater Mannheim (Germany) and the Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music (IRCAM; France). It won the Opera Premiere of the Year award from *Opernwelt Jahrbuch*, seventeen years after Czernowin's first opera, *Prima . . . ins Innere* (2000), received the same honor. It is scored for full orchestra, a concertino instrumental quartet (electric guitar, acoustic guitar, two cellos), electronics, six singers divided into two trios, and seven actors. All parts are amplified. The work consists of six acts without intermission, and the total running time is 150–175 minutes. Key collaborators were computer music designer Carlo Laurenzi and engineer Sylvain Cadars, both of IRCAM; musical director Titus Engel; stage director Luk Perceval; stage and video designer Phillip Bussmann; and musicians with a history of performing Czernowin's music, especially the extraordinary contralto Noa Frenkel.

### The Dramaturgy of a Composite Libretto

Czernowin created the libretto for *Infinite Now* from two apparently unrelated extant sources. One is Perceval's 2014 play *FRONT, a Polyphony . . .*, which is a visceral account of World War I's Western Front "from all sides of the trenches in Belgium."<sup>3</sup> In the tradition of documentary theater, Perceval uses historical and literary sources in French, German, Flemish, and English, including Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) in the original German. The second primary text is the short story "Homecoming" by Chinese avant-garde author Deng Xiaohua (b. 1953), who publishes under the name Can Xue. Live performers render excerpts from the story in English translation, and a recording of Weiwei Xu reading it in Chinese is part of the electronic soundscape.<sup>4</sup> In this surreal story a woman (called X) returns to a house she has been to many times before, yet finds it completely different: the old man who lives there now tells her that the house is dying, that they must remain in darkness, and that she cannot leave. The days run together, and she can no longer remember exactly how she got there. Czernowin selected only sentences directly related to the house and avoided those that might establish a precise sense of location (monkey, flamingo, banana groves).

The verb Czernowin uses to describe the arrangement of the two texts is "intercut," which is a common film technique. Elsewhere she describes the

process as one of “creating a dialogue between the two materials” in which “the two texts begin to talk and relate to each other” and “bring it all to the Now,” the current moment of feeling as if we live perpetually in a state of pending disaster.<sup>5</sup> Each act begins with the sound of a metal gate closing followed by instrumental and electronic sounds before any voices enter. At first the texts alternate. In acts I, II, III, and V excerpts from “Homecoming” are heard first, followed by excerpts from *FRONT*; in acts IV and VI the sequence is reversed. The crisis comes in Act IV, when they are not just juxtaposed but interleaved, so that lines alternate and even overlap. The texts converge more and more in the second half of the opera.

The performers do not portray characters or engage one another in a conventional narrative manner. *Infinite Now* thus qualifies as an example of Hans-Thies Lehmann’s postdramatic theater, by which he means that “at least the imagination of a comprehensible narrative and/or mental totality” is no longer the driving force.<sup>6</sup> Jelena Novak explains that “though postdramatic theater does not break with verbal text, it does break with its dramatic principles,” in that literary text and plot are no longer primary and that “all phenomena are given equal attention.”<sup>7</sup> In this case, the plot is not enacted based on the libretto; it is the interaction between the two texts that constitutes the plot. The opera’s five discernible languages alternate coming to the fore, with English the most prominent (an impression reinforced by English-language surtitles and mostly English projections, even in a production for a German theater). At other times their cacophony produces a Babelesque welter of thwarted verbal communication. Czernowin distinguishes the source texts throughout by assigning a dedicated vocal timbre to each source. Excerpts from *FRONT* are always performed by Trio #1 (a mezzo-soprano, counter-tenor, and baritone) and seven actors. Excerpts from “Homecoming” are always performed by Trio #2 (a soprano, contralto, and bass). Each trio functions as a single “meta-voice,” Trio #2 as a “blurred, unison meta-voice” and Trio #1 as “three voices combin[ing] together to create a meta-voice, singing in slow unison which changes its colors with the change of the dynamic individually for the single voices within the unified unison.”<sup>8</sup>

Both texts are present-tense, first-person narratives, and they are linked by a common theme: the trauma of being trapped in a horrible situation (soldiers in trench warfare, the woman in the house). This narrative strategy generates a temporal distortion common to trauma, which can feel like being trapped in a perpetual present (hence the title), reliving an experience again and again. Their authors also represent the cultural trauma of their respec-

tive regional generational cohorts. The authors in *FRONT* were writing from firsthand experience in World War I, but they also serve as synecdoche for the trauma of an entire European generation. Similarly, Can Xue's family was persecuted by the Chinese state beginning in 1957 and throughout the Cultural Revolution; she wrote "Homecoming" in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Analyses of her better-known short story "The Hut on the Mountain" are also relevant to "Homecoming." Lingchei Letty Chen writes that "the psychic disturbances and suggestive fears and paranoia in this short story are emblematic of the untraceable, traumatized historical experience of psychic assaults from which Can Xue—like all others who underwent the 'proletarian dictatorship'—has suffered."<sup>9</sup> Conventional opera can also generate a trauma-induced sense of entrapment through repetition, even if the narrative is more straightforward by comparison. Emanuele Senici finds evidence in Rossini's operas of a Freudian "posttraumatic compulsion to repeat," as they "staged over and over again the historical trauma of the post-revolutionary and Napoleonic years and the compulsion to repeat in which Italians found themselves trapped."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps libretti composed of extant, disparate texts can form a corpus for analysis. One might begin by text mining each libretto to assess the interaction of the separate texts, such as identifying common vocabulary, imagery, syntax, and concepts; parsing the rate at which texts alternate at the levels of word, line, paragraph, scene, and act; and locating instances of simultaneous presentation of multiple texts. The results would produce groupings for comparison based on similarities in these categories. A music scholar can then extrapolate dramaturgical strategies, narrative abstraction, and linearity of the libretti alone before extending the comparison to musical settings and even stagings. These composite libretti need not conform to Lehmann's notion of postdramatic theater, although the method may lend itself particularly well to that orientation.

Postdramatic or no, an effective comparison to *Infinite Now* would require some sort of sustained interaction between multiple, large texts, such as Czernowin's own *Zaïde/Adama* (2006; revised to add chorus 2017). The Salzburg Festival commissioned her to write a companion piece for Mozart's fragmentary opera *Zaïde*, and she created a counterpoint in which each piece has its own ensemble, and the two orchestras and two casts alternate scenes on the same set. The juxtaposition of the exoticist Singspiel set to Mozart's music, against the story of forbidden Israeli-Palestinian love set to Czernowin's, is striking. The pieces are almost completely independent, yet they com-

ment on one another in their alternation thanks to a shared theme and space, as Martin Iddon notes: “love across cultural, social or political divides, forbidden by masculine authority.”<sup>11</sup> George Lewis’s forthcoming *Comet/Poppea* may emerge as another fitting point of comparison, as it promises a meeting between his setting of the W. E. B. DuBois short story “The Comet” and Claudio Monteverdi’s *L’Incoronazione di Poppea*.

Other types of multi-sourced libretti might constitute additional corpora for analysis and provide an opportunity to examine what dramaturgical function they can serve other than trauma. There are those that function as compilations of short excerpts on a common theme rather than extended, interconnected texts: the libretto for Philip Glass’s *Akhmaten* brings together numerous sources in multiple languages linked by their common original subject matter (the Pharaoh), which is also the subject of the opera, while the libretto for *Doctor Atomic* is a “cut-and-paste” assemblage of poetry and historical documents compiled and arranged” by composer John Adams and collaborator Peter Sellars.<sup>12</sup> *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* (1990–96) by Helmut Lachenmann incorporates quotations from Leonardo da Vinci and Gudrun Ensslin into a text abstracted from Hans Christian Andersen’s short story, although those quotations function as interpolations (albeit highly provocative ones). Finally, there is Kaija Saariaho’s 2015 opera *Only the Sound Remains*, which is essentially a pair of short operas on two different Japanese Noh dramas translated by Ernest Fenolosa and completed by Ezra Pound, in which the multiply mediated and multiply authored texts remain separated in two discrete acts.

## The Dramaturgy of Spatialized Sound Design

Luigi Nono (of more below) used the term “spatial dramaturgy” to describe the role of spatialized distribution, location, dislocation, and mobility of sound—both acoustic and digital, live and prerecorded—in telling the opera’s story. In operas that use electroacoustic sound, its design is the primary means of spatial dramaturgy, although that need not be its only function. Composer Elfyn Jones identifies “five modalities of existing sound practice with the potential to be integrated into opera composition”: sound as environment, music, dramaturgy, sign, and inner voice.<sup>13</sup> He does not explicitly connect each of these to spatiality, but his review of theatrical precursors and tributaries frequently returns to this domain. Ryan Ebright, on the other hand, argues for sounds

design's fundamental purpose in opera as "using sound to activate and make use of the space inhabited by listeners," noting that despite its essential role in much repertoire since the 1980s, opera studies has not yet taken up sound design as a standard category of analysis.<sup>14</sup> There are exceptions, of course; for example, Yayoi Uno Everett analyzes the spatialization of sound effects both electronic and acoustic in Golijov's *Ainadamar* as indices of a lost time and place without using the terms spatial dramaturgy or sound design.<sup>15</sup> And I should note that Czernowin does not use the term "sound design" either, preferring to describe the use of amplification and sound manipulation in *Infinite Now* as simply "composition";<sup>16</sup> I use it here to connect her music to a broader discourse on creative practices in which composers and sound designers function as co-creators, much as Ebright does in his work on the *Doctor Atomic* collaboration.

I envision at least three operatic subspecies in which research into dramaturgy through spatialized sound design could be productive: site-specific operas, operas created for cyberspace, and those created for performance in a theater, such as *Infinite Now*. I will touch briefly on the first two before focusing on the third. Site-specific operas are, by definition, experienced outside of an opera house, and an audience member's mobility through a particular site determines their spatial experience, both in terms of scenography and in terms of sound (what I hear and when, from what distance, and what is most prominent). Director Yuval Sharon has specialized in such productions, first with his LA-based opera company The Industry and now at Detroit Opera Theatre, where he is Gary L. Wasserman Artistic Director. How does sound design facilitate the spatial dramaturgy of *Hopscotch*, in which audience members in groups of three or four took one of three routes through Los Angeles in a series of limousines that also contained live performers? (There is no sound designer credited in the production team, although it does include numerous AV technicians.) Or *Sweet Land*, which was created for outdoor performance at the State Historical Park in downtown Los Angeles? Audiences were assigned to one of two simultaneous tracks in close proximity to one another, which meant that sound designer Jody Elff had to account for sound bleed between the temporary structures, among countless other concerns (all sound was amplified, both acoustic and electronic). Finally, as discussed in the introduction to this volume, Sharon's production of *Twilight: Gods* in October 2020 was an ingenious product of its pandemic moment. I had to remain in my car with the windows rolled up, and as I arrived at each new scene, I tuned into a different FM frequency to augment the sound I

could hear coming from outside the car. Mark Grey's sound design, simultaneously both mediated and unmediated, managed to generate a multidimensional space for me as a listener confined to my car.<sup>17</sup>

The as-yet unrealized spatial dramaturgy Anthony Braxton has conceived for his massive multi-opera complex *Trillium* is of the "choose your own adventure" type, in which an audience member is also her own sound designer. Katherine Young describes it as follows:

Ideally, each of the three primary layers of the ensemble (the singers, the orchestra, and the instrumental soloists) would be on separate audio-visual channels, so that audience members could create their own mix and edits, navigating the materials as they would a session in a recording studio, selecting the tracks and perspectives they want to engage with at any given time. Rather than sitting still in a concert hall, audience members could move virtually or physically, listening and watching from as many different vantage points as desired.<sup>18</sup>

Second, Covid-19 conditions triggered experiments in live cyberspace opera that warrant inquiry in terms of spatial dramaturgy. These are clearly examples of media opera, in Bianca Michaels's terms, meaning a digital native that is musically and visually conceived as such, with all the terms and conditions of communication therein.<sup>19</sup> Boston-based White Snake Projects undertook an ambitious three-part online pandemic series in 2020–21 that put them at the forefront of technological innovation. *Alice in the Pandemic*, *Death by Life*, and *A Survivor's Odyssey* are visually innovative in that they use immersive 3D environments created by Curvin Huber and built with Unreal Engine, the game engine used in Fortnite. The biggest challenge for opera, however, was resolving latency issues to enable live, simultaneous, remote collaborative performance between singers scattered around the United States (in *Death by Life*, for example, singers were in California, Nebraska, Illinois, and New York). Sound engineer Jon Robertson designed a plugin called Tutti Remote that goes a long way toward solving that problem.<sup>20</sup> Sound design functions differently in the cyberspace environment, partly because one can never know what kind of audio technology the audience member has on her phone or computer, particularly if the user is not a serious gamer. Colleagues in ludo-musicology might be good interlocutors in this area. Other aspects could be addressed using research and methodologies established by Christopher Morris, Joseph Attard, and others, whose work on opera cine-casts is

usefully gathered in a special issue of *Opera Quarterly* devoted to *Opera at the Multiplex*.<sup>21</sup>

### *Spatial Dramaturgy in the Theater: Dislocation and Mobility*

In this section I sketch some background for spatial dramaturgy in the opera theater and then focus on two sound design elements that determine an audience's experience of that space for *Infinite Now*: (1) sound dislocation and mobility and (2) amplified breathy vocalization.

Spatial dramaturgy did not begin with the digital age, of course. Michel Leiris argued that *all* operatic music “carves and sculpts the space of the theater,” causing “an intensely palpable space (*un espace intensément sensible*) to blossom forth”; Jonathan Cross extrapolates that “music in an opera does not only function to serve character and dramatic situation but also to define space.”<sup>22</sup> For Cross, Leiris's metaphysical property is enhanced by composers' use of spectral analysis, but spatial music—meaning that which specifies and incorporates the placement or movement of sound in order to affect the listening experience—has a considerable pre-spectralist history in the opera house. It is perhaps most familiar in the form of offstage sound that establishes distance and direction. Consider Hector Berlioz's use of three bands placed offstage at increasingly closer proximity to signal the approaching Trojan horse in the act I finale of *Les Troyens*. The first group is situated far behind the upstage wall with a distinctive instrumentation featuring the high saxhorn sur-aigu with trumpets, cornets, trombones, and ophicleide; the second is closer to the audience but still behind the stage, consisting of four-part saxhorns plus cymbals; and the third is in the wings, closest to the audience, with three-part oboes and six or eight harps. The opening scene of *Il tabarro*, from Giacomo Puccini's *Il trittico*, calls for a car horn to sound in the distance followed by a tugboat whistle even further away. Arman Schwartz cites this as an example of the type of realistic ambient noise that was common in Puccini's operas of the 1890s.<sup>23</sup> Offstage acoustic sound lends verisimilitude to the action onstage by extending the opera's conceptual space beyond the stage.

Electroacoustic technology enables a wide variety of spatial effects that cannot be achieved by relying solely on the audience's or performers' physical proximity to the stage or to one another, as composers of acousmatic and other electronic music have long known. Such effects have been technologically mediated in opera since at least *Moses und Aron* (1932), when Arnold Schoenberg called for the six voices that constitute the burning bush to be

separated from each other offstage, “using telephones which will lead through loudspeakers into the hall where the voices will then coalesce.”<sup>24</sup> Such sonic manipulation is the storytelling role that Luigi Nono referred to as spatial dramaturgy. Nono developed his notions of theatricality and soundspace in the electronic pieces he wrote in the 1960s and then adapted those concepts for stage works.<sup>25</sup> Regarding his *Prometeo: Tragedia dell’ascolto* (Prometheus: Tragedy of Listening) from the 1980s, he wrote: “Soloists in motion—*sounds reading the space / creating a new spatial dramaturgy / from the slightest amount of space subjected to variation / to the whole space totally filled with live sound and sound elaborated by means of live electronics [ . . . ] mobile sounds that read, discover, empty, fill the space.*”<sup>26</sup>

Nono’s journal fragments on *Prometeo* reveal a preoccupation with soundspace and the technologies necessary to create and manipulate it for dramaturgical purposes. His research notes from his work with colleagues in Freiburg are revealing:

The diffusion in the hall with variously placed loudspeakers in relation to the six voices (each with a direct microphone) takes into account the space, still “uniform-rectangular,” with different itinerant paths that “compose” the diversity of the signal-sounds. Active perception is complicated, of course, but it is “provoked” by the plurality of the sources and the multidimensionality of the acoustic diffusion.

And the space articulates the diffusion and the directionality of the sound in different ways, becoming a creative component with respect to a single source.<sup>27</sup>

Nono treats the mobility, diffusion, and directionality of sound design as a “creative component,” adapted to a specific venue, to affect a particular spatial experience in that hall.

Czernowin and IRCAM computer music designer Carlo Laurenzi had similar priorities for *Infinite Now*. The meticulous design of amplification and directionality; extensive use of electronics, filters, and microphones; the adaptation required for each new venue; and attention to audience perception all suggest a comparable understanding of the role of sound design for spatial dramaturgy. In *Doctor Atomic*, the sound design functions primarily as verisimilitude; in *Infinite Now*, it enables an audience member to inhabit an otherwise impossible space: inside another person (“Imagine that the hall, the whole space of the hall, is the inside of a head/heart/body. The audience





Fig. 6.1. Production photo of *Infinite Now*, 2017. (© Annemie Augustijns / Opera Ballet Vlaanderen.)

is immersed in the inner workings of a person who is in a difficult or hopeless situation<sup>28</sup>). I experienced this spatial manipulation most conspicuously in two ways: the misdirection of amplified voices from the performers onstage, and the mobility of prerecorded sound.<sup>29</sup> In the first instance there were moments when the singers' voices were thrown, creating an effect that Jelena Novak, building on Steven Connor's theory of ventriloquism and the vocalic body, might describe as the power of the disembodied voice to disrupt the perception of space. For example, in act I (m. 235), Trio #1 stood directly in front of me onstage yet I heard their synthesized meta-voice emanating from the sides of the hall. Similarly, near the end of act IV (m. 1142), each voice in Trio #1 was projected from a different location even though they were standing together onstage, as a kind of deconstruction of the meta-voice through spatial distortion. The distribution of amplified voices is clearly marked in the score. At the same time Perceval's overall stage direction, in which stage performers move at a glacially slow pace, and Bussmann's stage design, in which lighting and set changes occur so slowly as to be almost imperceptible, create a sense of temporal distortion (see fig. 6.1). Close coordination of

sound design and staging create an immersive environment in which time and space are disrupted, as if one were immersed in a being who is struggling with trauma.<sup>30</sup>

The location and mobility of prerecorded tracks was just as immersive but less disorienting because, unlike the singers' physical presence onstage, there is no visual cue to create directional expectation for the source. The beginning of act III (m. 546) provides a good example of the precise sound design: "the wind and train slowly move around the loudspeaker array in a counterclockwise fashion at an approximate rate of one full revolution per 60"—200,"" while the "demonstration" sounds move from front to back and the "lively" track emanates from all four sides of the hall. Another excerpt from act III (m. 689–94) shows the circular symbols used to indicate the spatialization of three tracks in the electronics (bird wings, sine tones, waves of distant cicadas). The spatialization symbols are used in all parts.

The graphic notation for the "bird wings" track in figure 6.2 is a remnant of Czernowin's creative process. She began with visualizations of the sounds she wanted, and then she and Laurenzi used those as the basis for creating the electronics, much of it *musique concrète*, at IRCAM.<sup>31</sup> The notation is quite illuminating for score study and useful for reconstructing creative process, but probably unnecessary for performance. The audio files are prerecorded, and the sound engineer relies on explicit IRCAM documentation to realize their part of the soundscape. These instructions consist of seventeen pages of lists (required computer music equipment and files), instructions and diagrams (audio and loudspeaker setup), and screenshots of correct settings.<sup>32</sup> Clearly the sound engineer must be every bit as virtuosic as the other performers in the hall. The document concludes with a prose summary of the opera's overall aesthetic, followed by a paragraph for each act describing its sonic shape. David T. Little and Royce Vavrek's opera *Dog Days* (2010), which is a very different work aesthetically but also fully amplified, includes a similar summary by sound designer Garth MacAleavy.<sup>33</sup> In addition to the technical specifications outlined in the documentation, these sound design narratives are important primary sources that could enhance the work of opera studies.

In performance I frequently had the impression that recorded sounds were moving around me, but in fact that was rarely the case. Laurenzi explained that that effect was achieved by using multiple static spatial layers, and clarified that all decisions pertaining to the development of electronics and their spatiality were guided by "ease of perception" and "musical and dramaturgical needs":

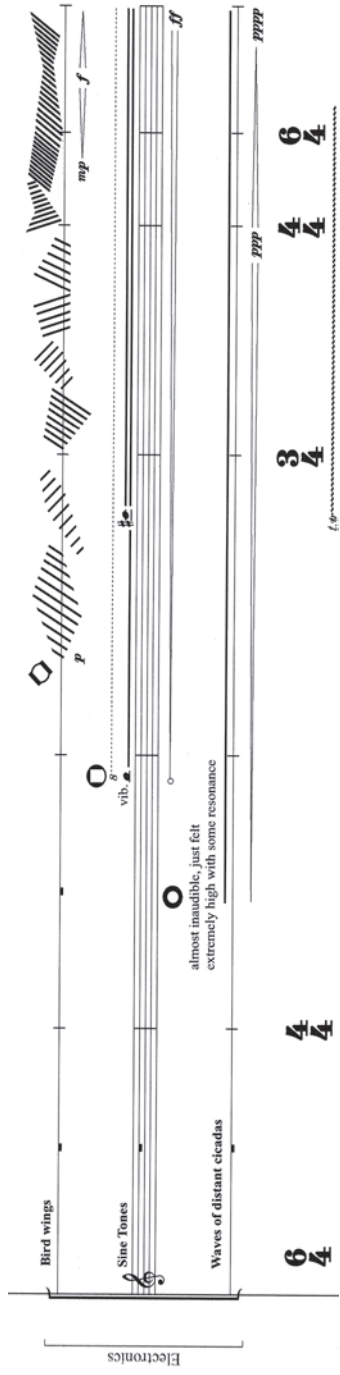


Fig. 6.2. Act III, mm. 689–694, from Czernowin's *Infinite Now*. (Copyright © 2016 Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz, Germany. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission of European American Music Distributors Company, sole U.S. and Canadian agent for Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz, Germany.)

Spatialization of sounds, either static placement or dynamic movement, are to be handled according to these principles. Since *Infinite Now* has most of the time very dense orchestral passages, many of the electronic sounds were designed to occupy specific and static positions in space. That's why we prepared three kinds of static spatial layers: bi-dimensional close and far plans, and a tri-dimensional medium distant plan, enveloping the entire hall. The spatial organization of electronic sounds was done, like in a complementary form of orchestration to the traditional one. . . .

Each sound had to have its different spot and dramaturgically correct sound quality, from the points of view of spatial location and sound presence. Locations ranged from little tiny spots in the tri-dimensional space (the "Morse" sounds), to medium and wider areas (the "Chinese spoken" parts, or the "machines" sounds), up to the full 360 degrees of the electroacoustic space (the train at the beginning, or the "portal" sounds at the beginning of each act). Very few sounds were moving, actually, mainly only the "bird wings" sounds were conceived to be something moving constantly around the audience. In all the other spots, the perception of dynamic space was achieved by creating fast alternating appearances of similar sounds from different spots in the space.<sup>34</sup>

### *Spatial Dramaturgy in the Theater: Amplified Breathing and Whispering*

Just as the directionality and mobility of sound situated me in an impossible location (in another person's head/heart/body), amplified breath and whispering distorted my proximity to the performers onstage and created an impossible sense of intimacy. Isabella van Elferen notes that "scholarly debate on timbre tends to focus either on the material aspects of timbral production or on the perception of timbral sonorities," and in this section I undertake a bit of both.<sup>35</sup> Czernowin writes for three vocal modes: breathing, singing, and talking. I will focus on the mode that is least indigenous to opera, which is breath "as a fully developed instrument" of its own, and as the key component of breathy vocalizations.<sup>36</sup> The singer's breath is not just the imperceptible foundation of good bel canto technique. The color of the breath, as shaped by her body's unique physiology, is as important as the timbres of her sung and spoken tones; "the sound of the breath is an equal partner to that of the voice."<sup>37</sup> Breath is integral to *Infinite Now's* sound world, and recordings

of wind and breathing also feature prominently in the electronics. (In fact, *Breath* was at one time the working title of *Infinite Now*.)

In the 1960s and 1970s, intrepid musicians with formal vocal training such as Bethany Beardslee, Cathy Berberian, Joan La Barbara, Meredith Monk, and Yoko Ono experimented with extended technique that included breathy vocalizations: unvoiced phonemes, whispering, half-singing, audible inhaling and exhaling, ingressive phonation, etc.<sup>38</sup> These sounds can be highly effective in many contexts (the recording studio, singing a cappella, or with small ensembles in live performance), but live opera with large instrumental forces poses a challenge. Amplification is required to render breathy vocalizations audible. Czernowin argues that this is an asset, claiming that “amplified breath is an untapped and rich musical resource.”<sup>39</sup> When such utterances carry text with semantic meaning, they require additional mediation in the form of projected titles to communicate.

Large opera houses typically use discreet sound enhancement systems to bolster singing voices in a natural-sounding way, but the amplification in *Infinite Now* is conspicuous by design. Close miking of breathy vocalizations so that they are as present as the operatic singing voice has several ramifications. First, amplification extends the range of vocal timbre available to opera creators, be it for sonic exploration or emotional expression, just as it challenges operagoers to expand their conception of the operatic voice. Second, it foregrounds the singing body by making audible the physical labor that is concealed by *bel canto* technique (inhalation). Third, there is a particular tension inherent in the sound of amplified breathing and whispering when it emanates from live performers onstage rather than from the electronics. Brandon LaBelle writes that whispering “hovers at the end of the audible spectrum as a subtracted orality that subsequently aims for those who are nearby (or for oneself only). It is to speak so not everyone will hear, enveloping conversation in secrecy, intimacy, and confidentiality.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, he states, “while physiologically whispering may be defined as ‘unvoiced,’ from a cultural perspective it might be understood more as a ‘meta-voice’ . . .” Perhaps this explains why, even in a completely mediated environment, the amplified whisper commanded my listening consciousness whenever it was present. Audible breathing implies proximity, and whispering is understood to be private. Amplification forces intimacy.

Czernowin’s choice of vocal mode was determined by what she wanted to highlight in the text at any given moment.<sup>41</sup> Roughly half the vocalizing for the two singing trios in *Infinite Now* consists of breathy vocalizations.

Some such passages convey text with semantic content (e.g., mm. 88–98 in act I) and some do not (e.g., mm. 863–867 in act IV), just as there is the rare segment that is nearly entirely sung with words (mm. 885–928 in act IV) and others that are mostly sung vowels and voiced consonants without (e.g., mm. 1723–63 in act VI).<sup>42</sup> Most of the time, voiced and breathy vocalizations are woven together in continuous lines, what Czernowin calls “a unified vocal experience.” This unified experience is necessarily different for the listener than for the singer, who continuously negotiates the technical demands of shifting vocal modes in performance.

The vocal climaxes of *Infinite Now* illustrate the vocal variety and underscore the primacy of amplified breath. (I would argue that the overall sonic and dramatic pinnacle is the extended storm scene in act V, which is almost entirely instrumental and electronic; perhaps another useful category for analysis might be those operas whose climaxes are not vocal.) As previously noted, the singers perform almost exclusively in one of two trios, each of which functions collectively as a unison meta-voice. A conspicuous exception occurs in act IV, approximately 75 minutes into the work (m. 885), when the contralto from Trio 2 performs the only aria in the piece. Her text is a segment of seven contiguous sentences taken from “Homecoming,” the longest section Czernowin adopted as a unit from that source, when the protagonist fully realizes she is trapped. Over the course of forty-three measures the vocal range extends from D<sub>3</sub> to G<sub>5</sub>, and the vocal timbres run the gamut of voiced and breathy vocalizations. Aside from the fact that the contralto dwells for extended periods at both ends of her range, the most conspicuous aspect for the listener is the frequent interpolation of gasps between words, all notated.

The second vocal climax at the end of the opera is the opposite of the first: it is quiet, scored for both trios rather than a soloist, and has no semantic content. It is also defined by breath, but not in the same way. An actor recites the passage from *All Quiet on the Western Front* in which the protagonist realizes that life became more precious than ever during the horrific final days of the war: “oh, Leben, Leben, Leben!” (Just before m. 1783; 2:26 in the video). This is followed by an extraordinary moment in which the two trios, functioning as a homophonic sextet for the only time (mm. 1787–1843), emerge from the electronic soundscape. The sextet’s fully sung unison E’s at m. 1788, m. 1808, and m. 1828 may deliver the biggest sonic shock of the evening. Czernowin describes this as her “favorite tune” in the opera, observing that perceptible repetition, predictable rhythms, and lack of distortion feel very pleasurable after such protracted tension, and they mark the moment

**D4**

885  $\text{♩} = 40$

C.A.

7/4

5/4 (mostly pitch, some air color)

6/4

5/4

2/4

5/4

5/4

Clinging to the grou - nd,

is trem - bli - - - ng, ha

The \_\_\_ earth

out \_\_\_ of h he the house.

to walk h

mp

f

f

5

Fig. 6.3. Act IV, mm. 885–89, from Czernowin's *Infinite Now*. (Copyright © 2016 Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz, Germany. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission of European American Music Distributors Company, sole U.S. and Canadian agent for Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz, Germany.)

at which the possibility of life begins to emerge in each source text.<sup>43</sup> The singers have phonemes only, as if the life force is so new it is still in a prelinguistic phase, rendered across the gamut of voiced and breathy vocalizations. Breath is also prominent in the electronics, life's essence audibly present at its re-emergence.

Lachenmann's vocal writing in *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* may provide a point of comparison. He had written for voice only once before, experimenting with extended vocal techniques as sheer instrumental sonority in the chamber work *temA* (1968) for mezzo-soprano, flute, and cello. The title is a play on the German word for breath (Atem), and it makes extensive use of breathy vocalizations to focus on the "non-semantic abilities of vocal intonations to communicate on the threshold of perception."<sup>44</sup> Even then, Lachenmann noted that others had already been working on the phenomenon of "breathing as an acoustically transmitted energy process" (Ligeti, Holliger, Globokar, Kagel, Schnebel, and Stockhausen). In the opera *Das Mädchen*, thirty years later, the amplified soprano soloists and other vocalists whisper consonants and plosive sounds.<sup>45</sup> Lachenmann later expressed qualms about writing for the voice. "[W]ith one singing voice the personality of the person who sings is so beautiful and intense with personality—what should I do as a composer? The sounds are already full of intensity before I even write one note—this was a problem for me."<sup>46</sup>

Czernowin made a similar observation, noting how "problematic it is to write for the voice, because we are so connected to the voice, and because of this it gets always a patina of pathos that we have absolutely no control of, and I hate that pathos."<sup>47</sup> Even so, *Infinite Now* is a long opera featuring a wide range of vocality, and my compulsion to attend to the amplified whisper suggests that said "pathos" remains intact even without the sung tone. This aspect of the sound design reconfigured my experience of theatrical space by placing me in impossibly intimate proximity to those onstage because, to paraphrase LaBelle, amplified breathy vocalization is a meta-voice. And, as such, it is not neutral. The amplified gasps notated in the first vocal climax described above force a particular intimacy because this type of ingressive phonation elicits such a visceral involuntary response in a listener raised in western art music traditions.<sup>48</sup> It is strongly correlated with trauma and appears to have a gendered component to it. (The correlation with trauma does not hold true in Inuit throat singing, for example, which is also primarily associated with women; even so, listening with my white settler ears does not elicit the same involuntary response, perhaps because gasping is prev-



alent in that practice rather than an isolated, contrasting event.) Consider the gasp in Damien Rickettsen and Adena Jacobs's experimental opera *The Howling Girls* (2018); its use in a more conventional recent opera like Kamala Sankaram's *Thumbprint* (2014), in which amplified sharp inhalations sonify a sexual assault without words, music, or explicit staging; or the most scrutinized moment in all of *Hamilton*, which is the way the show ends—with Eliza gasping.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

Czernowin and her team took full advantage of the extraordinary resources that accompany a major international commission: guaranteed performances at prestigious institutions in three countries, access to state-of-the-art technology for creation and performance, and collaborations with elite artists. Most experimental operas emerge from a much leaner environment, but the dramaturgies of composite libretti and spatialized sound design can be scaled, and they may serve storytelling purposes other than trauma. Many works are designed to exist outside the theater both as a space and as an institution, in which case the technical specifications of sound design will vary considerably, but its function—to create, manipulate, and activate the spatial dimension of the audience's experience—is always relevant for creators and scholars alike.

## Notes

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1. <http://chayaczernowin.com/infinite-now> (accessed June 7, 2023).
2. Nicolas Demertzis and Ron Eyerman, "Covid-19 as Cultural Trauma," *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 8 (2020): 428–50. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41290-020-00112-z>
3. <http://www.lukperceval.info/html/index.php/project/Front/>
4. Translation by Ronald R. Janssen and Jian Zhang in *Conjunctions* 28 (1997): 101–8.
5. <http://www.classicagenda.fr/chaya-czernowin-infinite-now-en/>
6. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 21.
7. Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 25.

8. <http://chayaczernowin.com/infinite-now/>. When a soloist does emerge, it is the middle voice of the trio.

9. Lingchei Letty Chen, "Writing Historical Traumas in the Everyday," in *A Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 457.

10. Emanuele Senici, *Music in the Present Tense: Rossini's Italian Operas in Their Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 225.

11. Martin Iddon, "Giving Adam Voice: Troubling Gender and Identity in W.A. Mozart's *Zaïde* and Chaya Czernowin's *Adama*," in *Masculinity in Opera: Gender, History, and a New Musicology*, ed. Philip Purvis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 168.

12. Ryan Ebright, "Doctor Atomic or: How John Adams Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Sound Design," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 31, no. 1 (2019): 87.

13. Elfyn Jones, "Sound Design for the Opera Composer: Concepts and Methods" (PhD thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2022), 4. Open Access at <https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/31575/>. He demonstrates the five modalities in three operas he composed as part of his doctoral project. See also Elfyn Jones, "The Trilobite, or The Fall of Mr. Williams: Opera with Integrated Sound," *Sonic Scope*, October 27, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.21428/66f840a4.3187fd8b>

14. Ebright, "Doctor Atomic," 85–86. His clarion call for opera studies to interrogate the role of sound design is critical to the vitality and even the legitimacy of the field. It should be noted that electroacoustic sound is not only for spatial dramaturgy. For example, Kaija Saariaho uses filters in *L'amour de loin* as subtle enhancements to the orchestra, but their primary function is not dimensional.

15. Yayoi Uno Everett, *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Opera: Osvaldo Golijov, Kaija Saariaho, John Adams, Tan Dun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 41–80.

16. Czernowin, interview with WhatsApp, August 14, 2020.

17. Megan Steigerwald Ille is the leading scholar of Sharon's oeuvre. See Ille, "Live in the Limo: Remediating Voice and Performing Spectatorship in 21st-Century Opera," *Opera Quarterly* 36, nos. 1–2 (2021): 1–26, and especially her forthcoming book, *Opera for Everyone: Experimenting with American Opera in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024). See also Gundula Kreuzer, "Butterflies on Sweet Land? Reflections on Opera at the Edges of History," *Representations* 154 (2021): 69–86.

18. Katherine Young, "Nothing Is as It Appears: Anthony Braxton's Trillium J" (DMA dissertation, Northwestern University Bienen School of Music, 2017), 88.

19. Bianca Michaels, "Is This Still Opera? Media Operas as Productive Provocations," in *The Legacy of Opera: Reading Music Theatre as Experience and Performance*, ed. Dominic Symonds and Pamela Karantonis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 25–38.

20. <https://tuttiremote.com/>. See also Joy H. Calico, "White Snake Projects, *Death by Life*, and Q&A with Composer David Sanford," May 20, 2021. <https://www.blackoperaresearch.net/forum/2021/05/20/white-snake-projects-death-by-life-may-2021-and-qa-with-composer-david-sanford/>

21. *Opera Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2018).

22. Jonathan Cross, "Musical Spectra, *l'espace sensible* and Contemporary Opera," *Twentieth-Century Music* 15, no. 1 (2018): 107.

23. Arman Schwartz, "Puccini, in the Distance," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 23, no. 3 (2011): 167–89. Schwartz's analysis focuses on "musical effects of echoing and distance," what he calls "a poetics of distance" in his later operas that is less literal than the ambient offstage noise cited above. Schwartz, "Puccini, in the Distance," 169 and 170, respectively.

24. Carola Nielinger-Vakil cites the Schoenberg example in a discussion of spatiality in *Luigi Nono: A Composer in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 91.

25. Andrea Santini, "Multiplicity-Fragmentation-Simultaneity: Sound-Space as a Conveyer of Meaning, and Theatrical Roots in Luigi Nono's Early Spatial Practice," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 137, no. 1 (2012): 71–106.

26. Luigi Nono letter to Renzo Piano, cited in English translation in Nielinger-Vakil, *Luigi Nono*, 193. Emphasis in the citation. *Prometeo* was composed 1981–84 and revised in 1985.

27. Luigi Nono, *Nostalgia for the Future: Luigi Nono's Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Angela De Benedictis and Veniero Rizzardi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 242, 243.

28. <https://en.schott-music.com/shop/infinite-now-no323710.html>. There is a slightly different version of this statement on Czernowin's website <http://chayaczernowin.com/infinite-now>

29. I attended the final dress rehearsal (a complete run-through) at the Mannheim National Theatre on May 25, 2017.

30. Czernowin, interview with WhatsApp, August 14, 2020. These events occur at approximately 0:18 and 1:35 respectively in the video recording of the 2017 production. It streamed on OperaVision in 2020 but is not commercially available as of this writing. I am very grateful to Czernowin for sharing it with me.

31. Laurenzi, email correspondence, December 27, 2020. I am very grateful for his assistance.

32. The documentation is licensed under Creative Commons license BY-NC-ND 4.0. IRCAM Archive service "Sidney" at [Brahms.ircam.fr](http://Brahms.ircam.fr). Peter MacMurray observed that the technological requirements constitute "an interesting kind of excess that's different from standard operatic excess" (email to the author, June 21, 2021). Ryan Ebright astutely noted that notating the electronics might also be an attempt to thwart technological obsolescence.

33. See the "tech info" tab at <https://davidtlittle.com/works/dog-days/>. Hiring a sound engineer is a prerequisite for renting the parts of *Dog Days* for performance.

34. Laurenzi, email correspondence, December 27, 2020.

35. Isabella van Elferen, "Agency, Aporia, Approaches: How Does Musicology Solve a Problem Like Timbre?" *Contemporary Music Review* 36, no. 6 (2017) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07494467.2017.1452685>

36. Chaya Czernowin, "The Primal, the Abstracted and the Foreign: Composing for the Voice," *Contemporary Music Review* 34, nos. 5–6 (2015): 449–63; 461. She explores singers' breath in several "Etudes in fragility for voice and breath," *Adiantum Capillus-Veneris* I, II, and III (2015–2016). See also Joy H. Calico, "Breathing and Gasping," <https://www.women-songforum.org/2022/04/28/breathing-and-gasping/>

37. Czernowin, "The Primal," 449.

38. The extraordinary contributions these women made to contemporary music are

increasingly recognized. See Pamela Karantonis, Francesca Placanica, Anne Sivuolja-Kauppalaa, and Pieter Verstraete, eds., *Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality* (London: Routledge, 2014), and *Tempo* 76, no. 301 (2022), a special issue of the journal honoring Joan La Barbara's 75th birthday.

39. Czernowin, "The Primal," 461. David Lang's *the whisper opera* (2013) poses a direct challenge to the fetishization of the operatic voice. He does not permit the work to be amplified or recorded.

40. Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 148.

41. Czernowin, video conversation with WhatsApp, August 14, 2020.

42. Her opera *Pnima* has only phonemes and other vocalizations because "words would have been too defined and the music would have had to struggle with the finality of the words." Czernowin, "The Primal," 453.

43. Approximately 1:45 in the IRCAM master class she gave on June 24, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHMF6UIrlQ>. Further details emerged in a WhatsApp video conversation with Czernowin, August 14, 2020.

44. Piotr Grella-Możejko, "Helmut Lachenmann—Style, Sound, Text," *Contemporary Music Review* 24, no. 1 (2010): 70.

45. Joy H. Calico, "Opera as Resistance: The Little Match Girl and the Terrorist in Helmut Lachenmann's *Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*," in *Art and Resistance in Germany*, ed. Elizabeth Otto and Deborah Barnstone (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 221.

46. Cited in Jessica Aszodi, "Got Lost: Embodied Vocal Performance at the Junction of Autoethnography and Practice-Based Research," in *Creative Selves / Creatives Cultures: Critical Autoethnography, Performance, and Pedagogy*, ed. Stacy Holman Jones and Marc Pruyn (Cham Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 199.

47. <https://www.ircam.fr/article/detail/les-cours-de-ircam-la-compositrice-chaya-czernowin-et-le-violoncelliste-pierre-strauch/> at approximately 2:36. On vocal pathos and the body, see also Sarit Ashley-Zondiner, "Striving for the Underneath: Body and Pathos in Chaya Czernowin's Composition for Voice in *Infinite Now* and *Heart Chamber*," *Tempo* 77, no. 305 (July 2023): 44–59.

48. For a thorough analysis of the full range of ingressive phonation (of which gasping is a subset) from the perspective of vocal pedagogy and performance, see Amanda DeBoer, "Ingressive Phonation in Contemporary Vocal Music" (DMA diss., Bowling Green State University, 2012).

49. Perhaps further research building on Novak's theorizing of the body-voice gap in conjunction with Amy Bauer's work on the failure of language would yield additional insights. Bauer, "Contemporary Opera and the Failure of Language," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Modernism in Music*, ed. Björn Heile and Charles Wilson (London: Routledge, 2019), 427–53. Ariana Philips-Hutton and Richard Beaudoin are working on separate projects about the gasp as well; see Beaudoin, "Dashon Burton's Song Sermon: Corporeal Liveness and the Solemnizing Breath," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 16, no. 1 (2022): 1–23.

## Inter-Asia Sensibility

*Vocality and Materiality in*

*Tan Dun's Tea: A Mirror of Soul*

Nancy Yunhwa Rao

I met Tan Dun in New York City and I asked him, "Why me?" He said, "I've had two directors direct the piece. Both were Europeans. They tried to make Asia have a mysterious image."

—Amon Miyamoto, director of *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*  
(Santa Fe Opera, 2007)

This predilection for a non-mysterious representation of Asia on the opera stage might seem merely a composer's staging preference. Yet behind the seemingly innocuous exchange is a profound critique, as well as Tan's yearning to be seen. Although scholars have scrutinized the racial stereotypes of Asia in canonic European operas and reviewers have criticized orientalist tropes such as yellowface production,<sup>1</sup> their efforts have not steered toward a greater understanding or exploration of Asia from an Asian composer's perspective.<sup>2</sup> "Invisibility," as I noted elsewhere, "is the constant state of not being seen, even when the object of study."<sup>3</sup>

Quoted by Miyamoto in an interview, Tan Dun's remark reveals an intense desire for an "inter-Asia" cultural sphere and sensibility to be seen and felt on the opera stage.<sup>4</sup> With the notion of "inter-Asia," I propose an approach that recenters the analysis outside the Anglo-American axis and constructs an inter-Asia subjectivity. In this chapter, I argue that an inter-Asia sensibility constructs the conceptual space of the opera and shapes the sonic, textual, and visual imagination of the opera.

The inter-Asia sensibility is made poignant in the 2007 Santa Fe production of Tan Dun's *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*. Its director, Amon Miyamoto, a dancer and producer of musicals based in Tokyo, was supported by an all-Japanese production team, and the production is distinguished by the theatricality of musicals and Japanese sensibility. It is the first design in the seven productions of *Tea* that distinguishes Japanese from Chinese customs in its dramaturgical conception. Prince Seikyo's sumptuous costumes take their cue from *haori hakama*, traditional formal attire for Japanese males; Chinese characters' costumes draw from Chinese robes with large and wide sleeves. The painting of enormous peonies is used as the backdrop, a flower that symbolizes wealth, nobility, bravery, and honor in both Chinese and Japanese culture. Together with the lush, red-colored stage, this production depicts the decadent golden era of the Tang dynasty and its transient beauty. Rich symbolism characterizes the production as a whole, such as the staging of shadow puppetry depicting the famous Chinese legend of *Journey to the West* and the use of a large circular ornamental design for the Chinese character of "shuang xi" ("double happiness") as an auspicious symbol of marriage. The profound inter-Asia sensitivity is made vivid in the presentation of the shared-but-different cultures. Miyamoto's production befits an opera that intently explores inter-Asia sensibility, an important impetus behind Tan Dun's conception of *Tea*.

This chapter situates the analytical approach of Tan Dun's *Tea* in a manner responsive to the local and regional in the heterogeneous Asia. By exploring elements inspired by different modes of inter-Asia connection, this chapter examines the multifaceted ways that inspiration from such a connection came to form the basis of the opera, determining the kind of story to be told and the sonic expressions that can be distilled or sculptured. I argue that *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* engages in a radical "inter-Asia imagining." Through this process, Tan Dun expresses his vision of music theater and explores new sonorities and sonic designs. Premiered in 2002, *Tea* is arguably Tan's most important opera. Heidi Waleson pinpointed the essential quality of the opera as follows: "effectively integrat[es] a Western orchestra and singers with the water, paper and ceramic percussion sounds that are the composer's trademark. These sounds, played by three onstage percussionists, not only created their own magical realm in the opera but fit elegantly with the careful orchestration, so that the harp, flute, or string colors coming from the pit provided both context and contrast."<sup>5</sup>

With "inter-Asia imaginings," the opera's conceptual space draws on historical, social, and geographical connections in northeast Asia. The musical

language, vocality, and imagery that Tan forged also reflects inter-Asia sensibility in the visual, kinesthetic, and sonic dimensions of this opera. In this chapter, I will explore these issues in two parts. In part I, by considering the space and the story of the opera and three layers of significance, I examine how the inter-Asia sensibility forms the basis of the opera. In part II, I consider the ways in which an amalgamation of Tan Dun's sonic creations from the previous decade, which include the elements (water, paper, and earth) and vocality, and a distinctive notion of musical gestures shape the opera with sonic imageries closely linked to the inter-Asia space of the libretto. The conclusion reflects on the role of inter-Asia sensibility in contemporary music analysis.

Tan Dun emerged in the contemporary music scene in the last decade of the twentieth century. After moving to New York in the late 1980s, he quickly became active and contributed to the synergy of Lower Manhattan's art scene, composing for dance groups and experimental theaters. His distinctive sonic imagination was complemented by a theatrical sensibility sharpened in the era of Model Opera (the primary art form during China's Cultural Revolution), when he gained experiences as a young adult working with regional dance and theater troupes in Hunan province. He has the incredible spark of the creative energy of what I call, "sonic imaginary after Cultural Revolution," which many among his cohort shared.<sup>6</sup> His talent stood out. In the span of two weeks in December 1991, the *New York Times* published two music reviews on Tan Dun, both by its chief critic Edward Rothstein. A shrewd title, "A Shaman Without Religion," led Rothstein's second, glowing review.<sup>7</sup> It encapsulated Tan Dun's distinctive characteristics that would come to mesmerize audiences for decades to come.

Opera as a genre prospered in America during the last decades of the twentieth century. It was the beginning of a growing trend; the number of American opera premieres jumped from 100 (1980–89) to near 250 (1990–99).<sup>8</sup> The 1980s saw many important American opera premieres, including *Akhmaten* (1984) by Philip Glass; *Nixon in China* (1987) by John Adams; *X, or The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1986) by Anthony Davis; *Européras I & II* (1987) by John Cage, and *The Cave* (1993) by Steve Reich. Glass pointed to the important shift in contemporary opera as follows: "There's been a real revolution in the world of music theater. My perception is that the world of progressive theater has found its way into the world of the opera house. . . . You're getting people who don't come from the world of repertory opera, but they come from the world of progressive experimental theater, and they

are bringing what they know about theater to the world of opera.”<sup>9</sup> Glass’s general assessment could not be more fitting for Tan Dun. In the variegated and vibrant scenes of contemporary opera, Tan was given significant opportunities to bring together a multitude of sounds, genres, materials, visual arts, philosophies, and aesthetic ideals. They were essential to his previous opera, *Marco Polo* (1995), as well as works such as *Water Concerto for Percussion* (1998) and *Water Passion After St. Matthew* (2000), which were commissioned by prominent music institutions in Europe and North America.

## Space, Story, and Significances

### *Space*

*Tea: A Mirror of Soul* was unique in its locality. Inter-Asia sensibility was at the heart of this commission from the start. *Tea* was commissioned by Suntory Hall in Tokyo in 1997 and dedicated to its founder, Keizo Saji, when it was completed in 2002. This was the second commission that Tan received from Suntory Hall; his *Orchestral Theatre II: Re* (1993) was commissioned by its international program on composition, directed by Tōru Takemitsu.<sup>10</sup> The commission of *Tea* was particularly significant for Tan Dun. Symbolically, it connected Tan, a Chinese composer on the rise in the international scene, to a prominent East Asian composer, Takemitsu, who passed away in 1996. As a performing venue, Tokyo’s Suntory Hall is not only a prestigious cultural institution, but also provides a unique performing space. In describing the space of Suntory Hall, Toshio Hosokawa invokes the notion of “a superb canvas”: “I call my music a calligraphy of sound on space and time. [. . .] What I mean by calligraphy of sound is that when I write lines of ‘sound,’ I consider many things such as the thickness and softness of the lines. This hall allows us to pick up on these delicate changes in sound.”<sup>11</sup>

Hosokawa’s invocation of calligraphy points to the prominent cultural inspiration of the unique space. For Tan, therefore, this opera commission was inculcated with Asian sensibility and cultural associations, uniquely binding him to an important cultural center in East Asia.

As a “hall opera,” *Tea* was also conceptualized differently from regular operas. The limited physical space of the stage espoused an intimacy, suited to Tan Dun’s ritual of sound, space, silence, and his experimental theater. He mentioned its similarity to “Greek plays, Chinese festive ceremonies and



operas, or the Noh and Kyogen traditions of Japan.”<sup>12</sup> For the opera’s premiere, Het Muziektheater was a co-commissioner. Tan worked with Pierre Audi as stage director, Jean Kalman as stage designer, and Angelo Figus as costume designer. Even though the costumes were of epic scale in the mythical realm, including attire of exaggerated shapes and neon color schemes for the main characters, the set design quietly acknowledged the distinctly Asian space.

Kalman’s stage design used large sloping and angled walkways that occupied the hall’s long rectangular stage. In critic Ken Smith’s words, “Kalman’s simple walkways of overlapping wooden planks actually form the linguistic character ‘ru’ (‘enter’), a poignant multilingual frame for scenes involving either love or death.”<sup>13</sup> This Chinese character 入 can be profoundly suggestive. This reading was echoed by other critics and by Tan himself. At the same time, the placement of the planks recalls the stage of the Noh theater. The strikingly positioned angled walkway is reminiscent of the iconic bridgeway of traditional Noh theater, *hashigakari*, which runs at an oblique angle off the main stage. It traditionally represents the space that divides the realm of the dead and the living. The back of the stage in Noh theater, known as the *ato-za*, is reserved for instrumentalists who are essential to the presentation of Noh, a tradition that also informed Tan’s placement of three percussion players on stage.<sup>14</sup> Regardless, the premiere’s stage design tapped into the Asian sensibility of the Suntory Hall. In its spatial design the interactions among singers, chorus, and instrumentalists in close proximity were perceived as a whole, and the conception of the orchestra as an actor in the drama could be realized.<sup>15</sup>

### *Story*

*Tea*’s libretto was authored primarily by Xu Ying, a Chinese opera practitioner and playwright at China National Opera and Dance Theatre. Xu met Tan Dun and began their collaboration while residing in New York from 1996 to 1998 on a cultural exchange fellowship. The initial conception of *Tea* was undefined and open, such that the liberty was nearly stifling to the playwright. After pondering on the gist of “tea” for nearly a year, Xu recalled later, he had an epiphany: the essence of the opera is in the title, that is, the ultimate relationship between humans and nature. The pictogram of the Chinese character for “tea” 茶 from top to bottom is made up of “plant-human-wood,” 草-人-木, suggesting a harmonious relationship between man and nature, a way of life.

With this interpretive logic, the notion of tea serves as an impetus for contemplation of elements of nature and the essence of life. The subject matter is ideal for an opera commission from a revered institution in Asia, whose tea has a profound history. The creators made a classic treatise, *The Book of Tea* (760–762 CE) by Tang dynasty's Lu Yu, the focal point and used the historical passage made by Imperial envoys between Japan and China of Tang dynasty as the backdrop. The opera draws attention to the complexity of tea and explores existential questions through the efficacy of tea. They developed an inter-Asia story revolving around the romance between the Chinese princess Lan and the Japanese prince/monk Seikyo, and the meddling of Lan's jealous brother. The plot is filled with operatic archetypes such as dueling desires, conflicts, and lament, but is mainly set up to explore and reveal the ethos of tea, its materiality, and the purity and spirituality of its essence.

The opera opens in the scene of a ninth-century monastery in Kyoto, where an ascetic tea ceremony is taking place. Seikyo, the Japanese prince-cum-high monk, sips from an empty bowl of tea. When asked by others why he savors this tea of emptiness, the high monk relates a decade-old tragedy that continues to torment him. As a young prince, he traveled to China to pursue love and tea. The opera then shifts to the location of Chang An, the Chinese capital of the Tang dynasty, where the palace is busy enjoying family puppet theater with siblings playing characters from *Monkey: Journey to the West*. Seikyo enters to propose marriage to Chinese Princess Lan, honoring a prior promise. The emperor tests Seikyo on composing poems and couplets, using tea as the theme. Seikyo's brilliant answers win him the emperor's approval of the marriage proposal, to which Lan consents. With the nuptial agreement, the preparation of a tea ceremony is announced, but Lan's brother, the prince, vehemently disapproves, loathing the rupture it would bring to the family union. Meanwhile, the female ritualist enters to announce the wish of a Persian merchant to trade a thousand horses for *The Book of Tea* held by the prince. Seikyo, however, declares the *Book* fraudulent, noting that the real *Book* was written by the tea sage Lu Yu. The indignant prince dares Seikyo to find Lu Yu to validate his claim; the one proven wrong must surrender his life. Seikyo accepts the bet. Lan is horrified, afraid that she will lose either Seikyo or her brother, and begs them to revoke the bet, but to no avail. In act II, Seikyo and Lan begin a journey searching for Lu Yu. Their love grows in a buoyant mood as they contemplate the sensuality of tea, its scent, feel, glow, etc. Their lovemaking is mixed with the bliss of fragrant teas. In act III, they reach the tea sage's daughter, who reveals Lu Yu's death. The daughter

consents to give them the *Book* on the condition that they promise to spread its wisdom throughout the world. Seikyo rejoices while Lan becomes terrified of losing her brother. But the prince bursts in to snatch the *Book* and a fight erupts, during which Lan is mortally wounded. The despondent prince surrenders his life to Seikyo. Instead of slaying the prince, Seikyo seeks austere peace in the monastery. In the final scene the chanting of monks returns. In a Japanese tea garden, the high monk Seikyo raises the empty teapot, passes the empty tea bowl, and savors the emptiness within.<sup>16</sup>

### *Three Layers of Inter-Asia Significance*

*Tea* is embedded in layers of significance associated with China and Japan's shared history and culture. First is the famous historical period of cultural interaction between the two countries, the Tang dynasty, a high point in Chinese civilization, and a golden age of cosmopolitan culture. Tang China is known as a critical time for cultural transmission to Japan. During the dynasty, the two countries established agreements, and the Japanese court appointed official envoys to China. Fourteen missions completed the arduous journey to and from the Chinese capital, Chang An. The missions brought back elements of the Tang civilization that profoundly affected Japan's government, culture, and religion. The missions were large, sometimes numbering up to six hundred individuals, and among their members were princes, students, and monks. Japanese embassies to China transported raw materials and a variety of silk textiles and exchanged them for Chinese goods, such as books, musical instruments, religious writings, and Buddhist images.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the calligraphy of Chinese masters was also transmitted from China to Japan and became its finest art tradition.<sup>18</sup> The opera draws its inspiration from this shared history. The Tang dynasty setting of the opera's plot gestures toward this prominent era of China-Japan cultural exchange.

Tea constitutes another critical layer of significance. In both Chinese and Japanese societies tea is not only a daily necessity, but also a work of art, associated with exquisiteness and manifesting itself in the spiritual and aesthetic realm. Lu Yu's *The Book of Tea* is the first seminal work that explores both the mythological and pragmatic aspects of tea.<sup>19</sup> Its ten chapters systematically introduce the history, production origins, efficacy, cultivation, harvesting, processing, brewing/infusing methods, and drinking of tea.<sup>20</sup>

Lu Yu's *The Book of Tea* initiated the discourse on tea culture and had a strong influence on Japanese tea masters such as Murata Jukō (1473–1502)

and Rikyū (1522–1591), who developed and codified the way of tea, *chadō* 茶道, which continued to evolve and develop through several schools. It is regarded as one of the classical Japanese arts of refinement. In 1906, Okakura Kakuzō, a Japanese scholar in Boston, wrote, “Tea with us became more than an idealization of the form of drinking, it is a religion of the art of life, . . . an excuse for the worship of purity and refinement.”<sup>21</sup> In China, the culture of tea began in medieval China with Buddhist monastics, later spreading to the literati and wider population. By Tang dynasty, the practice of tea connoisseurship became a marker of wealth, status, leisure, and good taste. The process of making tea evolved from simmering fresh leaves to simmering processed loose tea, then fermented tea, and to dried tea in the form of cakes. Poets and literati idealized spiritual and nonmaterial way of life through the practice of tea. As historian James Benn notes, “the physiological properties of tea—heightened sensitivity, concentration of mind, prolonged states of wakefulness—were interpreted in religious terms as well as medical ones.”<sup>22</sup> Tan’s choice of this cultural symbol for the Suntory commission signaled his commitment to an inter-Asia pursuit.

Tan gives compelling expression to the elements and spirit of tea. Much of what Lu Yu details in the chapters, matters of tea that include its attributes and instruments, constitute important sources of inspiration to the composer. Tan references organic elements such as water, paper, ceramic, wind, and stone—integral to the ritual and ceremony of tea in Japan and China—and explores their sonic, visual, and symbolic significance. Water, wind, fire, and earthenware are subject matters central to Lu Yu’s book, as shown in table 7.1.

The third layer of significance is the spirituality of Zen Buddhism philosophy and Taoism shared between China and Japan. The spirit of “tea” extends beyond the physiological aspects of tea drinking to its ritual attributes, its potential for eradicating suffering from the past, purifying the self, and elevating the mind. Thus the philosophy of tea—cultivating one’s mind, body, and soul altogether—is closely connected with Zen Buddhism philosophy. Kakuzō makes this point particularly clear, bringing attention to Zenism, Buddhism, and Taoism in his book. The search for *The Book of Tea*, therefore, symbolizes the search for the truth. In addition, the story of *Journey to the West* in the mise-en-scène centers around a westward quest in search of the truth and wisdom of the Buddhist Sutra, a spiritual quest that parallels the search for its spiritual truth in *The Book of Tea*.

Finally, “emptiness” is repeatedly referenced in the opera, a most important concept in Zen philosophy and Taoism alike. This may be a particularly

Table 7.1. Summary of *The Book of Tea*, by Lu Yu

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*The Book of Tea* 茶經 *chajing*

<b>ONE:</b> The Origin of Tea (一之源)	introduces geographical regions, harvest seasons, and growing methods in relation to tea quality
<b>TWO:</b> Tools of Tea Production (二之具)	introduces fifteen tools for picking, steaming, pressing, drying, and storing tea
<b>THREE:</b> Process of Producing Tea (三之造)	introduces methods of picking, processing, classifying, and differentiating for the steamed green tea
<b>FOUR:</b> Tea Wares (四之器)	describes twenty-eight items used in the brewing and drinking of tea, their names, shapes, structures, sizes, producing methods, and purposes of the tea wares for brewing and drinking tea, and their impact on tea
<b>FIVE:</b> Tea Brewing/ Infusing Methods (五之煮)	describes ideal water for tea brewing and proper flame and heat condition for tea boiling, as well as different phases of water boiling and methods affect the color, aroma, and taste of the tea
<b>SIX:</b> Ways of Tea Drinking (六之飲)	introduces the entire process from tea leaves picking to tea drinking and the points for attention
<b>SEVEN:</b> Anecdotes of Tea (七之事)	introduces the tea-related affairs concerning historical figures as well as tea-related historical data before the Tang dynasty (618–907), including legends, allusions, poems and verses, essays and prescriptions
<b>EIGHT:</b> Tea-Producing Regions (八之出)	ranks eight tea-producing regions
<b>NINE:</b> Simplified Method of Tea Making (九之略)	lists procedures of omitting steps under different circumstances
<b>TEN:</b> Illustrations of Tea (十之圖)	shows transfer the contents of nine chapters on four or six pieces of white silk and put them on the wall in order to make the contents of the book clear at a glance

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crucial layer of significance shared by China and Japan. Chiang Ching, a long-time collaborator who produced *Tea* for the 2007 Stockholm performance, recalls, “What he [Tan Dun] wants to express is not merely a story, but also the Zen philosophy of ‘true and false, existence and nonexistence, life and death.’”<sup>23</sup>

These three layers form the inter-Asia nexus, a cultural sphere constituted by the close proximity of the physiognomy, linguistic form, and geographical location, as well as aspects of similarity and difference in their shared

spiritual, religious, and aesthetic traditions. It situates the opera's points of reference in Asia, allowing for divergent and multiple expressions and sensibilities, possibilities of solidarity, and an emotional basis for new imaginings of Asia to emerge.<sup>24</sup>

### *Materiality (Water, Paper, Stone), Vocality, and Act II*

"Tan Dun's newest opera, *Tea*, succeeded in distilling the best of the composer's musical innovations (including his film scores and concert works) of the past decade into a compact three-act, 100-minute work," proclaimed Joanna C. Lee in the London-based magazine *Opera* after the world premiere.<sup>25</sup> The pronouncement could not be more astute. Three aspects of Tan's musical innovations to date are most centrally related to *Tea*: organic music, spatial dramaturgy, and human-body-as-instrument.

While the most exquisite elements in *The Book of Tea*—water, fire (flame), wind (fostering growth), and pottery (teaware)—are used as symbolism in the

Table 7.2. Overall Design of *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*

DIVISION	Act I		Act II	Act III
	scene 1	scene 2		
SYMBOLISM	water	fire	paper	ceramic, stone
LOCATION	monastery (Kyoto, Japan)	palace (Chang An, China)	voyage (southern China)	Lu Yu's home / monastery (China / Japan)
MAIN EVENTS	tea ceremony, reflection, lament	mise-en-scène puppet theater, marriage proposal, conflict, challenge, ode of tea	ode of tea, sensual love duet	truth revealed, conflict, death, lament
MAIN CHARACTERS	Seikyo	Lan, emperor, Seikyo, prince	Lan, Seikyo	Lan, Seikyo, prince, emperor
ROLE OF CONTRALTO	shadow	lady of spiritual	shadow	daughter of tea sage Lu Yu
ROLE OF CHORUS	monks	guests	shadow / cloud	stone forest / monks
PAGE NUMBER	1–21	22–111	112–150	151–233
GESTURE	"longing"	"filial piety" "roguish" "longing" "doom"	"longing"	"longing" "filial piety" "roguish" "doom"

opera, they already appear in Tan's nonprogrammatic works. Indeed, organic music constitutes one of Tan's most important innovations: stones and papers in *Ghost Opera*; water in *Water Concerto* and *Water Passion*; ceramic in *Soundshape*; and stones in *Death and Fire: Dialogue with Paul Klee*. But their presence in the opera takes the notion of organic music to yet another plane. On the operatic stage, the organic music are themselves "actors" that animate the materiality of tea. For example, water: one that crosses fire to be boiled for tea. Its connotation of clearing, healing, and purity is made apparent from the start. The opera opens with a performer bowing on waterphone, three percussionists on stage creating rhythm with the palms of their hands in amplified water basins. The percussionists' splashing and dripping of water creates a sensation that is mundanely ordinary, but with a new narrative power. It is followed by water-performing techniques that have become familiar in Tan Dun's work: water drums, drainers, and gongs that give "water" the complexity of a character.

In the opening, the prominent position of the percussionists and water basins on stage and the movement of the waterphone performer walking among audience members toward the stage exemplifies what Joy Calico refers to as "spatial dramaturgy," namely, sonic spatialization with a storytelling role.<sup>26</sup> As Calico notes, the distribution of sound can define and sculpt spaces of the opera theater, a practice that has grown more significant and varied with the digital age. The mobility of both the ethereal sound of the waterphone and its player moving from the seating area occupied by the audiences toward the stage activated a sense of movement to and from the lost time and place, the subject matter of the prince/monk's opening lines. The palpable sense of the lost past is continued by the percussionists placed on stage performing on the water basins, with their performing hands, the water sound, and the movement of the water itself. Featured at the beginning of the opera, these sonic, bodily, and material movements in the spatial design provide a bridge between the present and the past.

In act II, the voyage of the search for Lu Yu and *The Book of Tea*, paper screens are hung vertically in midair, and the sounds of its blowing and drumming are accompanied by the rhythm of loud page-flipping of the orchestra and other manipulations of the papers by performers on stage. With different tensile strength and rustling qualities, the papers provide a rich and subtle variety of sound. It gestures to the fragility of life. Far from simply a sound source, the papers signify the famous sutra that has come to be the center of the drama; in a later production, paper panels filled with scripts or callig-

raphy form the backdrop.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the materiality and action of the “instrument” (paper)—large paper panels and uniform page turning back and forth by the large orchestra—brings visual components into a critical part of the opera experience. In act III, the hard and dull sound of earthenware and stone depicts the somber mood of death as well as the spirit of fate. Tan Dun’s signature organic music thus comes to “life” by representing their spiritual and natural selves. Importantly, the materiality of water, paper, stone, and earthenware plays the part that tells a story, whose vital quality—a liveliness and a livingness—takes an expressive role.<sup>28</sup>

The sensibility of spiritual life emanating from these sonic creations was readily legible to his Asian counterpart. Japanese composer Shinichirō Ikebe expresses this sentiment in his review of *Tea*: “there are a whole host of pieces of music that make use of paper and pebbles, although such an approach is still considered avant-garde. But there was no quirky avant-garde feel to Tan’s work. The music was performed naturally and matter-of-factly, and the audience enjoyed listening to it.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, for this listener, the use of organic music in the opera is connected to the inter-Asia sensibility such that it feels “natural” rather than merely artificial, experimental, or abstract. The “naturalness” of the sound also belies the sophistication behind its creation: the meticulous scoring that produces the subtle, varied, and effective sonority of the “nature” befitting the inter-Asia imaginings.

The second aspect of Tan’s musical innovation is vocality, namely his use of a wide range of human voice, breath, and bodily/physical action to produce sound, such as breathing, whistling, slapping, ghost-like whispering, etc. It forms an important sonority of the opera and gives much symbolic power to the very malleable male chorus who play multiple storytelling roles. Furthermore, it adds timbres that expand the orchestra’s dramatic power in the opera. The sonority is again familiar yet foreign all at once. As Mariusz Kozak reminds us, “Human breath is characterized by its special status as a marker of bodily effort and intimacy, its power to signify life in general, and its close link with musical expression.”<sup>30</sup> The potency of Tan Dun’s usage of breath and control of air comes from the unique power of breath in making bodily intimacy and inner vitality audible. Whereas breath is often concealed and controlled in musical performances, such as in the performing technique of *bel canto*, here they are forcefully enunciated to be heard. By transforming the sound of intimate physical activity from one that is a sonic byproduct of human activity into patterns of sound as aesthetic object and expressive agent, Tan foregrounds the power of human vitality in the telling of the story of *Tea*.<sup>31</sup>



This constitutes a human-body-as-instrument approach that transforms the opera orchestra's traditional mode of signification. Rather than conveying expression through conventional means, he directs singers and orchestra players to follow patterns of vocalization in the manners of his own "oral tradition," to borrow Christian Utz's term.<sup>32</sup> With this "oral tradition," Tan creates a distinctive model for the role of the voice in generating performative meaning. For example, in a rehearsal with Philadelphia Opera, Tan Dun instructed the singers, "Add more colors of all kinds of air from your instrument [voice]. Combine all the colors of your air calligraphy, half air and half pitch, and then gradually return to pitch [. . .] control your breath." Through Tan's repeated demonstrations and coaching, the singers achieved the powerful effect of breathy vocalization.<sup>33</sup> There's always a subtext to his vocalization, he told the musicians. For the vocalization they rehearsed that day, it was connected to the questioning, "How!" Tan's breathy vocalization is thus situated hermeneutically in a cultural tradition.

Placing emphasis on various modes of vocalization—such as overtone singing, enunciated microtonal slides, articulated "t" and "s" sibilants in word endings, the persona/emotion underlying unpitched breath/voice, etc.—constitute an important part of Tan's musical language. With breathy vocalization kept simple and used sparingly in the opera, it forms effective human expression rather than radical innovation. Unlike the sonic materiality of structured breath and voice used in work such as Helmut Lachenmann's *temA* (1971), which explores new sounds outside of an instrument and vocalist's normal repertory, Tan's vocal methods build on an "oral tradition."

Calico's discussion of the wide range of vocalicity in Czernowin's opera *Infinite Now* (chapter 6) provides a good point of comparison. When considering Czernowin's three modes of vocal writing (breathing, singing, and talking), Calico notes that breathing "is least indigenous to opera." The notion of "indigeneity" might be the key to Tan's writing for the voice in this opera. He not only brings vocal modes that are not indigenous to the European opera tradition, but he brings replacements that are indigenous to a different performance tradition. At least it appears so. His "oral tradition" is often a composite, rather than one whose origin is necessarily traceable. Through his demonstrations and coaching, singers absorb his "oral tradition" to produce what can be experienced as "natural" to a culture. So when the physical sound and vocalization replace conventional lyricism to express emotive content, not only are the performers "moved and defined through these practices," as Nina Sun Eidsheim notes, they also draw the audience *closer* to the sounds of

the human, of nature, etc.<sup>34</sup> John Cage alluded to this characteristic of Tan's music when he said in 1992, "What is very little heard in European or Western music is the presence of sound as the voice of nature.[. . .] It is clear in the music of Tan Dun that sounds are sounds central to the nature in which we live, but to which we have too long not listened."<sup>35</sup> Along the same mode of sonic designs, the vocalizations in *Tea* are performed in an utterly unadorned way by choir or orchestra musicians, exuding a sense of community and everydayness.

In act II, Tan's avant-garde sensibility is in full view, one that he put in service of the inter-Asia sensibility.<sup>36</sup> The protagonists' journey in search of the Chinese tea sage and truth is sonically carried out with papers: by crinkling, tearing, whistling, blowing, beating, shaking, waving, and fanning papers in bowls and paper screens, as well as the orchestra's vocalization and page flipping. For its first ninety measures, the string section does not play any pitch with their bows. Instead, the players fade in with the vocalization of "m" on a low A to form the backdrop for the singers' lyrical lines. Later, rather than the accompaniment of typical lush strings, the lyrical melodies of the sensual love duet are accompanied by the sparse and unostentatious timbre of an extremely soft and low-register glissando on the strings, as well as the bass flute. The climactic section depicting the lovemaking explicitly (mm. 164–189) is created by the orchestra's free improvisation in tutti: wind instruments blowing head joints and mouth pieces to create wavy, bending pitch, percussionists blowing paper bags and drumming paper screens in "a sensual and violent passion," harpists playing slide on the strings with guitar picks, as well as strings' vocalizing "m" while flipping pages rapidly and loudly to create the sound of wind and rustling trees.

Notably, with all players of the string section flipping pages fervently to a monotonous beat pattern, a Chinese sense of the materiality of paper comes alive, as Tan noted: "The ideas [of page flipping] find their origin in the animistic notion that material objects have spirits residing in them; an idea ever-present in the old village where I grew up in China."<sup>37</sup> This reckoning with the nonhuman echoes with the notion of vibrant matter and thingness that Jane Bennett has drawn our attention to in recent years.<sup>38</sup> Yet "the active role of non-human materials in public life" that Bennett seeks to theorize is given here a visible and audible form.<sup>39</sup> The loud page flipping of the orchestra renders audible the paper's power to comment on the fate of the lovers. Furthermore, the choreography of seated orchestra players fervently flipping pages also adds corporeality and physical appeal to the emotional content of the

scene. That these sections free of pitched sonorities are performed by pitched instruments embraces the sensibility of Tan's experimental theater aesthetics. In this opera, they seem most befitting, not only of the particular moment in the plotline, but also of the spirit of the opera as a whole.

### *Gestures and Inter-Asia Sensibility*

Tan Dun's employment of musical gestures also draws significantly from the inter-Asia sensibility. Gesture is, for Tan Dun, the basic unit of compositional procedure, which he discussed in 1992 regarding his work *Death and Fire*.<sup>40</sup> He defines "gesture" as "a short phrase in which various musical parameters cooperate to create a distinctive emotive effect," and he continues, "Gesture, then, is a composite which becomes an independent whole. . . . Character, shape, rhythm, timbre, and dynamic combine in the creation of gesture." While in recent years concepts of musical gesture have received significant scholarly attention in music studies, Tan Dun's notion of gesture is distinguished by its compositional perspective and an emphasis on its emotive content and holistic nature. He adds, "Character [of gesture] refers to emotional content or expressive intent, for instance, longing as distinct from shouting." As a composer, he considers gesture to belong to the "primary material category," whereas pitch, rhythm, contour, etc., in the "secondary material category." Namely, gestures constitute the most basic kernel of his composition.

Four distinctive gestures stand out in *Tea*: "longing," "filial piety," "roguish," and "doom." The gesture of longing first appears in the melodies sung by the shadow character and the monks. The components of the gesture include the contour, rhythmic shape, and slide between notes in performance (fig. 7.1). Following the initial large ascending leap is the first long note (G), on which the "sighing" of the descending second lands. Then a similar contour appears again, followed by another long note also on the second beat. With its nonproportional shape, the emotion of anguish is expressed through both the placement of the two long notes that disrupt metrical stability and the series of three consecutive descending seconds. This gesture shape's gradual narrowing of the outer interval span and absence of metrical stability conveys a decrease in energy. At its close, the use of letters such as "s" or "t" reinforces the sense of stillness. This is also often performed with sliding between notes, much in the style of Chinese traditional music. This gesture appears frequently in the opera, which gives the sense of always trailing behind, longing, lamenting, and void.



Fig. 7.1. Gesture of longing. (Copyright © 2002 by G. Schirmer, Inc. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved.)

In contrast, the gesture of “filial piety” uses the regularity of two-bar tight-knit phrases, accompanied by a lively syncopated rhythm, to express unity and elation (fig. 7.2). The symmetry of the melodic contour and diatonic characteristics depict the joyful feel and exuberant mood, and the cycling through of the two-bar syncopated rhythm propels the forward motion. The regularity of the hypermeter aids the sense of flow and ease. Together they work as the “filial piety” gesture. The story of *mise-en-scène*—*Journey to the West*—in the form of puppet theater and the story’s protagonist monkey king both add to the bubbly mood. The echoing sound of the short-long figures (also in tight-knit two-bar phrases but forming a phrase overlap with the end of the filial piety gesture) add to the mood of festivity. With the lively rhythm, it recalls the common scene of vibrant temple fairs for deity birthdays in Chinese society, where puppet theater is typically performed.

Fig. 7.2. Gesture of filial piety. (Copyright © 2002 by G. Schirmer, Inc. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved.)

Later when the gesture of “filial piety” resurfaces during the conflict between the enraged prince and Seikyo, the accompanying syncopated rhythmic figure is dropped and its jovial effect is weakened by the juxtaposition of Japanese Ritsu and Ryō scale, as well as the instrumentation of muted trumpet (fig. 7.3). Here the gesture of “filial piety” loses its symbolic integrity, and

the repeated distorted gestures signal the rise of tension (m. 354). In act III, the prince’s abrupt appearance is again accompanied by the gesture, but only by its two-bar syncopated rhythm; the gesture all but drained of its emotive content.

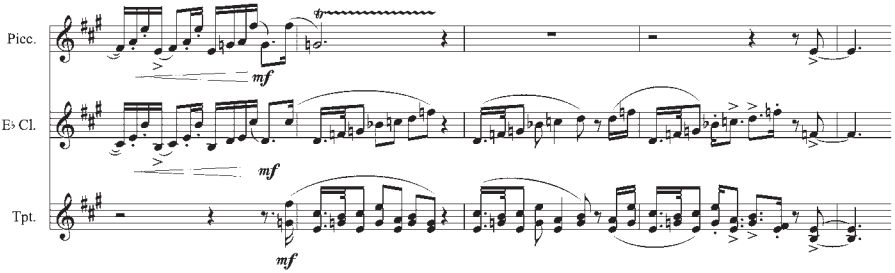


Fig. 7.3. Gesture of filial piety varied. (Copyright © 2002 by G. Schirmer, Inc. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved.)

The gesture of “roguish and puckish” is expressed through a crashing, energetic percussive burst from the Chinese small gong and large cymbals (pulse rhythm and usually in tight-knit two-bar units). It is characterized by the distinctive combination of their timbre, the crash and scraping sound of cymbals and the ringing sound of the small gong (fig. 7.4). This gesture accompanies the puppet theater, expressing the monkey king’s general puck-



Fig. 7.4. Gesture of roguish. (Copyright © 2002 by G. Schirmer, Inc. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved.)

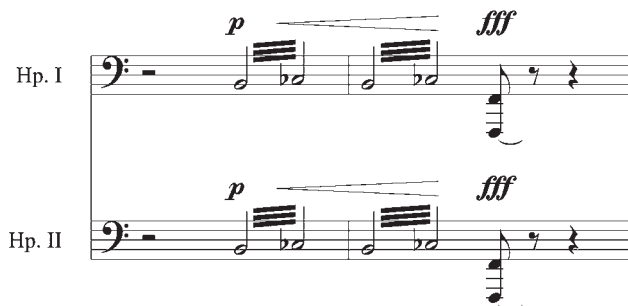


Fig. 7.5. Gesture of doom. (Copyright © 2002 by G. Schirmer, Inc. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved.)

ish ways, which underlies the prince's challenge to Seikyo. It returns in act III and repeats continuously when the roguishness finally turns into a cruel fatal blow. While the rhythmic figures change with its return, sometimes the distinctive timbre signals the gesture unfailingly.

The gesture of “doom” is readily recognizable and has probably since become Tan's idiomatic doom gesture: a two-note figure of a descending tritone, where the first note in soft and tremolo falls dramatically onto the second note in fortississimo (fig. 7.5). The gesture is often amplified: in the climax of the conflict, Tan lengthens the first note in tremolo to twice or thrice as long to enhance suspense and give the second note additional potency. This gesture is repeated incessantly, with increasingly shorter intervals to tremendous emotive power in the fatal scene.

Each of these gestures comprises a particular sense of energy, shaping, and timbre that is central to their expressive power in this opera, much in the same way as patterns of percussion in Chinese opera that denote emotive content and communicate meaning in the drama. The roguish and doom gestures in particular connote an affinity, albeit aloof, that correspond to gestures of similar emotive content in Chinese opera.

## Productions

*Tea* was performed nearly annually from 2002 to 2010 with six distinct productions by innovative directors in highly visible venues. The premiere production of *Tea* directed by Pierre Audi at Suntory Hall's has been memorial-

ized through excellent cinematic choreography in an award-winning DVD, which, despite its nods to Asian sensibility in stage designs, situates the story in a mythical world.<sup>41</sup> In addition to Audi's production, I have seen a video recording of Chiang Ching's production in 2007, and attended Miyamoto's production in Philadelphia. These two latter productions will be discussed below.

At Stockholm's Royal Hall, Chiang Ching's 2007 production combined realism supported by historical research with the symbolism of Chinese theater. An accomplished modern dancer, choreographer, and producer, Chiang has been a longtime collaborator with Tan (dating back to 1980 in Beijing) and also served as a consultant to Franco Zeffirelli's 1987 production of *Turandot* at the Metropolitan Opera. With a profound knowledge of Chinese culture, Chiang was intent on conveying the essence of the ancient city of Chang An, the capital of the Tang dynasty, and based her design on historical research in complex ways. Tang dynasty terracotta sculptures inform the design of all costumes, and Tang banquet style is created for the entertainment scene at the palace. Rectangular boxes stand in for palace and monastery similar to the usage of tables and chairs in Chinese opera, which also inspires the choreography of stage movement in act II. The *mise-en-scène* uses a Chinese folk dance "running-on-land-boat," Chinese zodiac animals, and delicate puppetry to portray the playfulness. Act II uses a modern ink painting of erotic theme by famous painter Walasse Ting as backdrop. This production, rich with Chinese signifiers, made it to Beijing for the 2008 Olympic Games.

The Santa Fe 2007 production, the American premiere, was directed by Miyamoto, with stage design by Rumi Matsui. It was distinguished by the sharper theatricality of musicals, Japanese sensibility, and shared Asian culture. Through an enormous red peony, the production not only references nobility, bravery, and honor, as well as the golden age of China's Tang dynasty, but it also creates the elegant, distilled image of passion, the lovers and their earnest pursuit. The complexity of the inter-Asia sensibility shone through, as critic Heidi Waleson astutely notes: "Masatomo Ota designed opulent, richly colored Chinese and Japanese robes and headdresses, and director Amon Miyamoto gracefully melded ritual and reality in the staging, giving equal weight to the tea ceremony and the passions of the characters."<sup>42</sup>

Miyamoto also had a keen sense of the opera's physicality, enlivening *Journey to the West* with entertaining shadow puppetry on a prominent red circle screen at the center of the stage. The famous Chinese story is carried out on the circle screen by the cutout shapes of the legendary monkeys and

monk characters. The richness of the interpretation of the scene with shadow play theater was a sharp contrast with the rendition in Audi's production at the premiere, where the cultural complexity of the famed story is muted: crouched nondescript choir members hop around the planks in their monk costumes referencing monkey. As for the subject of the opera, tea, whose ceremony Miyamoto has enjoyed since childhood and which became a refuge when he was a young adult, he presented it with the aura of a ritual.<sup>43</sup>

Since 2007, Miyamoto's production has been brought to Philadelphia and Vancouver.<sup>44</sup> The inter-Asia imaginings allow the audience to engage with a multifaceted Asia. In the words of Jonathan Pell, the artistic director of Dallas Opera, who saw the production in both Santa Fe and Vancouver, "[I] was again struck by the extraordinary 'sound world' created by the composer. [...] It was inventively staged in what appeared to be an authentic fusion of Chinese and Japanese theatrical conventions."<sup>45</sup> A production where inter-Asia sensibility is featured through nuanced representation undoubtedly contributes to making Asia visible on the opera stage, which, hopefully, can in time lead to the erasure of stereotypes and orientalist tropes.

## Conclusion

Paradoxically, while relying on operatic conventions, Tan creates an expressive form that is compelling precisely because it is direct and often unbounded by stylized convention, offering its viewers opportunities to liberate their imagination of ritual, landscape, and nature in profound ways. Tan did not leave the opera tradition behind altogether, however. The powerfully fresh sonority drawn from the materiality of organic music and the expressive vocalization derived from oral tradition are coupled with the conventional dramatic force of musical gestures and vocal lyricism. One might say Tan deftly weaves elements indigenous to opera into his work built on the inter-Asia sensibility. "A richly textured soundscape that spoke to something universal," noted a blogger in Vancouver.<sup>46</sup> As a focal point of the opera, the subject of tea encapsulates many quintessential material and spiritual aspects of the inter-Asia cultural sphere, reaching deeply into a multitude of cultural expressions: from *The Book of Tea* to the vocality of proclamation chants, the materiality of organic music, and musical gestures drawing from instruments and modes of different Asian traditions. It is into this mix that the *bel canto* lyricism is blended seamlessly.



By creating an opera deeply rooted in inter-Asia sensibility, Tan Dun's *Tea* is one of the first works on the contemporary opera stage to give a long overdue voice to the nuances and creative expression within the region's histories and culture. Other early works of these decades include *Wolf Cub Village* (1994) by Guo Wenjing; *Silk River* (1997) by Bright Sheng; *Wenji: Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* (2001) by Bun-Ching Lam; *Hanjo* (2004) by Toshio Hosokawa; and *Madame White Snake* (2010) by Zhou Long. Many more operas have been written by these prolific composers and their younger counterparts since. Together they constitute an important revolution in the world of contemporary opera, much in the spirit that Glass had noted in the 1988, as quoted above.<sup>47</sup>

To this revolution in contemporary opera, one might ask; How should the analysis of opera respond? If, as Tan Dun noted, the production of an opera could be constrained by the calcitrant notion of "mysterious" Asia, does a similar danger arise for opera analysis? What might be at stake? And what might be the analysts' approaches? The answers to these questions are yet to be worked out. But a focus on the locality and specific cultures of Asia present a starting point.

This chapter trains an analytical lens on inter-Asia sensibility, with an aim to connect opera analysis to the region. The inter-Asia sensibility of *Tea* is inseparable from the locale of its inception and the shared cultural sphere that formed its primary inspiration. The connection is profound. As Suntory Hall's chief producer, Keiko Manabe noted pointedly after the premiere, "it can be said that the history of the hall created this work."<sup>48</sup> Manabe was referring to more than the physical space. Both the characteristics of the hall—no barrier between the stage and the audience, and the orchestra as one of the protagonists on the stage—and its historical significance as a revered cultural institution in Japan shaped Tan's *Tea*.<sup>49</sup> Its premiere garnered such critical acclaim in Japan that Suntory Hall brought the production back four years later in 2006, as its annual hall opera performance. Future studies of this work might look further into the connection between the opera and traditional Japanese theater, as well as Japanese receptions of the opera in both years of its performance, and the impact that this opera might have on the music scene in Japan. Inter-Asia expression has constituted the voice of many prominent actors in the ever-changing international scene of contemporary music and opera production that operates under the dictates of a global cultural industry, different forms of representation—visual, virtual, sociopolitical—as well as institutional and economic forces at work. While compre-

hending the expressive means, hermeneutics, and storytelling roles of the fascinating timbre, vocality, and sonic designs in these operas is an important pursuit of knowledge production, the analysts also bear a particular responsibility to make the silent Other, Asia, be seen and heard.

## Notes

1. See Ashley Thorpe, *Performing China on the London Stage Chinese Opera and Global Power, 1759–2008* (London: Palgrave, 2016).

2. There are very few exceptions. One is the analysis of Tan Dun's *First Emperor*, in Yayoi Uno Everett, *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Operas*: Osvaldo Golioff, Kaija Saariaho, John Adams, Tan Dun (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

3. Nancy Yunhwa Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 8.

4. The use of the term "inter-Asia" draws from the field of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies that gives voice to a global intellectual community that is concerned about the inter-Asia connection, exchange, and historical processes.

5. Heidi Waleson, "The Hun Wears Prada," *Wall Street Journal*, March 4, 2010.

6. Nancy Yunhwa Rao, "Sonic Imaginary After Cultural Revolution," in *Listening to China's Cultural Revolution Music, Politics, and Cultural Continuities*, ed. Paul Clark, et al., 213–38 (London: Palgrave, 2016).

7. Edward Rothstein, "Classical Review: A Shaman Without Religion," *New York Times*, December 15, 1991. This review in the Sunday Arts & Leisure section was preceded by Rothstein's earlier review of the same concert on December 2, "An Eastern Sonic Ritual in an Imaginary Religion."

8. The numbers are drawn from study of data available in OPERA America: The National Opera Center, <https://www.operaamerica.org/>

9. Philip Glass, "Philip Glass. Composer. New York City," *ARTSREVIEW* 5, no. 1: *America's Opera*, ed. Dodie Kazanjian (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 1988), 18.

10. Takemitsu served as its artistic director until 1998, followed by Joji Yuasa and Toru Hosokawa. For the role of Suntory Hall as music institution and its international program for composition, see Bonnie C. Wade, *Composing Japanese Musical Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 88–89.

11. Toshio Hosokawa, <https://www.suntory.com/culture-sports/suntoryhall/30th/mo vie/>

12. Tan Dun on Tea in Conversation with Keiko Manabe (Chief Producer at Suntory Hall), <http://tandun.com/composition/tea-a-mirror-of-soul-opera-in-three-acts/>

13. Ken Smith, "Tan's Brew of Eastern, Western and Elemental Styles Is a Lyrical Triumph," <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/tan-dun-tea>

14. In addition to its use for actors' entry and exit, *hashigakari* also functions as another playing area. As opposed to the main stage, the *hashigakari* is linearly laid out and consequently aids in creating a sense of spatial and psychological depth. Kalman's spatial design

of the angled walkways connotes the feeling of depth and expression of multiple mental states. See Tan Dun on Tea in Conversation with Keiko Manabe.

15. This point is supported by the subsequent performances in more traditional opera space, where Tan often requested that the orchestra pit be raised to allow visibility.

16. For a synopsis of the opera see the publisher's website, <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/33592/Tea-A-Mirror-of-Soul--Tan-Dun/>

17. Douglas S. Fuqua, "Classical Japan and the Continent," in *Routledge Handbook of Premodern Japanese History*, ed. Karl F. Friday (New York: Routledge, 2017), 38–52.

18. Fuqua, "Classical Japan and the Continent," 40.

19. Lu Yu's treatise *Cha Jing* is generally translated as *The Classic of Tea*, but the Chinese title could also be translated as *The Book of Tea*. It is quite clear that by "*The Book of Tea*" Tan Dun is referring to Lu Yu's version and not that of Okakura Kakuzō, *The Book of Tea* (New York: Putnam's, 1906).

20. James A. Benn, *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

21. Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, 12.

22. Benn, *Tea in China*, 200. The information here is derived from Benn, as well as Bret Hinsch, *The Rise of Tea Culture in China: The Invention of the Individual* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

23. Chiang Ching, "From *Fu fu fu* to *Tea*—Duet with Tan Dun in Music and Dance," in *I Sing I Chant* (Taipei: Erya chuban she, 2020).

24. The discussion here is much shaped by Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 214.

25. Joanna C. Lee, "Opera Around the World: Japan-Tokyo," *Opera* 54, no. 3 (2003): 323–24.

26. See Joy Calico, chapter 6 in this volume.

27. The Lyon production and Stockholm production.

28. I discuss this topic more fully in Nancy Yunhwa Rao, "Materiality of Sonic Imagery: On Analysis of Contemporary Chinese Compositions," *Music Theory Spectrum* 45, no. 1 (2023): 151–55.

29. Shin'ichirō Ikebe, "Moving from Cutting Edge to Mainstream," *Daily Yomiuri and The Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 19, 2002.

30. Mariusz Kozak, *Enacting Musical Time: The Bodily Experience of New Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 64.

31. Tan would use in his next opera, *The First Emperor*, the sound patterns from slapping in the opening to great effect.

32. Christian Utz, "The Rediscovery of Presence: Intercultural Passages through Vocal Spaces between Speech and Song," in *Vocal Music and Contemporary Identities: Unlimited Voices in East Asia and the West*, ed. Christian Utz and Frederick Lau (New York: Routledge, 2012), 56.

33. "Tan Dun Rehearses TEA with the Opera Company of Philadelphia Chorus," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAD\\_2vDPMxA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAD_2vDPMxA)

34. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 20.

35. John Cage and Joan Retallack, *Musicage: CAGE MUSES on Words \* Art \* Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 187. The interview was conducted July 15–17, 1992.

36. For Tan Dun's avant-garde approaches, see Nancy Yunhwa Rao, "Cultural Boundary and National Border: Recent Works of Tan Dun, Chen Yi, and Bright Sheng," in *Contemporary Music in East Asia*, ed. Hee Sook Oh (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2014), 211–40.

37. Tan Dun on TEA in Conversation with Keiko Manabe, in "Dialogues with Tan Dun," translated by Leo Alexander Imai; October 2, 2002, <http://tandun.com/composition/tea-a-mirror-of-soul-opera-in-three-acts/>

38. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

39. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 177.

40. Tan Dun, "Death and Fire: A Dialogue with Paul Klee" (DMA diss., Columbia University, 1992), 12–14.

41. Tan Dun, *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*, dir. Frank Scheffer (Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon, 2004).

42. Waleson, "The Hun Wears Prada"

43. David Patrick Stearns, "The OCP Prepares to Serve 'Tea,'" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 16, 2010.

44. The opera was produced by Opera Philadelphia at the Academy of Music in March 2010; it was produced by Vancouver Opera at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in May 2013.

45. Jonathan Pell, "From the Desk of Artistic Director Jonathan Pell, Vancouver and Toronto," <https://dallasopera.org/from-the-desk-of-artistic-director-jonathan-pell-vancouver-and-toronto/#more-4575>

46. Hadani Ditmars, "Tea—a Mirror of the Soul Speaks to Vancouver's Spiritual Possibilities," *Huffpost*, May 14, 2013, [https://www.huffpost.com/archive/ca/entry/tea-a-mirror-of-the-soul-\\_b\\_3267983](https://www.huffpost.com/archive/ca/entry/tea-a-mirror-of-the-soul-_b_3267983)

47. Glass, "Philip Glass. Composer. New York City," 18. For discussion on the historical process facing contemporary Chinese composers, see Nancy Yunhwa Rao, "Asian Americans in Opera: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature*, edited by Josephine Lee, 1344–67 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

48. Naka Mamiko, "'Listening to the Colors and Seeing the Sound'—The Soundscape Projected in Tan Dun's Hall Opera *Tea*," *Minzoku Geijutsu* 21 (2005): 153–59. She also reported that the premiere received many reviews in Japan, including a twenty-six-page article in the prominent magazine *Mostly Classic*. I am indebted to Kumiko Reichert for the translation and other help on the article.

49. Photos of the same production by the Netherland Opera show that spreading out on a spacious opera stage, the large wood planks denote a less intensive feeling of the opera's psychological space.

## Of Sense and Sirens

*Ana Sokolović's Svadba and Six Voix Pour Sirènes*

Colleen Renihan

In recent work by women composers, new opera—often defined with the broader “music theatre” to indicate its refusal to adhere to traditional generic markers and values—is being reclaimed as a site of feminist expression and power. In this post-#MeToo era, these composers push against opera’s fraught history as a form where women sing to their death and are shamelessly exploited by men (both on- and offstage) in order to reimagine it as a feminist mode of expression and hearing. Often these works experiment with divergences from opera’s traditional structural and aesthetic tropes in the interest of reconceiving what opera offers to women in the twenty-first century as a rich mode of representation.

Many of these composers’ key works—such as Chaya Czernowin’s *Infinite Now* (2017), Ellen Reid’s *p r i s m* (2018), Missy Mazzoli’s *Breaking the Waves* (2016)—explore the visceral and affective dimensions of sonic experience, novel evocations of time and temporal experience, and new approaches to language and vocal sound. In each case, the experiences and voices of women are brought to new heights by original compositional approaches that empower women in new musical and theatrical ways. In each, traditional modes of operatic hearing and seeing are upended. In this chapter, I examine Serbian-Canadian composer Ana Sokolović’s unusual music theater work *Six Voix Pour Sirènes* (2000) and her internationally acclaimed opera *Svadba* (2011) as two Canadian examples of how the form is being reimaged to allow for new, timely modes of relationality. Sokolović’s is a truly original compositional voice, with self-identified influences in Ligeti, Kurtág, Bartók, and Stravinsky, because of what she describes as their “visceral music,” a

description often used in reference to her own music.<sup>1</sup> Through a supportive and fruitful collaboration between Sokolović and Toronto's Queen of Puddings Music Theatre between 2000 and 2011, Sokolović focused nearly exclusively on composing for a cappella female voices, employing playful extended vocal techniques, unexpected vocal textures and colors, and a strikingly affective approach to text. Unlike many feminist pieces including the ones listed above, Sokolović's works focus not on trauma or oppression, but rather serve as joyful celebrations of female exuberance.

## Visceral Opera

Since its premiere run at the Berkeley Street Theatre in Toronto in 2011, which I attended, Ana Sokolović's most popular work, *Svadba*, has achieved international status. Significantly, it is most often described as a powerful, visceral work of music theater; according to Lydia Perovic, it is "visceral as a pagan ritual."<sup>2</sup> And as Opera Philadelphia general director David Devan described Opera Philadelphia's warehouse production of *Svadba* 2013—which notably involved audience members in an immersive production that included a wedding reception featuring traditional cuisine and Balkan dance music by the West Philadelphia Orchestra—the opera made possible "a very intimate, visceral experience with a very interesting, different opera."<sup>3</sup> Canadian opera director Wayne Gooding labeled it "music theatre at its innovative best," and Christopher Hoile in *Opera News* wrote that the piece will appeal "not just to new music enthusiasts but to those interested in the wider possibilities of music theatre in general."<sup>4</sup> The piece has had a remarkable life, having now been performed throughout Canada, and also internationally in London, Perm, Belgrade, Paris, Festival de Provence, Milwaukee, at the Bard Festival, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Boston, and beyond, an impressive list for any new (chamber) opera. Sokolović's vocal works ignite the imagination—they have a capacious sense of possibility about them. In the case of *Svadba*, this can be seen in the wide variety of productions of the opera that have emerged across the globe over the past decade. Productions range from those more minimalist in nature, such as the 2020 production streamed by Perm Opera Ballet—a semi- (mostly un)staged production that featured all six singers in a semicircle formation, all dressed in black.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the 2022 Boston Lyric Opera film production of *Svadba* features a completely reimagined scenario and set on a wispy Cape Cod beach, with each singer being paired with a

corresponding dancer double in a production that capitalizes on Sokolović's penchant for temporal and narrative nonlinearity.<sup>6</sup>

The opera has garnered praise from some of the world's leading opera companies as a work that harbors a strange power in its effect on audiences: its impact, like Czernowin's *Infinite Now* and indeed many of Sokolović's vocal works, is primeval in nature. I see much of this primeval power deriving from the unique composition of vocal textures in the piece. As a listener-viewer, I am ensnared by Sokolović's vocal works; I find them to be intimate, fresh, and raw. The vocal works of Ana Sokolović written during her years collaborating with Queen of Puddings Music Theatre have an affective power or force about them, an elusive force in many ways. They are captivating, spellbinding, they resonate unusually, and viscerally. And yet though they seduce by way of intense vocal power as so many of their operatic counterparts, they also do so in unexpected and untraditional ways in that they require us to attend to the ways they generate an unruly emanating force, or what Michelle Duncan describes as "how a resonant voice acts and how it participates in the creation, disruption, or dissolution of registers of meaning independent of linguistic signification."<sup>7</sup> Drawing on Adriana Cavarero's work on the relationality of voice, Steven Connor's work on vocal phonetics, and Nina Sun Eidsheim's work on singing as intermaterial vibrational practice, as well as on interviews with performers and producers of the opera, I consider the source of the work's power and provide a feminist reading of its impact.<sup>8</sup> I argue, ultimately, that the materiality of the vocal writing in *Svadba* and *Six Voix Pour Sirènes* provides the opportunity for operatic women to command attention in its expression of what I interpret as a refreshing physicality and unavoidable presence—an immediacy—albeit one that remains difficult to pin down.

## Queen of Puddings Music Theatre and Ana Sokolović

The development of Ana Sokolović's vocal works is imbricated with the history of the innovative company Queen of Puddings Music Theatre, which began in 1994 with an interest in supporting vocal commissions.<sup>9</sup> Cofounders John Hess and Dairine Ni Mheadra were interested in exploring the potential of text and music in a theatrical context, Hess initially at the Banff Centre and Ni Mheadra initially in Dublin. Through commissions of Canadian composers, Queen of Puddings Music Theatre brought Canadian works of new

music theater to international attention with the commission of pieces like *Beatrice Chancy* (James Rolfe and George Elliott Clarke), Ana Sokolović's works, etc. Despite resistance from the larger Canadian opera companies, Queen of Puddings Music Theatre put Toronto on the map as a center for innovation in new music theater by commissioning new Canadian works. Sokolović's relationship with Hess and Ni Mheadra began in 2000 with the work *Six Voix Pour Sirènes* (in English, less cleverly *Six Voices for Sirens*), commissioned by Queen of Puddings as an a cappella work for six female voices, followed by her first opera *The Midnight Court Opera* (2005), *Love Songs* (2008) for solo female voice, and *Svadba* (2011), all of which toured internationally.

Queen of Puddings commissioned *Six Voix Pour Sirènes* after Ni Mheadra listened to a recording of Sokolović's *Pesma* (1996/2005, a monodrama based on a Serbian text for mezzo-soprano and chamber ensemble) and was entranced by the composer's sound. Sokolović chose Montreal-based writer Natalie Mamias as librettist. The premiere of the piece occurred at the Enwave Theatre at Harbour Front Centre, as the finale of a concert of new Canadian music, all choreographed, and all to be sung by six women. Sokolović's piece was the finale of the concert. All dressed in extravagant queen's costumes, the six women (Laura Albino, Carla Huhtanen, Andrea Ludwig, Shannon Mercer, Krisztina Szabo, and Jacqueline Woodley) linked arms as they moved intentionally toward the audience through the duration of the piece. As Tamara Bernstein described it: "It's something like what you'd hear from a Bulgarian women's choir, but wilder, and more unpredictable. Their voices have set up a forcefield of sound, on which they play fearlessly, like shamans dancing on flames. The women appear to be having the time of their lives, and in a way, so are you, though the distance between them and the audience closes, the effect is both thrilling and slightly alarming."<sup>10</sup>

The text for the piece is playful, using several plays on words that the audience may catch if they can hear and understand the French text, which is also playfully set to music:

Six voix-ci les reines, voici les reines, six voix pour six reines. Voilà la scene, six voix sur scene. Sirènes. Six reines sans roi ni royaume, sans chat sans chaîne. Six reines de la scene. Enchantées de chanter, avant de rejoindre l'éther, l'éternité. Une reine ça ne s'amuse pas, une reine ça règne. Ça se tient droit et ça fait face à tout! Haut, très haut. Étoiles des étoiles, Balises du ciel. Tchh, tchh. Nous sommes les reines de l'éther, de l'éternité. Voix, nos voix. Caresses



scintillantes, elles font pétiller les yeux, palpiter le souffle, courber les coeurs. L'orsqu'elles roulent dans nos gorges, s'enroulent dans nos bouches. Grâce cristallines, elles voltigent. D'éclat en reflet, de pointe en pente, de pente en pic! Défiant le vertige qu'elles donnent à ceux qui les endonnent. Vertige . . . Nos voix de sirènes, nous les reines de la scene. Voix de la scene. Et si nous perdions la voix? Qu'advierait-il? Et d'une scene sans ses sirènes? Qu'advierait-il si? Silence!

The English translation of Mamias's text for *Sirènes* is as follows:

Six Voices, six voices here, six voices for sirens, here is the scene, here are the queens. Sirens. Six queens without a king, nor a kingdom, without a cat nor a castle. Six queens without chains. Six queens of the stage. Delighted to sing, before meeting ether, eternity. A queen does not play, a queen reigns. She stands upright and faces everything! Up, high up. Stars of stars, buoys in the sky. Check, check. We are the queens of ether, eternity. Voices, our voices. Scintillating caresses, they make eyes shine, chests bend, breath palpitate, hearts curve, when they roll in our throats, turn around in our mouths. Gracious crystal lines, they fly away, from sliver to reflection to point to slope. From slope to peak! Defying the vertigo that those who heard them are under. Vertigo. . . . Our voices of sirens, we, queens of the stage. And if we lost our voice? What would happen? What would happen to sirens without a voice? And of a stage without sirens? What would happen if? Silence!<sup>11</sup>

*Svadba* was commissioned by Queen of Puddings as an expansion on *Six Voix Pour Sirènes*; Hess and Ni Mheadra were interested in further exploring the potential of a group of solo women on stage. Thematically, the opera depicts the evening before the marriage of one of the girls, and to this end, Sokolović draws on the marriage customs of her Balkan heritage, with bits of Serbian poetry woven throughout.<sup>12</sup> Still, the designers of the premiere, namely, director Michael Cavanagh and designer Michael Gianfrancesco, eschew any folkloric approach to the piece. Rather they articulate it as a universal rite of passage shared across cultures. As the composer shares in her interview with Lydia Perovic, the popularity of the work is owing partly to this universal appeal of the story: "I think part of it is that a wedding is a near-universal experience and a universally understood phenomenon. But here it's told through a very local perspective. That quote attributed to Tolstoy, 'If you

want to be universal, start by painting your own village?' It's that.<sup>13</sup> Though Hoile notes the similarity between the iconic Bulgarian folk-choral album *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* (1975) and the score of *Svadba*, Sokolović's approach is more playful, irreverent, modern, as she plays with words and their meaning by breaking melodies and phrases down into separate words, sounds, even individual consonants using techniques from Stravinsky, Berio, and Ligeti.<sup>14</sup>

*Svadba* is the fourth of Sokolović's ventures into opera.<sup>15</sup> More music theater than opera, the work unfolds in a series of interconnected numbers or tableaux that reveal the singers' voices melding into one another and, alternately, performing nontraditional sounds that could be characterized as guttural and onomatopoeic through the composer's deployment of nonsense syllables and extended vocal techniques. Influences for Sokolović's style include folk, pop, and Balkan choral singing. She also cites Stravinsky's *Les Noces* (1923) as an influence, which one can hear off the top, with its harsh dissonances, exploitation of percussive potential in the text, and mixed meter. Yet unlike in *Les Noces*, the male voice does not come in. In fact, the piece can be heard as a jubilant celebration of womens' voices through a closer examination of Sokolović's vocal writing.

## Vocal Materiality, Feminist Presence

I am interested primarily in exploring how voice participates in the creation of relational energy and acoustic power in *Six Voix Pour Sirènes* and *Svadba*. The voice was also central to Queen of Puddings's mandate. Ni Mheadra describes their early creations as focusing particularly on exploring the potential in the voice:

We decided to found this company, Queen of Puddings, that would essentially focus on the voice and would get rid of extraneous trappings. The voice was really the centre of the thing and that's what the spotlight had to be on. [. . .] We were trying to get away from the big operatic model and really focus it because we thought that the human voice if it was really good one is incredible. And we didn't want anything in the way of that. And we felt sure that people . . . It's a very visceral thing and that people would be captivated. And also the form had to be intimate. It wouldn't do well in huge spaces.<sup>16</sup>





Hess and Ni Mheadra speak about the primacy of voice in their works, and often an unaccompanied voice at that. As they explain, “We were not interested in big sets. We commissioned very few things for electronics. We like the idea of this kind of ‘real’ voice. The human voice. And the audience’s proximity to it.”<sup>17</sup>

Focusing on the materiality of the voice is key to understanding the power at the heart of Sokolović’s vocal works. As Tamara Bernstein writes, “Welcome to the vocal music of Ana Sokolović—a universe where words may at any moment detach themselves from meaning and become pure sound; where women’s voices take the word ‘enchantment’ back into their ancient sources.”<sup>18</sup> Voice, after all, has always been a compelling and productive site for feminist inquiry. Vocal expression has historically been coded as feminine (the voice of the mother, the many instances of women’s song in Classical and mythological references such as the Delphic Oracle, Homer’s sirens, mermaids, Echo, even operatic heroines, and the like). And yet, as Linda Fisher writes, “[as a woman], being associated with the voice did not necessarily translate into having one.”<sup>19</sup> Sokolović’s exploitation, thus, of the female voice at powerful extremes (dynamic, signifying, and expressive extremes) in a context where an audience is required conventionally but also compelled to listen to them is a powerful response to this social reality. The archetypal figures of the dangerous but compelling female voice are of course the sirens, whose singing lures men to their destruction. Though different versions of this myth exist (including Clément’s theory of men’s desires to control anxieties surrounding women’s voices through their (mis)representation or silencing of them), Sokolović’s version includes humor, which is not what the Sirens are usually associated with. As Cavarero writes, “it is feminine song that is at stake. This is precisely why it is so disturbing. [. . . and it becomes] all the more disturbing by the absence of speech.”<sup>20</sup>

Although the piece can and has been heard as a feminist statement and celebration of the power of the female voice, it speaks beyond essentialist constructions of gender, in my view, to the power of creative vocal writing to bring about a special and rare form of relationality. Indeed, by focusing exclusively on the gendered identity of the voice rather than the materiality of the voice and the relationality that it facilitates, we lose the opportunity to understand the multifarious ways that the voice reads and expresses intersectionally. As Jennifer Logue writes, “sexuality needs to be centered and read intersectionally alongside race, class, gender, etc., in analyses of disciplinary and other forms of exclusion.”<sup>21</sup> This approach to Sokolović’s work under-

scores what Everett and Stevens express in the introduction to this volume about the transformational potential of opera that works against its history of elitism and exclusivity, “when it becomes a means for rhetorical and symbolic resistance to power, especially for the oppressed.”

Though Sokolović’s works are texted, her aversion to traditional operatic narrative forms and conventions, and the nature of her vocal writing, disrupts signification as it celebrates the potential for the female voice to perform an intense form of presence. The opening of these two pieces, as seen in figures 8.1a and 8.1b, produce a similar effect, one that can be heard throughout both pieces. In them, womens’ voices pierce, affect, and demand attention. The score markings in both pieces communicate her intention for the sound. For example, the *double forte* dynamic indication, marked in *Sirènes* as *senza vibrato*, with “throat voice” and unconventional notation of pitch wavering indicates that we are in vocal territory unlike the traditional operatic one. In my analysis of the significance of the voice and of vocality in these pieces, I follow Julia Kristeva’s, Michel Poizat’s, and Roland Barthes’s distinction of its signified or pheno-song from its sonorous, bodily geno-song.<sup>22</sup> I also draw on Judith Butler’s and Cavarero’s attention to the materiality and relationality of voice. Cavarero, for example, writes that the voice “has a reality and a communicative power that precedes and exceeds the linguistic elements.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in both figures above, the communication of text is far from the focus of these moments.

Cavarero also writes about the materiality in the voice as an expression of its singularity, which becomes an important caveat to the reading of the prototypical operatic women, who serve as stand-ins to be ultimately exposed, exhausted, and expired by men. While Cavarero writes of the individuality of the voice—that “the voice [. . .] subjectivizes the one who emits it, even when it is an animal. The voice belongs to the living; it communicates the presence of an existent in flesh and bone; it signals a throat, a particular body”—she points to the intense presence of the singing subject, the space that that female performer insists on taking in that moment.<sup>24</sup> Walter Ong reaffirms this reading: “Since sound indicates an activity that takes place ‘here and in this moment,’ speech as sound establishes a personal presence ‘here and in this moment.’”<sup>25</sup> In the case of Sokolović’s works, however, this is made more powerful vis-à-vis a feminist reading that takes into account the collectivity of the sound that is produced by these women singing in ensemble. Their sound, a kind of sonic shield as seen in figure 8.1a, is heard as nothing less than a forcefield of sound, as Bernstein described it, despite the loss of indi-

viduality in these moments. In these instances, the power that emanates from these singers, in ensemble, is powerfully more than the sum of its parts. As Feldman and Zeitlin write, referencing Cavarero, music is “commensurate with unique souls interacting within an ‘interrelational plurality,’ one which also constitutes a utopian feminist space that accommodates difference.”<sup>26</sup> This is the energy that is forged in Sokolović’s vocal works, particularly in these moments where voices meld, combine, and, for a glimmer of a moment, become beautifully indistinct.<sup>27</sup>

Eidsheim’s recent approach to singing as vibrational practice, and her focus on the animate and material human body, inspires much of my approach here. Eidsheim is interested in reframing the art of singing as one that is about forging relationships with one another; as in the work of Cavarero, there is a strong relational aspect to her work. She writes about singing as a multisensory act and a vibrational practice, a practice brought to life in Sokolović’s vocal works in their more-than-simply-sonic texture. Eidsheim writes, “singing and listening are not confined to the audible register but rather permeate it. At its base, the ontology of singing and listening is material practice.”<sup>28</sup> Michelle Duncan, who dismantles opera studies’s long-standing insistence on theories of vocal disembodiment, notes how in opera studies, voice has managed “to slip surreptitiously into a position of silent alterity, strangely disenfranchised from corporality and unable to resound.”<sup>29</sup> This materiality of the voice in *Six Voix Pour Sirènes* and *Svadba* is powerful because of the lack of textual and thus direct signifying interference of the pure vowel sounds when sung, as in the extended pitches that open both pieces. But their material power also emanates as the result of Sokolović’s exploration of the potential for the voice to communicate power and presence in other ways.

This intense materiality can be managed and explored to various ends in production. In the Boston Lyric Opera production on operabox.tv, for example, film director Shura Baryshnikov, conductor Daniela Candillari, screenwriter Hannah Shepard, and production designer Ana Novačić employ these material voices as background music to several of the opera’s scenes of action, such as near the beginning of the opera where the women are decorating the cottage for the upcoming nuptials.<sup>30</sup>

The voices even underscore shots of the women in conversation. Most significantly, in this production, the mixed sound features a reverb that hints at technological mediation and in many ways interferes with the immediate, raw impact that the voices have in live performance. As vocal sounds surround the listener from the screen and emerge from unknown locations

and origins in stereo, vocal emanations are not able to be traced back to a specific body, thus giving them a more ethereal, unearthly quality. This alienating effect is amplified through the technique of splitting each role into a singer and corresponding dancer. As Jane Forner so aptly points out in her review of this production, “Unseen sound sources in film are unremarkable in themselves, but this production goes further, eschewing all direct connections between what we see and hear: not only do we not see singing, mimed or otherwise, there are no occasions on which musical sound is presented as existing in any form in the filmed world we are watching.”<sup>31</sup>

There is also a sense that the staging is pointing to a utopian reality of sorts, perhaps because the score does not signal a particular time or place for the piece’s action to occur, thereby affirming the initial production’s director (Cavanagh) and designer (Gianfrancesco), who conceived of the piece as referencing a universality in nuptial traditions across cultures and times.

Despite this certain utopian universality that many productions of *Svadba* have capitalized upon, in the critical reception of Sokolović’s work, the focus has primarily been on parsing the Serbian folk influences in her compositions. Bernstein writes that “The extended vocal techniques in Sokolović’s music are rooted not in the avant-garde music of the twentieth century, but in the oral traditions and poetic voice of Serbia.”<sup>32</sup> She notes that the “yelps,” the micro-ornaments, the small downward slides at the ends of phrases, as well as the minor and major seconds she writes in her music were acoustic elements that enabled Balkan peasant women to communicate with one another across large outdoor distances.<sup>33</sup> Sokolović’s vocal settings also often include unsung, unique speech-sounds, which are effectively nonnarrative utterances that disrupt semantic meaning as they display the materiality of the female voice. Indeed, though these works are texted, partly as a result of their Serbian folk poetry, Bernstein writes, “It’s difficult to think of another ‘contemporary music’ composer who is exploring female power through traditional vocal techniques particular to women.”<sup>34</sup> And while Bernstein and others write about the “nearly supernatural” power that is expressed through these women’s voices, I want to think about their expressions as more earthly-bound and present.

As the figures themselves demonstrate, vocal energy and power in both pieces are not predicated exclusively on the extension of vowel sounds, though that is what emerges at the beginnings of both pieces to initially seize the listener. There is a strong tradition in linguistics and opera studies of seeing the vowels as the soul or essence of language, spoken or sung. This is of



course particularly true of the focus of the bel canto training that is foundational to the training of opera singers the world over. The voice proper, in singing, is distinguished from—often pitted against—the work of the articulators. Indeed, in opera studies, debates about the metaphysics of voice play out nearly exclusively (if implicitly) through considerations of (primarily, or perhaps ideally!) extended vowels.<sup>35</sup> The physical presence of the women in both *Sirènes* and *Svadba* is heightened by the propensity of what Barthes in another context has called “language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the voice, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony.”<sup>36</sup> Both of these works are replete with moments that celebrate the fleshiness of these women’s voices, what Duncan calls “carnal voices,” made more complicated by an additional figure in their (conspicuous, I wonder?) female authorial voice. While the voiced and embodied vowel sounds are important for referencing the presence and relationality or acoustic link that is at the core of the power of these works, the many consonant sounds that are capitalized upon also point to the fleshiness of the expression at hand. Indeed, I would argue that because of their not-quite meaning and their foregrounding of the performers’ body and vocal mechanisms, these aspects work to amplify what Cavarero describes as a “convoking of mouths and ears” in its invocation of vocalic relation, perhaps even more powerfully than their nonarticulated counterparts.<sup>37</sup> The noisiness of speech also performs interference and nonlanguage in a way that signals its lack and interruption of meaning.

Most of the score involves writing that exposes and celebrates the vocal and articulatory organs at work. Others, like the many passages of hissy and air-induced sounds, remind the listener of the breath in these women, their lifeline, their life.<sup>38</sup> As a result of this vocal writing, the female performers of these works perform with voices that escape their fate as representations, conduits, or stand-ins and become present both temporally and physically with what I hear as an intense presence articulated in the vocal writing and in the use of language.<sup>39</sup> Connor provides a useful phonometrical perspective to understand the many resonances of the many unconventional sounds used in Sokolović’s writing. As Connor writes, the noisiness of speech performs non-language, but in a way that signals its lack and its interruption of meaning. Connor believes we are powerfully influenced by conscious and unconscious assumptions about the relations between sounds and sense, a reading that is also (of course) problematized in that it is the Serbian language that is in question, a language unfamiliar to many listeners. As Connor writes:

The early anatomists of voice had two competing theories for the structure and function of the larynx. One saw the voice as a wind instrument, as reed, flute, or organ pipe. The other saw the voice as a stringed instrument. Eventually the explication of the function of the vocal cords meant that the dispute ended in an honorable draw. [. . .] The voice as stringed instrument partook of the lucidity and rational intervals of the Apollonian lyre. The voice as wind instrument was full of reminders of the respiring and expiring human body.<sup>40</sup>

In brief, “the lyric voice is virile, virtuoso, inviolate, untouched by human hand; the bagpipe voice is odorous, exhausted, and mortal.”<sup>41</sup> And yet, although these women sing with lyrical, trained, entirely operatic voices, the moments where they are forced into bagpipe modes of singing is where they become most human, where I feel their intimate presence and a stimulated relationality most intently and impactfully. Sokolović believes that the dramatic sense of the language comes from the culture from which they derive. The Serbian language has these characteristics. Words like “netish,” which means “will not,” becomes, in one scene in *Svadba*, “netish etish tish tish sh sh sh.’ It becomes percussive, and this is something we are doing in our folklore. So, using the characteristics in the language is something that was my goal.”<sup>42</sup>

## Fearless and Uncompromising Sound

As Hess described *Sirènes* to me, “Once you [. . .] understood the quality of sound [called for in Sokolović’s compositions]: slightly nasal; absolutely fearless and uncompromising—it’s really a take-no-prisoners kind of piece—it’s easier to come up with metaphors for how the sound should be. So it changed how we worked with the singers.”<sup>43</sup> The prevalent nasalized sounds throughout convey, for me, a primal energy. Because English has fewer naturally nasal sounds than other European languages, the traditional culturally antagonistic position was such that nasality came to “stand for the disgusting corporality the English found in the French.”<sup>44</sup> This exoticist reading is reminiscent of the primal nature of Homer’s Sirens. In both *Svadba* and *Six Voix Pour Sirènes*, the prevalent glissandi and yelps near the beginning of *Six Voix Pour Sirènes* certainly suggest and then amplify this reading of the animalistic nature of their voices.

In *Six Voix Pour Sirènes*, the materiality of the voice seems to assert itself

45

*rit. poco* ----- *a tempo*

*p* *molto vibr.*

S.1 Six reines sans roi. ni roy - sans chat sans aume,

S.2 *p* *molto vibr.* Six reines sans roi. ni roy - sans chat sans aume,

S.3 *mp* roi. [a] - - - - - *pp* *poco* [a] - - - - -

S.4 nes[ng] - - - - - *pp* *poco* [a] - - - - -

M.1 ré[ng] - - - - - ré[ng] - - - - - ré[ng] - - - - - ré[ng] - - - - -

M.2 si[ng] - - - - - ré[ng] - - - - - ré[ng] - - - - - nes[ng] - - - - - si[ng] - - - - -

Fig. 8.2a. Ana Sokolović, *Six Voix Pour Sirènes*, mm. 45–49. (Copyright © 2000 by Boosey & Hawkes. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved.)

## IV Fight

Milica continues to dance and sing. Ljubica decides to make a joke. She approaches her and taps her on her back while Milica sings. Milica makes a "funny - goat" sound... Ljubica is in front of the audience. She is jealous. The four others are frozen or they do something neutral.

♩ = 58

**Bul...**

any pitch

355

*Milica*

*Danica*

*Lena*

*Zora*

*Nada*

*Ljubica*

The two groups are formed.

talk

dz-ga! —

talk

talk

she turns her head left-right

talk

ts ts ts ts

talk

talk

she's mocking Danica, imitating her

talk

No!

she's mocking Lena, imitating her

ts ts ts ts

ts ts ts ts

ts ts ts ts

she's laughing "silently"

3

km km km

inhale, with sympathy to Ljubica

Hm!

taps on Milica's back

Fig. 8.2b. *Svadba*, mm. 355–364. (Copyright © 2011 by Boosey & Hawkes, International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved.)

gradually. For example, in mm. 23 onwards, we have vowels [i] and [a] intrude at the ends of words. Gradually, however, at m. 33 for example, the [m] and eventually [ng] sounds intrude. Beginning in mm. 41–44, we hear the [ng] introduced in the ends of words, signaling the presence of the various parts of the mouth and vocal articulatory organs. All are sense disrupting. This is certainly Barthes's "language lined with flesh." Sokolović explains these interruptions as deriving from the playfulness of Serbian folk singing culture.

The dissolution of sense or of signification also plays out in scene 4, the climax, of *Svadba*, which Sokolović has titled "Fight." Here, in order to create drama, the composer stages—or composes out—the very undoing of meaning, "a *revolutionary act*," according to Duncan, "that calls into question the very sovereignty of reason."<sup>45</sup> Here, the singers' percussive vocal sounds work against traditional conceptions of percussion as a masculinized musical space.<sup>46</sup>

Sokolović's approach to the libretto is revealing. She talks about the libretto's nonlinearity, and its identity as "text" rather than "libretto." The barriers of translation as a result of the Serbian text are unimportant for Sokolović; indeed, she operationalizes this aspect of the piece. As she explains:

It's not to think we don't care [about the text]. It's that (again referring to the universality of the story), we will understand the meaning of this word, we will *know* when she is excited, we will *know* when someone is sad, we will *know* when there is conflict, you know? We don't need the *words* for that. So, in the libretto, well, there is no libretto. What Stravinsky did for his *Noces*—I put original texts from different regions and different eras. So, the text which was used for these situations and I just used it as a text and composed the melody for it. There is no dialogue, just texts. Texts for combing hair, songs while making flowered wreaths, while bathing, etc. And then, and more than that, I knew from this dramatical side, that I would need a conflict, because the opera cannot be everything beautiful. And I knew how I would put it, where I would put it, but I didn't know which text. I couldn't find any song where the people will be in conflict before the wedding—it doesn't exist. So I used the Serbian alphabet. First of all, you don't need to know which words they are using. What is important to the audience that there is a conflict—that's all. What we need is a text which is good to put in music for doing this battle. So, I used Serbian. The weakness of the Serbian alphabet is that it is not singable. In Serbian, our language is phonetic. So, you see, in a dramatic sense, you don't need too much text, you need intention.<sup>47</sup>

The ring in the voices throughout both of these pieces, described by nearly all listeners as something guttural, physical, and probing, is a material force. Traditional modes of analysis do not account for observations about materiality: these distinctions are for the most part unrecorded in the score. They are also incredibly difficult to describe. The range of timbres and registers of this singing, the straight tone, and indeed the intense modulations of tone that are asked of the singers, requires a commitment to the vocal expression that itself registers as intentional and passionate. Sokolović hears this as a result of the drama of the piece. The piece to her describes a rite of passage; it is something that audiences everywhere understand. Some of the singing, sustained and often static in many ways, seems from the listener's perspective to be taxing to the singers, the materiality of their instruments at stake in the requirements of this intense sound production. Mezzo-soprano Krisztina Szabo, for one, who workshopped and premiered both pieces with Queen of Puddings, spoke about the "beltissimo" timbre required of her in the two lowest parts and remarked upon its taxing nature. The tessitura of both pieces, being slightly lower than one might expect of traditional operatic singing, also impacts the materiality that one hears in the voices, since head voice singing betrays less evidence of the vocal mechanism and body than does singing involving more of the middle and lower vocal registers.

The intersubjective power of breath plays out powerfully in *Sirènes* most directly at the end of the piece, when the singers sing and speak about their heartbeats, but also of their breath, their mouths ("bouches"), voices ("voix"), and finally throats (with the exquisite French "gorges"), producing sounds that allow for the articulators to make noisy interruptions in an already busy, hectic swirl of sound. As Mariusz Kozak writes, hearing breath is about acknowledging reciprocity, and it takes on an "important subjective, psychological, and even spiritual dimension."<sup>48</sup> As though to enact the seduction of the sirens in a final gesture in *Six Voix Pour Sirènes*, Sokolović asks the singers to whisper, as she does throughout *Svadba*. In fact *Svadba* begins with the alternation of intense, visceral pitch clusters and short, articulated whispering of the bride's name "Milice." *Six Voix Pour Sirènes* ends with the sirens whispering questions that reference the possibility of their disappearance, a presence that is located in their voices with the text: "Et si nous perdions la voix? Qu'advierait-il? Qu'advierait-il de sirènes sans voix? Et d'une scène sans ses sirènes? Q'advierait-il si? Silence Silence Silence Silence Si."

Whispering, for Connor, is a mode of communication that crosses the linguistic gulf separating human from animal (think of horse whisperer, dog

whisperer, or even baby whisperer!). The whisper, especially in the context of the powerful singing that surrounds it, is a powerful lure. How can mere mortals resist the power inherent in a sound that invites one to incline so intently, as Jean-Luc Nancy has described it, towards its meaning? As David Lang has explained of his *the whisper opera* (2013), he created the piece as the result of his interest in the intimacy and fragility of live performance, of life itself. The intimacy of the whisper and its visceral insistence on relationality, or an intersubjective way of being, are perhaps particularly salient in the here and now, since recent restrictions on live performance and on gathering in the age of Covid-19 have made us long for this quality of operatic performance even more intently.

Recent feminist research and writing from the Global South has also challenged Western notions of voice as the ultimate sign of power, which Sokolović's works also support. The implications for the playfulness with which she explores various kinds of vocal sounds—including hushed vocal sounds, highly unusual in opera—challenge the notion that silence need be a sign of disempowerment and of lack of agency and seem to suggest that silence can also be subversive.<sup>49</sup> The extended exploration of these post-operatic approaches to vocalism position Sokolović's piece as representative of post-operatic experiments that use traditionally non-operatic vocalism to explore complex subjectivities characteristic of the twenty-first century.

According to Michel Poizat, we are always in search of the lost materiality of the voice, a materiality we knew before we were engulfed in the symbolic order, which Lacan situates as the order of narrative and language. We are always trying to get back to that. This is the lost object of opera. Or, rather, a lost effect. If music has been traditionally made to fit the symbolic, there is always a tension wherein it tries to get back to its originary way of being, what Tia DeNora says it is already trying to “achieve, silently.”<sup>50</sup> I would position Sokolović's creative use of consonant sounds and other “carnal” noises in *Six Voix Pour Sirènes* and *Svadba* as extensions of Eidsheim's assertion that intention and vibrational energy are key to materiality. Indeed, though the operatic form is built on the idea that the vowel communicates the true voice and subjectivity of the heroine, her deepest emotions and instincts (though not her thoughts) carried through the primordial (yet stylized) “ah” that pervades the canon, *Six Voix Pour Sirènes* and *Svadba* prove that there is also value in listening to other extra-vocal, contra-logos sounds as powerful communicators of womens' irreducible, often unnameable, power and presence.

## Notes

1. See Holly Harris, "Ana Sokolović Wants You to Enjoy Her Imagination," *Musicworks*, Issue 134 (2020), available at <https://www.musicworks.ca/ana-sokolovi%C4%87-wants-you-enjoy-her-imagination>
2. See Lydia Perovic, "In Conversation: 'It's a necessity, creation,'" *The Whole Note*, December 7, 2021, <https://www.thewholenote.com/index.php/newsroom/feature-stories/31533-in-conversation-it-s-a-necessity-creation-composer-ana-sokolovic>
3. See Shaun Brady, "Philadelphia Opera Unveils 'Svadba-Wedding,'" *Metro Philadelphia*, September 19, 2013, <https://metrophiladelphia.com/philadelphia-opera-unveils-svadba-wedding/>
4. Wayne Gooding, "Opera in Review: Toronto," *Opera Canada* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 40–41; 39–41. See also Christopher Hoile, "In Review—North America: *Svadba—Wedding*," *Opera News* 76, no. 3 (September 2011).
5. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPoURIGNsP0>
6. This production was available as of January 2022 at <https://www.operabox.tv/products/svadba>. Opera Philadelphia also streamed the opera through its Opera Philadelphia channel. Jane Forner's review of this film production also addresses the fascinating tensions between what is heard vocally and what it seen visually in this particular rendering of the work. See Jane Forner, "Svadba on the Beach: Opera for the Streaming Age," *Opera Quarterly*, 2022. kbac006, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/kbac006>
7. Michelle Duncan, "The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body: Voice, Presence, Performativity," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3 (2004): 284.
8. See Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. and with an introduction by Paul A. Kottman (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2005); Steven Connor, *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters, and Other Vocalization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
9. See Laurie Fyffe, "Queen of Puddings Music Theatre," *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (April 7, 2008), available at <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/queen-of-puddings-music-theatre-emc>
10. Tamara Bernstein, "The Vocal Music of Ana Sokolović: Love Songs for the Twenty-First Century," *Circuit*, 22, no. 3 (2012): 19–35; 27. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014226ar>
11. English translation by Francine Labelle.
12. For an excellent interview with Sokolović about the cultural and ethnic influences and inspirations for *Svadba*, see Perovic, "In Conversation: 'It's a necessity, creation.'"
13. Perovic, "In Conversation: 'It's a necessity, creation.'"
14. Hoile, "In Review—North America: *Svadba—Wedding*."
15. The score for *Svadba* is available for purchase through the Canadian Music Centre website and through Sokolović's new publisher Boosey & Hawkes. See <http://www.cmccanada.org>. The score for *Six Voix Pour Sirènes* is available from the composer.
16. Dairine Ni Mheadra and John Hess, interview with the author, April 17, 2018.
17. Dairine Ni Mheadra and John Hess, interview with the author, April 17, 2018.
18. Bernstein, "The Vocal Music of Ana Sokolović," 19.



19. Linda Fisher, "Feminist Phenomenological Voices," *Continental Philosophical Review* 43 (2010): 86.
20. Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 105.
21. See Jennifer Logue, "Beyond Binaries: Reflections on the 'Feminine Voice' in Philosophy and Feminism," *Philosophy of Education Archive* 2018, no. 1 (2018): 136–39.
22. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): 179–89; Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, and Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
23. Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 152.
24. Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 177.
25. Walter Ong, *Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).
26. Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin, eds. *The Voice as Something More: Essays Toward Materiality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019): 14.
27. Krisztina Szabo talked about the "weirdly emotional" way she got when she talked about the process of doing the piece, indicating that the connection wrought between the women through the rehearsal and performance processes of this piece was something special, binding, and visceral. The force of this "interrelational plurality" can be heard in the rawness of the voices in the 2020 Perm Opera Ballet Theatre production. It is also emphasized in the indistinct nature of voices in the BLO film of the opera.
28. Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 148.
29. Duncan, "The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body," 287.
30. This production starred Chabrelle D. Williams as Milica the bride-to-be, Brianna J. Robinson as Lena, Maggie Finnegan as Danica, Mack Wolz as Zora, Vera Savaage as Nada, and Hannah Ludwig as Ljubica. Actor/dancers embodying each character include Victoria L. Awkward (Milica), Jackie Davis (Lena), Jay Breen (Danica), Sarah Pacheco (Zora), Emily Jerant-Hendrickson (Nada), Sasha Peterson (Ljubica). Olivia Moon makes a special appearance as The Betrothed, a character who does not appear in Sokolović's score.
31. Forner, "Svadba on the Beach," 8.
32. Bernstein, "The Vocal Music of Ana Sokolović," 18.
33. Bernstein, "The Vocal Music of Ana Sokolović," 20. See also Aaron Gervais, "Ana Sokolović: Made in Canada (Sort of)," *Music on Main* (December 2012), <http://www.musiconmain.ca/ana-sokolovic-made-in-canada-sort-of/>
34. Bernstein, "The Vocal Music of Ana Sokolović," 29.
35. Michelle Duncan's work comes to mind here, as does Carolyn Abbate's work, specifically the analysis of Lakmé's vocalizing in the first chapter of *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Abbate writes, "In opera, we rarely hear the voice both unaccompanied and stripped of text—and when we do (in the vocal cadenzas typical of Italian arias, for instance), the sonority is disturbing, perhaps because such vocalizing so pointedly focuses our sense of the singing voice as one that can compel *without* benefit of words" (4).
36. Roland Barthes, "The Pleasure of the Text," trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 27.
37. Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 182.

38. Joy H. Calico explores breath as sound and concept brilliantly in her contribution to this volume, and her thinking around this issue has both inspired and confirmed my own thinking around the significance of breath in Sokolović's works.

39. The history of extended vocal techniques is in many ways imbricated with an interest in the materiality of sound. Pauline Oliveros and Joan La Barbara were intensely interested in these not only as compositional or sonic experience, but also as vibrational ones. Pauline Oliveros writes, for example, about her initial explorations into extended vocal techniques, writing, "I began to do this localization [writing about *Sonic Meditations*] because I wanted to explore [...] the sensation, how it felt and what the resonance was in the body in mind. How it could change your mind. And changed your thought patterns and so on" (Gelsey Bell and Pauline Oliveros, "Tracing Voice through the Career of a Musical Pioneer: A Conversation with Pauline Oliveros," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies* 2, no. 1 [2017]: 69).

40. Connor, *Beyond Words*, 35.

41. Connor, *Beyond Words*, 35. The story of the contest between Apollo and Marsyas enacts this distinction. See "Windbags and Skinsongs," <http://stevenconnor.com/windbags.html>

42. Ana Sokolović, interview with the author, May 31, 2019.

43. Dairine Ni Mheadra and John Hess, interview with the author, April 17, 2018.

44. Connor, *Beyond Words*, 88.

45. Duncan, "The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body," 291.

46. Thanks to Michael Kinney for this observation during the presentation of a shorter version of this chapter at the conference *Opera in Flux: Identity, Staging, Narrative* in October 2020, hosted virtually by the University of Illinois at Chicago.

47. Ana Sokolović, interview with author, May 31, 2019.

48. Mariusz Kozak, *Enacting Musical Time: The Bodily Experience of New Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 57.

49. This is the topic of Jane L. Parpart and Swati Parashar, eds, *Rethinking Silence, Voice, and Agency in Contested Gendered Terrains* (New York: Routledge, 2019). The book features several examples from the Global South that reveal silence as symbolic of womens' strength, power, and often political agency, challenging Western notions that speech and silence are polar opposites.

50. Tia DeNora, "Interlude 54: Two or More Forms of Music," in *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education*, ed. Liora Bresler (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer, 2007), 801. Cited in Nina Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 160.

## Sex, Myth, and Power

### *Reclaiming the “Dark Feminine” in Anthony Davis’s Lilith*

Jane Forner

“You were an accident of femininity, witchcraft, and maternity. The Creator is sorry for His mistakes.” With these words, the “Voice” reveals to Lilith her origins, during divorce proceedings from Adam in Eden. An angel and spokesman for the Almighty, the ominously named Voice attempts to assert divine patriarchal authority over the wayward woman, deemed an aberration in what should have been the creation of the ideal first man and woman. Lilith is cast as a mistake soon to be rectified by the arrival of Adam’s new wife, Eve, the original woman 2.0. With music by Anthony Davis, and a libretto by Allan Havis based on his 1990 play of the same name, the opera *Lilith* offers a comic and provocative interrogation of sexual equality and women’s power. I situate it both as a representation of twenty-first-century feminist strategies of engaging with myth and as an important—and overlooked—component of how Davis’s political commitment is expressed through his operatic work.

Surprisingly, given its long-standing attachment to “transgressive” women with suspiciously devilish and seductive intentions, opera has rarely featured Lilith as a character. Despite her strong imprint on the Western cultural imagination throughout literature, visual art, theater, film, television, popular music, and even video games, feminist approaches to new opera have also generally overlooked this quintessential figure. Of the few Lilith operas, those debuted in the United States include Deborah Drattell’s *Lilith*, premiered in concert version at the 1998 Glimmerglass Festival and subsequently staged by the New York City Opera in 2001. Joshua Horowitz’s *Lilith, The Night Demon in One Lewd Act*, a “part burlesque, part chamber folk opera” in English, Hebrew, and Yiddish, was produced at the Osher Marin Jewish Community Center in San Rafael, California, in 2014.<sup>1</sup> Outside North America, Péter Eöt-

vös and Albert Ostermaier's *Paradise Reloaded (Lilith)* (Neue Oper Wien, 2013), which I have analyzed elsewhere, is perhaps the most high-profile contribution to a Lilith opera corpus since it was staged at multiple major opera houses in Europe. The opera presents an elusively feminist take on the mythological demoness, inserting Lilith into a reinterpretation of a classic work of Hungarian literature, Imre Madách's 1861 eschatological, Milton-esque prose play *Az ember tragédiája (The Tragedy of Man)*.<sup>2</sup> In their work, Davis and Havis constitute a vital part of this roster of operatic reimaginations of the Lilith myth, which they position explicitly as a feminist act that scrutinizes society's conceptions of "what a woman is . . . what a modern-day woman is" and how Lilith's story "could reflect on today."<sup>3</sup>

Premiered in 2009 at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), *Lilith* represents, on the surface, a diversion from Davis's focus on narratives drawn from modern American—and especially African American—history, but its feminist critique nonetheless grapples with parallel mythologies of power and inequality. The stage works of Davis, who has a robust operatic oeuvre spanning four decades, have only lately enjoyed widespread acclaim, accelerated by winning the 2020 Pulitzer Prize in Music for *The Central Park Five* (2019, libretto by Richard Wesley), and through several high-profile revivals of his first opera, *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1985, libretto by Thulani Davis) at the Detroit Opera and the Opera Omaha in 2022 and at the Metropolitan Opera in 2023.<sup>4</sup> This renewed attention to Davis's operas—undeniably encouraged by Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020—has centered his inclination for staging recent history, especially marginalized stories and topics of racial injustice. As George E. Lewis sums up, "an important part of every Davis opera involves a hard, socially committed look at race."<sup>5</sup> This focus is present also in the opera *Amistad* (1997, libretto by Thulani Davis), narrating the 1839 slave revolt on the eponymous ship, and *Wakonda's Dream* (2007, libretto by Yusef Komunyakaa), which tells the story of a "Native American family struggling to find their place in contemporary society."<sup>6</sup>

*Lilith* is among a group of Davis's chamber operas that continue to address complex social and political questions in different directions, including *Tania* (1992, libretto by Michael John La Chiusa), based on the 1974 kidnapping of Patty Hearst by the Symbionese Liberation Army, and *Lear on the Second Floor* (2013, libretto by Havis), a twist on Shakespeare's *King Lear* exploring the degenerating mind of a woman with Alzheimer's and her relationships with her three daughters. All three feature intimate ensembles; directed at

its premiere by Cuban bandleader and percussionist Dafnis Prieto, *Lilith* comprises three principal and three secondary vocal roles and a chamber orchestra of clarinet and bass clarinet, string quintet, percussion (vibraphone and marimba), drums, and keyboards (piano and Kurzweil synthesizer). My analyses of *Lilith* are based on the concert premiere in 2009, at which Cynthia Aaronson-Davis sang Lilith/Claire, Susan Narucki as Eppy, Ruff Yeager as Adam, Jonah Davis as Earl, and Philip Larson as the Voice, and a semi-staged 2015 workshop production consisting of five scenes, *[Re]Creating Lilith*, the latter also at UCSD. This featured Bonnie Lander as Lilith/Claire, Hilary Jean Young as Eppy, Alvin Almazan as Adam, and Larson reprised his role as the Voice; direction was by Keturah Stickann, set design by Victoria Petrovich, lighting by Gwilyoung Ko, and visual/interactive design by Peter Torpey.

After giving a brief overview of the history of *Lilith* and the opera's genesis, I focus on three key aspects of the opera's feminist reclamation: sex and power, motherhood, and confronting a Lilith-Eve duality, throughout which I emphasize the creators' dominant expressive mode of satire and dark comedy. I demonstrate how the narrative is shaped by features of Lilith mythology, influences from post-Freudian and feminist psychoanalytical perspectives, and allusions to twentieth-century popular culture from Hollywood femmes fatales to video games. Addressing Davis's signature freedom in his compositional approach, I argue that stylistic plurality functions as an important strategy to disrupt racially coded politics of operatic genre. I aim here to build musicological discourse on Davis's operas, especially establishing *Lilith* as occupying a crucial position—that of a turn to distant pasts rather than recent history—in his long-term efforts to sustain his politics through musical practice.

## Creating *Lilith*

The dramatic structure and narrative of *Lilith* are largely drawn from Havis's original play, although he and Davis worked collaboratively to adapt it for operatic form. Havis, of Jewish background, was familiar with the figure of Lilith but undertook considerable research into her mythological history, augmenting his existing knowledge through research in New York at a Yiddish Library on the Upper East Side and at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in Chelsea. Lilith's symbolic resonance for feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, "who claimed her," Naomi Wolf writes, "as their own personal one-

woman Act Up guerrilla fighter,” also strongly impacted Havis and Davis’s approach.<sup>7</sup> *Lilith* is based most directly on the *midrash* in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (*ABS*), an anonymous collection of proverbs and stories written in Aramaic and Hebrew, dating from somewhere between the eighth and tenth centuries CE.<sup>8</sup> Here Lilith precedes Eve as Adam’s first wife, and her refusal to submit sexually—“I will not lie below,” she proclaims—leads her to flee, pursued by angels, and thereafter live a cursed existence.<sup>9</sup> In an even longer history of folk mythology, she belongs to lineages of goddesses and spirits coded as seductive and demonic.<sup>10</sup>

The opera unites influences from across centuries of mythological and popular culture, addressing “the ironic ever-changing image of Lilith through history, from the mysterious, dark-haired, winged creature of ancient mythology to the irresistible blonde sex goddess as portrayed in 20th century media ranging from Jean Harlow and other Hollywood femme fatales to the rock stars Madonna and Shakira.”<sup>11</sup> It focuses especially on examining critically her mythological reputation as a nocturnal seducer of unsuspecting men, whose semen she steals (“You gotta give back his semen,” insists the Voice in scene 2), as a threat to children, and the broader trope of the femme fatale. Both Davis and Havis mentioned Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* (1987) to me as a key reference point, and Havis described taking inspiration for both play and libretto from classic Hollywood actresses of the 1940s and 1950s. One of the most pertinent was J. R. Salamanca’s 1961 novel *Lilith* and the subsequent 1964 film adaptation directed by Robert Rossen, starring Warren Beatty as Vincent Bruce, a young man who returns from serving in the Korean War and becomes infatuated with Lilith Arthur (played by Jean Seberg), a mysterious and seductive inpatient at a Maryland psychiatric home.

These many influences amalgamate to form the opera’s narrative, which is set in two places, the Garden of Eden and modern-day New York City. Havis’s play was divided into two parts corresponding to these locations, titled “Before Eve” and “Agunah: Bound Woman,” but the libretto introduces more fluidity of time and place.<sup>12</sup> The opera begins in the present, moving to Eden for scenes 2–5, before returning to the present for scenes 6–15. In scene 1, we encounter Claire and Eppy, modern manifestations of Lilith and Eve: Claire, a seductive and threatening stranger, meets Eppy in a café, and the two develop a warring but intriguing connection. It transpires that Claire has been watching Eppy’s husband, Arnold (a modern Adam); a predictably disastrous affair ensues, with Eppy and Arnold’s son Earl used as a pawn in the fraught love triangle. Claire eventually abducts Earl, and the opera ends

with a dramatic confrontation between her and Eppy. Nested within this plot are the Eden scenes, where we witness divorce proceedings between Adam and Lilith, presided over by an angel (“The Voice”)—Eve is never actually present—and the aftermath of Lilith’s banishment to the Red Sea.

Two important consequences arise from the structural changes that Havis introduced for the opera: the Eden scenes untether the narrative from fixed and linear chronology, but furthermore, because the characters in the “present” function symbolically, a doubling ensues where past and present fluctuate and refract, and Eden projects a mythical atemporality. In our conversations, Havis offered a vivid analogy to how he sees the concept of identity in *Lilith*; I was curious as to what happens when Claire and Arnold seem to “remember” that they are Lilith and Adam in the present. Havis often used the word “jolt” to describe these moments, implying something that forces the modern-day characters into a memory state where they become aware that their identities are not fully their own. He also suggested an analogy to experiencing a (good) psychedelic trip, as shedding your name and identity, which falls away “like a jacket” falling off your body, knowing that your existence is both now and infinitely part of the universe.

Throughout the opera, Havis’s predilection for linking temporal and psychological ambiguity is a core strategy through which the varied potential subjectivities of the Lilith-Eve archetypes manifest (I omit Adam deliberately here, as it is first and foremost the multiplicities of women’s identities that are explored). His approach in *Lilith* builds on a precedent established in his earlier plays of exploring interpersonal dysfunction, such as *Mink Sonata* (1986), where stepmother and daughter are positioned in a narrative counterpoint of beautiful/disturbed. In an interview regarding his play *Haut Goût* (1987), Havis noted his attraction to portraying confrontation and dramatic ambiguity through psychological prisms: “whatever the tapestry, I like an unusual conflict. I also like either the fantastical or things that are very much real—but because of some deep-seated psychology, they reverberate and don’t become realistic.”<sup>13</sup> Boundaries between the real and the fantastical, and between an Edenic “past” and a modern “present” in *Lilith*, are similarly tested. Characters frequently reference past and future events that, if they were persons tethered psychologically to one time frame (rather than unstable prisms of archetypal identities), they should have no business knowing. That the same performers sing all roles only magnifies, of course, this sense of doubling that bends time, where mythical and symbolic personas confront one another.

## Sex and Power

Sigmund Hurwitz concludes his historical and psychoanalytical study of Lilith with the question: “What does the confrontation with the dark aspect of the feminine mean to people today?”<sup>14</sup> Lilith, Wolf argues, “offers us a vision of pure female autonomy”: for Havis and Davis, the answer is one of rehabilitation and reclamation of this “dark feminine,” where feminist empowerment is predicated on challenging entrenched associations between women’s sexuality and transgression.<sup>15</sup> Surrounded by the judgment of men during her divorce proceedings in scenes 2 through 4, Lilith rebuffs Adam’s complaints that their problems “began in bed . . . she demands to be on top, always”:

VOICE: Adam is supposed to take the missionary. LILITH: Because he’s a man? Where’s it written? ADAM: Because I am man. LILITH: Why should you precede me? We were born at the same time.<sup>16</sup> (scene 2)

The Voice here acts as ventriloquist for God, and as a henchman—mirroring the angel messengers in the *midrash*—sent to regulate sexual disobedience, to clean up the mess of Lilith before her marriage yields a humanity that might risk women *being on top*.

That these demands are ludicrous is made clear through the text’s witticisms (“Only the missionary”; “I get nosebleeds!”) and Davis’s vocal writing, particularly for the Voice, for whom he writes a sententious, contrapuntal line, parodying a serious fugal style to highlight the archaic absurdity of the angel’s position as divine enforcer. (In *[Re]Creating Lilith*, the character is represented visually by shifting lights on stage rather than physical presence, emphasizing the concatenation of the Voice and God’s authority). Such passages also serve an important function of affording Lilith a voice denied to her in mythology. Her speaking back to patriarchal power parallels other reclaimed voices of mythological or medieval women in contemporary opera, such as Clémence in Kaija Saariaho and Amin Maalouf’s *Lamour de loin* (2000), where the usually silent *domna* of troubadour poetry is not only given a voice, but uses it to attack the pedestal upon which she has been placed by Jaufré Rudel (“Mais de quel droit parle-t-il de moi?” “What right does he have to speak about me?”).<sup>17</sup>

As Judith Baskin summarizes the *midrash*, “the very notion of an autonomous woman, co-existent with the first man and dangerous to submissive men and their children, was a source of significant social, spiritual, and sexual



The image displays a musical score excerpt for the opera *Lilith*, measures 301-309. It consists of two systems. The first system (mm. 301-304) features Lilith's vocal line and Piano accompaniment. Lilith's part is marked 'C-C# octatonic' and includes the lyrics 'Ah - - ee uh - ee ah -'. The Piano part is marked 'f' and 'mp cresc.' and also features a 'C-C# octatonic' collection. The second system (mm. 305-309) shows Lilith's vocal line and Piano accompaniment. Lilith's part includes the lyrics 'ee uh - - ee'. The Piano part is marked 'ff' and 'fff' and includes performance instructions for '(Clarinet, Vln I)' and '(Piano)'. The score is written in 4/4 time and features complex rhythmic patterns and chromaticism.

Fig. 9.1. Lilith pronounces the Ineffable Name, scene 2, *Lilith*, mm. 301–309. (Score excerpt from *Lilith*, copyright 2009, reprinted with permission from Episteme Music, administered exclusively worldwide by Schott Music Corporation.)

anxiety to the collective rabbinic psyche.”<sup>18</sup> The opera caricatures these anxieties in emphasizing that Lilith is by default Adam’s equal, and that there is no justification for the inhibition of her freedom. Lilith is also situated not only as Adam’s peer, but *surpassing* him in strength and, more importantly, rivaling God’s power. Davis articulates this musically in two ways: first, by setting Lilith on equal footing with the two male characters. In the divorce scenes, he typically clusters the three voices closely, differing in register but sharing melodic figures and rhythmic patterns, and all lines drawing pitch material primarily from octatonic collections, a backbone of Davis’s melodic palette in *Lilith*. On other occasions, Lilith’s superior strength is emphasized through musical difference. For instance, when she utters the “Ineffable Name” in scene 2, she causes a great sonic rupture: shown in figure 9.1, her vocal line, dominated by glissandi through ascending tritones, soars to land

on  $D_b$ , matched by the strings and piano's syncopated, increasingly rapid, and loud patterns. Both voice and ensemble outline markedly the C-C $\sharp$  ( $D_b$ ) octatonic scale, landing on a thick cluster chord.<sup>19</sup> Lilith's blasphemy is signified through its effect alone, wordlessly vocalizing on vowels "Ah-ee-uh-ee."

Followed by the Voice's angry demand, "Who said the Ineffable Name?," the score then instructs all instrumentalists here to "improvise harmonic texture with space" and "improvise soft texture, use harmony": in the 2009 premiere, Aaronson-Davis added fierce whispered noises, while electronic distortion was added in Lander's 2015 performance to emphasize the anarchic quality of Lilith's sound. We understand that she possesses superior, forbidden knowledge—of the Ineffable Name—and thus we hear it only as phonemic content.

Lilith's wordless singing tears through an invisible line between the permissible and the blasphemous, but I interpret it also as the sounding of sexual abandon, rising to the excessive boundaries of the voice, reflecting David Stern's suggestion that in the *Zohar*, in which Lilith also features, "divinity itself is eroticized."<sup>20</sup> Crossovers between an erotic dimension of medieval Jewish mysticism and contemporary influences are also evident here, in that Davis sought inspiration from blues traditions for these scenes of Edenic divorce banter:

There's this incredible battle of the sexes that's always implicit in the blues . . . I studied all this music, and that came out in *Lilith* too, especially the kind of dirtiness, the salaciousness of it, and also the raw, emotional aspect, the fact that it's laying bare these feelings and this anxiety about sexuality, which is basically at the root of *Lilith* . . . Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, all these people, they really negotiated those things in their songs, so it seemed natural to me to draw on that idea, even though it's unnatural for an opera singer.<sup>21</sup>

Echoing Angela Davis's analyses of women's blues as subversive of gendered expectations, Davis's deployment of a blues-inflected "battle of the sexes" undermines heteropatriarchal norms, with Lilith's erotic resistance functioning as both a challenge to male sexual demands and a *sonically* disruptive force.<sup>22</sup> This works both on a narrative level and as a play with operatic genre, wherein Davis considers his use of rap and blues as a subversive intervention matching Havis's provocative text: "Sometimes he would have in the libretto things that cut away, you feel the rage, the crudeness of the language.

It's almost like a fissure, something that breaks open, even from something that would usually be in the blues paradigm, something you wouldn't say—you create expectations, and sometimes there are fissures, disjunct aspects."<sup>23</sup>

Davis's approach speaks to a spirit of stylistic plurality and openness that runs throughout *Lilith* as well as his other works. While his rejection of the label "jazz" has been well-documented, his key role in Black musical experimental traditions and translation of his practice to the operatic stage illuminates the politics of genre.<sup>24</sup> Davis's "sense of play" in *Lilith*<sup>25</sup>—described by a reviewer as "genre-leaping"<sup>26</sup>—represents a compositional freedom that works as a disruptive strategy, producing those "fissures" not only in the immediate horizon of musical expectations in the opera but as an intervention into the form. I pressed further on this idea in our conversations:

JANE FORNER: I'm interested in this idea of play: do you think of it as a kind of openness, a mobility to be able to freely move between things?

ANTHONY DAVIS: You could say a kind of postmodern way of looking at it, using reference, something recognizable yet mediated into something I'm creating, but I'm thinking about these forms when I'm creating it. . . . Sometimes the references I use may be unrecognizable to the audience . . . but it gives me pleasure, because it's also establishing my connection to the past . . . sometimes it's subversive too. . . . It's an assertion of my identity, who I am, where I come from, for me.<sup>27</sup>

In *Lilith* we hear blues, free jazz, video game music, Cuban jazz, rap, hip-hop, and more; it offers fertile ground to explore how Davis's stylistic mobility reflects his background in experimental practices and a musical politics of what, for Lewis, is a form of "genre refusal."<sup>28</sup> It calls to mind Fred Moten's scrutiny of "how the idea of a black avant-garde exists, as it were, oxymoronic—as if black, on the one hand, and avant-garde, on the other hand, each depends for its coherence upon the exclusion of the other."<sup>29</sup> Davis's connections to many diverse musical traditions exist in an exciting ever-shifting sonic dialogue; I see his operas reflecting what Lewis asserts are ways that "African-American composers have explored what it means—and could mean—to be American, helping to foster a creolized, cosmopolitan new music for the 21st century."<sup>30</sup>

I conceptualize *Lilith*'s rehabilitation in the opera as a further expression of Davis's attention to empowerment of marginalized or maligned voices.

Musically, this is facilitated by his allocation of substantial solo sections exclusively to Lilith, Claire, and Eppy: Lilith is afforded two, in scenes 3 and 5; Eppy's aria comes in scene 9, representing the moment "Eve" can speak freely, and Claire sings several aria-like passages in scene 15. Text and music in these moments tend to shift away from the prevailing satirical and comic mode. For Lilith's soaring, meditative aria in scene 3, Havis offers a lyrical poetic mysticism: "These aren't mere arms, these are wings of a fiery spirit. The sun, the moon, and the earth became triumvirate. I too have a magic amulet against them and their kind."

Moving away from the bass and piano beat-driven writing that underpins the Eden court scenes, Davis articulates for the first time in this aria a musical identity associated primarily with Lilith, a beguiling web of undulating white-note cluster chords (fig. 9.2), producing dense modal sonorities, which continually thicken as black notes are added. Overlapping triplets weave together to create a pulsing texture, encapsulating the magic and universal unity of which she sings, and the spreading of her powerful "wings." We hear in Lilith's soliloquy what Quincy Troupe calls "a symphonic elocution of elegant voices / a cecil taylor bedazzlement of lyrical, discordant chords."<sup>31</sup> These passages indeed specifically echo influences from Cecil Taylor's signature modal piano clusters, which he described as "four or five bodies of sound existing in a duality of dimension."<sup>32</sup> Davis's writing is a "tribute" to the musician that also emphasized his experience as an improviser.<sup>33</sup>

Musical allusions to the distribution of power and agency among the three characters in Eden also work deliberately to shore up Adam's weakness as well as Lilith's strength. This parallels Wojciech Kosior's recent analysis of "the ruthlessly parodic tone" of the *midrash* as primarily a criticism of Adam, "who turns out to be weak and ineffective in his relations with his wife."<sup>34</sup> The opera, however, strikes a balance, mocking Adam's deficiencies and emphasizing Lilith's strength without erasing the harm she and all women endure. For example, in scene 4, Adam cannot penetrate Lilith, but his literal and figurative impotence is marked by the discovery that she has been "sewn up from side to side"; Lilith responds that "They're bringing surgical tools that will cut open our flesh. My ovaries, your ribcage, ripped with ease." Havis's libretto oscillates between straightforward comedy, dark humor, and devastating lines like this that reiterate Lilith's humanity and strength simultaneously, while avoiding the pitfall of the misogynist trope of men as "powerless" when faced with seductive women.

205

Lilith

These aren't mere arms, these are wings

Piano

*p cresc.*

208

Lilith

of a fie - ry spi - rit. The sun, the

Pno.

*mp cresc.*

211

Lilith

moon and the earth,

Pno.

Fig. 9.2. Lilith's aria, scene 3, *Lilith*, mm. 205–212. (Score excerpt from *Lilith*, copyright 2009, reprinted with permission from Episteme Music, administered exclusively worldwide by Schott Music Corporation.)

## “Divine Whore, Terrible Mother”

As spectators, we are not asked to believe that Lilith is morally right, but to understand her and Claire’s actions in the opera always as performing a critique and parody of patriarchal notions of what it means to be “good,” as woman and mother. Hurwitz proposes two “aspects” of Lilith: when she is faced with a man, “the aspect of the *divine whore*, or, psychologically speaking, that of the seductive anima, comes to the fore. To a woman, however, she will present above all the aspect of the *terrible mother* [emphasis in original].”<sup>35</sup> I have pointed to depictions of Lilith’s sins as chiefly concerning the sexual, but her identity as (bad) mother is central to the opera’s interrogation of how patriarchal structures fear and seek to pathologize women’s sexual agency. Lilith refuses normative sexual roles specifically cast within the context of proper marital relations, thus establishing the sphere of her transgression as inherent to the family and to proper social reproduction.

Perceived sexual transgression is inseparable from perceived maternal neglect and perversion. “Fear of the archaic mother,” writes Julia Kristeva, “turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing.”<sup>36</sup> The crux of Lilith’s punishment, as told in the *ABS* and manifesting in the Eden scenes in *Lilith*, concerns her children: “Said the Holy One to Adam, ‘If she agrees to come back, fine. If not, she must permit one hundred of her children to die every day.’”<sup>37</sup>

God’s judgment will not permit Lilith to assume the role of a mother who is also sexually liberated and independently powerful. Fear of this happening ushers in her banishment, where she is not only removed from Eden but also forced perpetually to live out a cursed motherhood, one that will then be turned upon her again as she is transformed into a folkloric symbol of evil against other mothers and children. In the opera, Claire’s relationship with and abduction of Earl, Eppy and Arnold’s son, further casts her as the “terrible” or abject mother. This largely dictates the narrative of the latter half of the opera, in which Claire/Lilith’s sexuality is most threatening when directed toward the child: “[Earl] will worship me . . . he will confuse mother and whore” (scene 15). The opera’s scrutiny of society’s exigencies on motherhood is often deliberately uncomfortable. Claire seems to take perverse delight in children’s sexual pleasure and to wield an uncanny influence over Earl, foreshadowed first by Lilith’s rap interlude in scene 3, taunting that she will haunt Adam and Eve’s offspring: “I tickle little boys in their sleep / They never stir, or

make a peep / Before they awake, their sheets are wet / Their flannel pajamas are drenched in sweat.”

Over a jagged, syncopated bass-piano riff, Davis requires the singer to alternate between rapping and singing these lines. In the premiere, the angel beatboxes in the background, while in *[Re]Creating Lilith* Lilith's voice is electronically distorted, parodying threat. I find this passage difficult, recoiling at hearing the character revel in causing young boys' nocturnal emissions. But we are supposed to feel uneasy and to use that discomfort to probe societal biases, particularly those that reinscribe associations between sexual “deviancy” and child-focused “perversion.” These biases continually manifest, for instance, in queerphobic rhetoric surrounding child molestation, what Ian Barnard has examined in depth as one of the twenty-first century's most pervasive “sex panic[s].”<sup>38</sup> This scene also parallels Salamanca's *Lilith* novel and Rossen's film, from which Havis drew inspiration, where Lilith Arthur appears several times in uncomfortable quasi-erotic interactions with young boys, musing, in the novel, “to possess a child—oh, that would be exquisite.”<sup>39</sup>

The sexually deviant predator stereotype is also subjected to more obvious satire, however, evidenced in scene 14 in the hotel room and hostage site, where Earl plays a video game titled *Lilith, the Succubus Bitch*, sonically rendered by a Kurzweil synthesizer. Shocking his mother (“Nice language!” Eppy comments on the game's title), the passage neatly elides paranoia of child perversion with entrenched societal anxieties over the (perceived) damaging effect of video games on children. (An added layer of irony comes from the fact that Davis was inspired by the playing of video games by his own son Jonah, who sang Earl in the premiere.) In the game, Earl defeats an angel in a battle over the Red Sea, and the Voice speaks *to* Eppy through the game, telling her she can use an amulet to ward off Claire. The shimmering synth texture here musically renders this mind-bending dissolving of temporalities, with myth, operatic narrative, and game all colliding in one dramatic space.

Again recalling how Havis's text continually emphasizes the cruelty of Lilith's treatment, the opera's rehabilitation of Lilith-as-mother lies both in her ability to voice her own resistance and in exposing the brutality of the forced loss of her child and its emotional impact: “Lilith, before your body swells, we will abort this child, a young soul defiled” (Voice, scene 4). “I don't want them,” Adam grumbles; “I want my babies returned,” Lilith pleads. The Voice speaks: “Never . . . you will never see them again.” Responsibility for her demon children and their daily abortion is placed exclusively on Lilith, exposing, I suggest, the haplessness of Adam as a vehicle for a more serious

criticism of men absenting responsibility for pregnancies and yet still meting out punishment. When I first started writing about this opera in 2018, I thought about how the impact of the public acceleration of the #MeToo movement on the opera industry might shape a future staging. Returning to the opera several years later, it's this aspect of Lilith's story that I felt deeply in the wake of the devastation of reproductive rights in the United States following the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022. I think now of what it would be like to revisit the opera's feminist critique in a staging of *Lilith* today, bearing in mind the contrast already in place in the 2015 production, which, in staging only five scenes, ends with a mournful elegy to Lilith's unborn child. Davis sets this new finale to the same texture of shifting cluster chords heard in her scene 3 aria: "Little you, little me, in the trees, on our knees / Little me, on the beach, out of reach / Under leaves, without sleeves / Little you, little me."

This ending considerably alters the original narrative arc, removing the motivating subplot of Earl's abduction, but although presenting only a third of the full opera was initially a practical decision, Stickann's direction also offers an important alternative interpretation. *[Re]Creating Lilith's* ending focuses substantially on pathos and, most importantly, on the psychological complexities of the Lilith-Eve/Claire-Eppy relationship, whose centrality forms a connecting thread between the two versions.

## Confronting Lilith-Eve Duality

Havis asks, "What happens when Eve becomes Lilith?";<sup>40</sup> but who *is* Eve in the opera? We only meet her as a modern manifestation of an archetype, as fleetingly echoed in contemporary subjectivities and in the shadows of Eppy's psyche. We also learn about her through others: the Voice calls her "Lilith without fire, she is Lilith without danger, nothing stranger" (scene 2), and Lilith's attitude during the divorce scenes is predominantly disdainful toward the forthcoming "new woman," replying "She has a vagina, Adam," when he asks, "Is she as sexy as Lilith?" Eve will be nothing more than a vessel to fulfill Adam's needs. But so too is it consistently implied that the two women are in some way the same:

LILITH: The other woman is my enemy.

VOICE: The other woman is still you. (scene 2)



...

EPHY: I am the natural female; you are the counterfeit.

CLAIRE: You seem so much like me . . . (scene 15)

It is also strongly insinuated that Earl is, in fact, the product of Adam and Lilith's final sexual union, as well as Ephy's son, which both continues to warp the narrative chronology and strengthens the suggestion that Eve/Ephy is also Lilith, as in this passage in scene 8:

CLAIRE: We have given birth to the very same child.

EPHY: Get away! Fly to Hell!

CLAIRE: We are beloved sisters . . .

EPHY: I will kill you!

CLAIRE: . . . genuine mothers of one mystical uterus.

EPHY: If you come again, I'll tear your fucking eyes right out from your skull!  
This, I swear.

Ephy's anger signifies a revulsion and rejection of Lilith that arises from being confronted with a facet of her own identity that she is unable initially to accept. The ongoing battle between Ephy and Claire could appear as a simple case of protective mother versus child-stealing psychopath, wife versus mistress, but even as the drama moves toward the final conflict, I see a shift take place that refocuses their energies inwards, that is, away from Adam/Arnold, to where their tension no longer holds men as its central referent. As mentioned, Ephy is also later afforded a substantial aria in scene 9, matching Lilith's in scenes 3 and 5, offering her a chance to speak freely and establish an identity in her own right. It is a lament that draws attention to another important dimension of the opera's feminist critique, societal attitudes towards postmenopausal women: "The petals of my flower bleed as if time died. Look at the hourglass; listen to the red oriole. Am I aging needlessly when kisses turn to dust? Must I hemorrhage to please you?"

The move away from presenting Lilith and Eve as dueling opposites toward highlighting their proximity is expressed on multiple levels. Musically, Davis tends to situate Claire and Ephy's vocal lines in intimate musical spaces, writing melodic lines in their dialogue scenes that mirror one another either as repetitions or as literal mirrored motifs, each line a straightforward intervallic inversion of the other's. In Stickann's directorial vision for *[Re] Creating Lilith*, the ambiguity between the two identities was represented



Fig. 9.3. Video projections and mirrors emphasizing Eve-Lilith duality, scene 5 in *[Re]Creating Lilith* (2015). (Used with permission from Anthony Davis and Allan Havis.)

through Victoria Petrovich's set design, which used multiple mirrors to form a triptych-like tableau with Lander as Claire/Lilith at center stage and videos of both her and Eppy projected onto the mirrors, conveying the "multiplicity of both Lilith and Eve, as they replicate themselves through time"<sup>41</sup> (fig. 9.3). The videos change rapidly in the performance, reiterating continuously a diffracted and splintered visual and sonic exploration of women's subjectivities; when Eppy demands, "Who are you?" upon meeting Claire in scene 1, the latter replies simply, "I am you in the mirror late at night."

Hurwitz's Jungian framework perpetuates a Lilith-Eve duality as two opposing female archetypes and explicitly dismisses feminist approaches to reinterpreting the myth. While his position is hardly mainstream, the resistance to this line of argument from pioneering feminist writers of the late 1960s is no less foundational now to our understanding of the failings in post-Freudian psychoanalytic approaches to Lilith. While acknowledging the Lilith-Eve binary as manifestations of specifically male anxieties, they shift away from them in order to explore erotic potentials. Jewish theologian Judith Plaskow writes, for instance, of her realization of the "potentially sexual nature of the energy between Eve and Lilith" after coming out, a decade after she wrote her important text *The Coming of Lilith*.<sup>42</sup>

Reading the opera's two endings side by side, I hear two avenues opening

up that transcend the heteronormative patriarchal stereotype of Lilith and Eve as a Janus-faced female dialectic of dark and light, Madonna and whore. In closing with Lilith's lament for her children and Eppy and Lilith absorbed in mirror reflections, *[Re]Creating Lilith* encourages empathy and a focus on self-love and acceptance. The impact of the original finale, meanwhile, lies in its undoing of this oppositionality and its exploration of the "potentially sexual nature" of the women's relationship. The direction reads, "Eppy is caught in Claire's spell. Their lips touch"; Claire implores "Kiss me, Eppy, end my pain." In my hearing, it is this morphing in the final passages away from the Eden narrative and an opening up of a queered potential that is the opera's most powerful feature in its mythological rewriting. I perceive the Lilith-Adam-Eve triumvirate to be destabilized in favor of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls an "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically."<sup>43</sup> It functions as a new starting point that is gestured to only as the action ends ambiguously, upending clichéd concepts of conflict between two opposing "aspects" of woman, beginning to dissolve a binary and to transcend heteronormative archetypal identities. Adam—perhaps man altogether—is irrelevant to the dramatic tension of the finale, exiting without fanfare and with unwavering weakness on his final line "Eppy, my chest." As Eppy and Claire then face one another, I see and hear Lilith's power engaged as a form of queered speculation, where narrative uncertainty opens the way for her sexuality to be recast as an all-absorbing celebration of a female erotic energy. It reflects Audre Lorde's assertion of the feminist possibilities of an erotic that "offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation"; like Lilith herself, "the erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation."<sup>44</sup>

For the final forty or so measures of the opera, Davis again deploys the sound world used earlier to signify Lilith's mysticism, a swelling chordal texture that begins with those signature white-note clusters and is slowly infiltrated with dissonances. Importantly, this begins the measure after Lilith sings "Come, kiss me goodbye" to Eppy, the music thereby signifying and reinforcing the shift in their relationship. Much of this queered, woman-focused erotic potential that I draw out in my own listening lies under the surface, not foregrounded explicitly in the opera. I think here of Ellie Hisama's longstanding assertion that "hearing pieces of music *as feminists* may

lead us to reject our traditional analytical tools and encourage us to develop new ones . . . because some works might exceed our received ways of hearing, theorizing, and criticizing."<sup>45</sup> When I listen to Claire's final lines, I hear the unreserved replenishing force of women's erotic energy that Lorde describes, drawn out through the subtle suggestions of the text and Davis's expansive, lyrical vocal writing; when I sing through the passage myself, I feel not only the physical satisfaction of the sustained, sinuous line but also a gratifying tension between Davis's fondness for large leaps, open fifths and fourths, and tritones, the "invisible pleasures," in Lawrence Kramer's term, of the operatic voice, audible but invisible.<sup>46</sup> I see this mode of analysis as especially necessary for understanding *Lilith* in the absence of many vocal performances, where I rely as much on my own embodied experience of hearing and singing as I do on recordings.

The speculative possibilities opened up for Lilith and Eve never quite materialize, however. Claire seems to gesture toward a future for them that might manifest in a new, *different* kind of Eden, one where they'll unite in the face of God: "When we next meet, we'll drink, laugh and eat, raise crystal glasses to our Supreme Host. . . . Eppy, you're so beautiful, know that I envy you." But Claire/Lilith apparently disintegrates into the ether, shouting "BITCH!" as she fades away; the instruction reads "Claire covers her face. Lights radiate from Claire's hands. Her arms slowly extend like wings." Ultimately, the meaning of the ending is left open in both music and narrative: the final passages swirl in ambiguous harmony, while Lilith seeming to dissolve into a white-light energy and primal force. In some ways, the ambiguity is frustrating and tantalizing: the opera could more decisively outline possibilities for transcending the perennial duality—beloved of the genre—between woman's vice and virtue. Given that there has yet to be a fully staged performance of *Lilith*, there is much that a future production could explore in terms of bringing a queered, feminist perspective to the Lilith-Eve relationship, which reaches its apex in this finale.

Psychology, wrote Naomi Weisstein in 1968, "has nothing to say about what women are really like . . . because psychology does not know."<sup>47</sup> When Claire and Eppy see themselves and each other in the mirror, they come face to face with an open future—and a potentially rewritten past—that will allow them to write their own stories, not the myths of men; they are nothing the world has tried to tell them they are. As a source of empowerment, Lilith can be many things, and Davis and Havis's *Lilith* shares this with all those who have drawn succor from "great tradition of dangerous women."<sup>48</sup> What work

might Lilith do for feminism and feminist music in the twenty-first century? Future stagings of *Lilith* might draw on intersectional possibilities; while her presence in twentieth-century feminist movements already represents multitudes of overlaps between religion, politics, sexuality, and gender, so too have others mobilized Lilith as a powerful figure of resistance that addresses silencing and erasures in histories of Black women in modern feminism, for example in Octavia Butler's science-fiction trilogy *Lilith's Brood* (1987–89).

In building a critical mass of music scholarship on Davis's operas, I find it imperative to consider how his own self-positioning as well as the reception of his works interacts with broader discourse on Black opera in the United States. At the turn of this century, Davis asserted that his goal "is to be the American composer who helps to define opera for the next century, to give opera its unique American voice, and leave a legacy of works that do that."<sup>49</sup> Paying attention to the full spectrum of Davis's operas will yield rich explorations of his ongoing dedication to political fights for equality as a multidimensional phenomenon. "I'm in this box," he said,

everyone wants to produce my operas that deal with the black experience—*Lilith* is not about that, and *Lear on the Second Floor* is in the same boat. But I'm very attached to those works, because it was important for me, particularly as an African American composer, that I'm not just writing about African American characters, just about the political struggle and civil rights, I wanted to do something that expanded that, that brought me out of that. And it's funny because for producers, it's hard for them to accept my pieces that don't fulfill a certain social function for them, and that's unfortunate.<sup>50</sup>

The attention in *Lilith* to erased and silenced narratives and voices must be seen as contiguous with Davis's focus on political struggles, joined in this case by Davis's engagement with Jewish mythology and folklore. *Lilith* reflects a preoccupation manifest in all Davis's operas with oppressed, alienated subjects who strain against the imposed boundaries of a (white) heteropatriarchal society. The disruptions and fissures I identified in *Lilith* on musical, linguistic, and narrative levels also reposition the opera as another iteration of how Davis mediates connections to cultural and musical pasts through his work. Henry Louis Gates Jr., writing in 1997 about *X*, located artists like Davis as an important part of a "movement" characterized by a "certain openness . . . [and] by its deep self-confidence in the range and depth of the black experience as a source for art"<sup>51</sup>; Naomi André affirms that "Davis's

operas tell a story of American life encompassing multiple experiences and vantage points.”<sup>52</sup> But as the above interview excerpt demonstrates, representing these narratives through his works and commitment to social justice is in tension with being pigeonholed as a one-dimensional spokesperson for “the black experience”; following X, Davis “had to fight to overcome the institution and transform it, to make a white institution serve a black person.”<sup>53</sup>

*Lilith* is invigorated by potential for a revitalization of operatic approaches to myth that intersect, through webs of musical, textual, and dramatic allusions, with aesthetics of freedom and openness. Choosing to situate her at the center of an opera offers a compelling strategy to confront, from within, a genre whose empire has been built on punishing women. Davis and Havis’s rehabilitation of the “dark feminine” continues centuries of Lilith empowerment to work against erasures of many kinds, and its spirit of openness and freedom represents a formidable future for the modern operatic stage and power for all “those females who can wreck the infinite.”<sup>54</sup>

## Notes

1. Jodie Shupac, “Lilith Comes to Life at Ashkenaz Festival,” *Canadian Jewish News*, August 12, 2014, <https://thecjn.ca/arts/lilith-comes-life-ashkenaz-festival/>. My thanks to Nathan Friedman for directing me to Horowitz’s work.

2. Jane Forner, “‘Hinter den Spiegeln warten nur Spiegel’: Myth, Dystopia, and Utopia in Peter Eötvös’s *Paradise Reloaded (Lilith)*,” *ACT: Zeitschrift für Musik und Performance* 10 (2021): 1–29.

3. Anthony Davis, “Talking ‘Lilith’: The Creators,” University of California San Diego Television (UCSD-TV), December 15, 2009. <https://www.ucsd.tv/search-details.aspx?showID=18555>

4. *The Central Park Five* is a substantial new version of Davis’s earlier and shorter opera *Five* on the same subject, which was performed in Newark, New Jersey, in 2016 by Trilogy: An Opera Company.

5. George E. Lewis, “The Dancer of All Dancers: Anthony Davis and *Amistad*,” in *Composing While Black: Afrodiasporic New Music Today/Afrodiasporische Neue Musik Heute*, ed. Harald Kisiedu and George E. Lewis (Hofheim: Wolke-Verlag, 2023), 145.

6. Synopsis on Opera America North American Works Directory. <https://www.operaaamerica.org/applications/NAWD/newworks/details.aspx?id=713>. The opera takes inspiration from the trial of Ponca chief Standing Bear in 1879 in Omaha, Nebraska, during which he successfully argued that Native Americans should be granted civil rights under the law, which was recognized as significantly impacting the advancement of human rights for Native Americans under federal law.

7. Naomi Wolf, introduction to *Which Lilith? Feminist Writers Re-Crete the World’s First Woman*, ed. Enid Dame, Lilly Rivlin, and Henry Wenkart (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998), xii.

8. Other written sources for Lilith myths include a brief reference in the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 34); the Babylonian Talmud; the *Zohar*, the key text of Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah); and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

9. I use Norman Bronznick's translation of relevant excerpts of the *Alphabet Ben Sira* throughout, in David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky eds., *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), here 183.

10. Lilith can be traced to Assyrian, Babylonian, and Sumerian cultures. Raphael Patai notes the earliest mention of Lilith in the Sumerian version of the Gilgamesh epic, ca. 2000–2400 BCE, in *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 221–22.

11. *Lilith* website, [www.liliththeopera.com](http://www.liliththeopera.com)

12. "Agunah" (אגונה), meaning "anchored," "tied," or "chained" in Hebrew), refers to a woman who is unable to obtain a *get* (rabbinic divorce) under Jewish law (*halakhah*) and is thus trapped in a marriage.

13. Allan Havis, quoted in Janice Arkatov, "Havis Develops 'Haut Goût' for Confrontation," *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1987, [http://articles.latimes.com/1987-09-25/entertainment/ca-6748\\_1\\_allan-havis](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-09-25/entertainment/ca-6748_1_allan-havis)

14. Siegmund Hurwitz, *Lilith—the First Eve: Historical and Psychological Aspects of the Dark Feminine*, trans. Gela Jacobson (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 1992), 229.

15. Wolf, introduction to *Which Lilith?*, xii.

16. This comment reflects Lilith's declaration in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, "We are equal to each other inasmuch as we were both created from the earth." *Rabbinic Fantasies*, 184. There is much written on the varying accounts of Lilith's provenance; see Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 230.

17. I also think of the end of act IV, when Jaufré refers to himself as "Adam" and casts his "love from afar" as the forbidden fruit: "Pourquoi fallait-il que je tende la main vers le fruit?" ("Why must I reach toward the fruit?"). Translations my own.

18. Judith R. Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2015), 60.

19. In Jewish traditions, God's name is sometimes called "The Ineffable Name," or "explicit name."

20. Stern, introduction to *Rabbinic Fantasies*, 23.

21. Anthony Davis, interview with the author, January 26, 2020.

22. Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 11.

23. Davis, interview, January 26, 2020.

24. See Robert Tanner, "Olly Wilson, Anthony Davis, and George Lewis: The Lives, Works, and Perspectives of Three Contemporary African American Composers" (DMA diss., Ohio State University, 1999), and David Gutkin, "American Opera, Jazz, and Historical Consciousness, 1924–1994" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2015), and Gutkin's program notes for the 2022 Detroit Opera revival of Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, "Anthony Davis's X," Detroit Opera Website, April 11 2022, <https://detroitopera.org/ant-hony-daviss-x/>

25. Davis, interview, January 26, 2020.
26. George Varga, "Lilith,' a Family Affair: In This Family, You Start Young," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 29, 2009.
27. Davis, interview, January 26, 2020.
28. Lewis, "The Dancer of All Dancers: Anthony Davis and *Amistad*," 135.
29. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 32. I think here also of George E. Lewis's discussion of genre and mobility in the experimental practices of the AACM in *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
30. George E. Lewis, "Lifting the Cone of Silence from Black Composers," *New York Times*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/arts/music/black-composers-classical-music.html>
31. Quincy Troupe, "Words that Build Bridges Toward a New Tongue," *Transcircularities: New & Selected Poems* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2002), 307.
32. Cecil Taylor, in J. B. Figi, "Cecil Taylor: African Code, Black Methodology," *Down Beat* (April 10, 1975), quoted in John Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle: Jazz after 1958* (Poole: Blandford Press, 1985), 216.
33. Davis, interview, January 26, 2020.
34. Wojciech Kosior, "A Tale of Two Sisters: The Image of Eve in Early Rabbinic Literature and Its Influence on the Portrayal of Lilith in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 32 (2018): 115.
35. Hurwitz, *Lilith—The First Eve*, 229.
36. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: A Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 76. I think here also of connections drawn between Kristeva and Lilith in Alejandro Hugo Del Valle and Micaela Julieta Del Nero, "La Abyección de Lilith: sobre feminismos y binarismos," *Novapolis* 18 (2021): 31–54.
37. Excerpts from *Alphabet Ben Sira*, trans. Bronznick, in Stern and Mirsky, *Rabbinic Fantasies*, 184.
38. Ian Barnard, *Sex Panic Rhetorics, Queer Interventions* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2020).
39. J. R. Salamanca, *Lilith* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961; reprint Welcome Rain, 2000), 324. Page citations refer to the Welcome Rain edition.
40. Allan Havis, interview with UCSD-TV.
41. Keturah Stickann, Director's Note, Program for *[Re]Creating Lilith* (2015), n.p.
42. Judith Plaskow, "Lilith Revisited" (1995), reprinted in *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972–2003*, ed. Donna Berman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 82.
43. Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.
44. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 54.
45. Ellie M. Hisama, *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 13.



46. Lawrence Kramer, "The Voice in/of Opera," in *On Voice*, ed. Walter Bernhart and Lawrence Kramer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 46.

47. Naomi Weisstein, "'Kinde, Küche, Kirche' as Scientific Law: Psychology Constructs the Female," Paper read at meeting of the American Studies Association, University of California, Davis, October 26, 1968. Reprinted in Robin Morgan ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Vintage, 1970), 208.

48. Havis, interview.

49. Davis, in William Banfield, *Musical Landscapes in Color: Conversations with Black American Composers* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 347.

50. Davis, interview, January 26, 2020.

51. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Harlem on Our Minds," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (1997): 8.

52. Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 11.

53. Davis, in Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* 38 (1989): 240.

54. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 157.

## Narratives of the Self in Thomas Hyde's *That Man Stephen Ward*

Edward Venn

Contemporary manifestations (at least in the Western world) of the “crisis of masculinity” are conventionally traced back to the 1960s, when liberationist movements served to make the power relationships around white masculinities culturally visible.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it was not until the 1990s that a sufficiently stable scholarly vocabulary emerged to enable critical analysis of masculinities to move into the mainstream.<sup>2</sup> The field of opera studies was slow to respond: the conscious engagement with poststructural tendencies “within post-1990 feminist and ‘queer’ writing on opera” positions Philip Purvis’s *Masculinity in Opera* (2013) as a significant moment in the coming of age of the study of operatic masculinities.<sup>3</sup>

The subtitle of Purvis’s volume (*Gender, History and New Musicology*) points to its predominantly retrospective gaze.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, of the twelve contributions to the volume, only Purvis’s concluding chapter addresses masculine crisis directly, and even then, it is both historicized and in scare quotes.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, his argument that Francis Poulenc’s *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (1945) offers “a piquant record of the many challenges to male hegemony posed by wartime and post-liberation France” points to the ways in which the operatic literature might present, and critique, masculine norms and power relationships.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, other canonic operas emerge as candidates for historical critiques of masculinity. To take but two examples, the titular character of Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* (1914–22), for instance, is at once “unmanned” by the patriarchal systems in which he moves (represented by the authority figures of the Captain and the Doctor) and by the greater virility and prowess of the Drum Major.<sup>7</sup> The critique inheres within the extent that the audience are encouraged to identify with *Wozzeck*’s struggles over the

representation of patriarchal and hegemonic systems. A similar reading can be teased out from Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945), in which Grimes's outsider status—commonly interpreted in the critical literature as a commentary on the status of the artist and/or homosexuals in society—can also be understood in terms of socially acceptable roles that males are allowed to adopt. In Deborah Warner's production for Teatro Real Madrid (2021) and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden (2022), the visceral distance between Allan Clayton's traumatized Grimes and the toxic masculinity on display by the mob that hounds him becomes part of the dramaturgy. It is significant that both of these works display expressionist qualities; Warner's staging for *Peter Grimes* leans into this, not least in the recasting of the opening trial scene as an expressionistic fever-dream.<sup>8</sup> The use of expressionistic musical and dramaturgical techniques to symbolize and provide access to subjective experiences under intense psychological stress has remained a dominant (if not *the* dominant) part of an opera composer's tool kit throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Such precedents demonstrate that operas from the canon offer the potential for otherwise "invisible" presentations of masculinity (which is to say, masculinity as an unmarked gender) to be read through theoretical lenses derived from the scholarship on gender from latter decades of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it is only in the wake of post-1960s liberationist movements and such scholarship that masculinity became a *visible* script, available for thematization within dramatic works.<sup>10</sup> To take three British examples, Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Greek* (1988), a retelling of the Oedipus myth in 1980s London, taps into contemporary portrayals of working-class British (and more specifically, English) masculinity under threat.<sup>11</sup> *Greek's* musical language, drawing together influences from Berg, the broadly expressionist operas of Michael Tippett (*King Priam*, 1962; *The Knot Garden*, 1970) and Dmitri Shostakovich (*Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District*, 1934), the high modernism of Harrison Birtwistle, and popular rhythms associated with English soccer (derived from the popular television series *World of Sport*, ITV [1964–85]), is typical of the eclecticism of the British opera composers emerging at that time.<sup>12</sup> Turnage returned to soccer in his second opera, *The Silver Tassie* (2000), in which Harry, a professional soccer player, returns from the First World War in a wheelchair, losing in the process both his masculine status as a sporting hero and his girlfriend to his best friend in the final act. An even more eclectic mix of genres and styles can be heard in Benedict Mason's knowingly (and prescient in its tabloid-like treatment of celebrity)

Faustian depiction of the fall (and hence unmanning) of a professional soccer player in *Playing Away* (1993).<sup>13</sup>

In all the above British examples, the masculinities under threat are predominantly associated with the (white) working class. Far less common are operas that train their focus upon middle-class masculinities (and especially the way in which such masculinities contribute to, and intersect with, power dynamics within society). This is perhaps surprising, given the relatively rigid class-bound system within the United Kingdom, and in particular the concentration of political and economic power among white, privately educated, middle-class males. (Or perhaps it is *not* so surprising, if one of the tools of perpetuating hegemonic practices is to render them invisible and unavailable for critique.) This is not to say that operas that represent middle- and upper-class British masculinities don't exist, but rather that the means by which the hegemony is sustained remain unchallenged.

One notable exception can be found in Thomas Hyde's *That Man Stephen Ward* (2006–7), to a libretto by David Norris and scored for solo baritone and small ensemble. The opera charts the events leading up to the suicide of the British osteopath Stephen Ward (1912–1963). Ward had been a key figure in the Profumo affair, a political scandal that led to the resignation of the then-British Secretary of State for War, John Profumo, and that contributed to the downfall of the Conservative government. The Profumo affair, a heady blend of sex, showgirls, and Cold War politics, captured the imagination of the press, but it was ultimately Ward, who introduced Profumo to the model Christine Keeler, who provided the necessary establishment scapegoat. Accused of profiting from immoral earnings, Ward killed himself when it became clear that he was to be found guilty. The perceived miscarriage of justice has given rise to numerous dramatic portrayals (including the 1989 film *Scandal* and Andrew Lloyd Webber's 2013 musical *Stephen Ward*). But rather than give prominent roles to all the key protagonists of the affair (Lloyd Webber, for instance, had ten leads in his musical), Hyde and Norris offer instead a one-man opera in order to present a psychological portrait of Ward.

Given the social and historical milieu of the opera—and with it the carefully modulated, ironically detached modes of emoting common to male middle-class subjects of the early 1960s—the type of searing, expressionistic writing for a single voice and the dreamlike narrative logic of Arnold Schoenberg's *Erwartung* (1909) simply was not available to Hyde. But it was another work by Schoenberg—his intentionally satirical and ironic *Pierrot lunaire* of 1912—and a range of pieces that followed in its wake, that can be heard to

inform *That Man Stephen Ward's* instrumentation, tone, form, and narrative techniques.<sup>14</sup> As Jonathan Dunsby has observed, the traditions that nurtured *Pierrot lunaire*, including cabaret and the *commedia dell'arte*, were both connected to popular culture but also to popular critique (notably, the “harsh European *commedia* cult . . . was often tinged with a symbolic challenge to heterosexual hegemony, and perceived at the time as a most threatening homosexual haemorrhage”).<sup>15</sup>

Such traditions, according to Dunsby “could not hope to survive” in the musical environment that followed Pierre Boulez’s *Le Marteau sans maître* (1955)—one of *Pierrot's* most influential descendants—following Boulez’s rejection of those *commedia*-like qualities that distinguished Schoenberg’s work: “narration and acting, ambiguities of perceived style and aesthetic, the knowing nod.”<sup>16</sup> But however true Dunsby’s claim might be for the Schoenberg-Boulez axis writ large, it is possible to trace within British musico-dramatic practices a more-or-less unbroken line from Schoenberg to Hyde in which such qualities are preserved.<sup>17</sup> Significant works in this lineage (though not necessarily direct influences on Hyde) include William Walton’s *Façade* (the original version of 1922 was scored for a flexible ensemble very close to that of *Pierrot lunaire*); 1930s film scores by Benjamin Britten; the music theater works written by Peter Maxwell Davies for various versions of the *Pierrot* ensemble (most notably *Eight Songs for a Mad King* [1969]); and the multiple roles played by the unaccompanied solo soprano of Judith Weir’s ten-minute opera, *King Harald’s Saga* (1979).<sup>18</sup> Although these works differ greatly from each other in expressive language, they manifest a cluster of dramaturgical elements inherited from *Pierrot lunaire* (and cabaret) that include abrupt juxtapositions of both style and vocal delivery and (often) the use of pastiche popular music as a means of interrogating the protagonist’s psyche. To this, Ward adds non-naturalistic dramatic techniques derived from the television dramas of Dennis Potter (1935–1994) to offer moments in which the singer on stage breaks into stylized song or addresses the audience directly.<sup>19</sup> Such moments, which in their employment of popular stylistic references generate “shifts in the level of discourse,” signal transitions from Ward’s external performances of masculinity to his internal narrations of his self, the man that he wants to be.<sup>20</sup>

And here we reach the nub of the psychological drama of *That Man Stephen Ward*, as well as the specific dramaturgical means by which it is realized. The hierarchies implicit within the discursive shifts of the opera suggest that these might in turn be interpreted in the light of the stratified hierarchies

within the patriarchal pyramid, and thus hegemonic masculinity. Although not intended as a direct commentary on the crisis of masculinity, the opera, written during the current period of crisis, nevertheless lays bare the issues that underpin it. With a caveat that such a reading was neither anticipated by the creators of the opera nor the only possible response to the opera, I shall consider in the next section some of the interpretive affordances of the formal and narrative organization of music and text in the light of masculinity. Because masculinity is so often defined in relation to its Others (including othered masculinities), consideration is given too to its intersections with race, class, and gender (and the musical and social hierarchies that variously support and marginalize such identities), and to Ward's continually mediated musical response to these in his self-narration.<sup>21</sup> In the final section, I consider how the varied vocal demands of *That Man Stephen Ward*, as exemplified in the performances to date of the opera, play a vital role in supporting, communicating, and nuancing the work's specifically operatic presentation of multiple masculinities.

## Narrating Profumo, Narrating Masculinities

Although the political import of the Profumo scandal was exacerbated by Cold War tensions, the manner by which it captured the collective imagination of the United Kingdom is almost certainly a reflection of its particular historical moment. Had Profumo's affair with Keeler happened a few years earlier, it would undoubtedly have been covered up. But in the wake of an obscenity trial in 1960 over Penguin Book's publication of an unexpurgated edition of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, public interest had been fueled in sex scandals. The poet Philip Larkin wrote that "Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three / (which was rather late for me) / Between the end of the 'Chatterley' ban / And the Beatles' first LP."<sup>22</sup> In this context, when faced with revelations over the sexual misconduct of a government minister, the press reported as much as they dared.<sup>23</sup> Were the affair to happen later in the decade, it would in all likelihood have attracted far less attention.

The Profumo affair provided more than just gratification of the public desire for sexual scandal. Richard Farmer describes it as:

[a]political, media and cultural event [. . .] linked to the decline in deference that facilitated or followed on from the "satire boom" of the early 1960s, and

many of the cultural products that deal specifically or obliquely with the affair intersect with people or institutions or places associated with those who sought to use humour to challenge the established sophistries of the Macmillan government and the static, elite society it was believed to represent.<sup>24</sup>

This historical moment also coincided with the final years in which hegemonic masculinity—represented by the “typical Enlightenment subject: anatomically male, white, heterosexual and middle-class” (which in Britain, had additional emphasis on social class)—could be said to maintain its cultural invisibility, prior to the social upheavals of the 1960s and subsequent “crisis.”<sup>25</sup> The power relationships that emerge from such a hegemony are clear, not least in the treatment by the middle- and upper-class men of the working-class female call girls, or in the way that the involvement of a different type of masculinity in the figure of Edgcombe—a Black, working-class immigrant—set in motion the public unraveling of the affair.<sup>26</sup> In this context, it is reasonable to speculate that at least some of the public interest in the Profumo affair was driven by an awareness (no matter how unconscious) that the headline-grabbing mix of sex, spies, and corruption were simply the perceptible tremors of a more fundamental seismic shift within society.

But what of Ward? His rise and fall brings to light the shifting dynamics of hegemonic masculinity, and in particular that which R. W. Connell describes as the “patriarchal dividend” (which is to say, the ways in which men contribute to, and draw power from, the patriarchal structure).<sup>27</sup> David Buchbinder, placing this idea within a “patriarchal pyramid,” notes that the exercise of such power leads to inequalities not just between men and women, but also *between* men (especially those who do not conform to dominant masculinities): “[t]he uneven distribution of power means that the benefits and advantages of accessing power encourages individual subjects to wield as much of it as possible, whether to maintain their current position in the pyramid, to reach a higher one, or even only to fend off the more aggressive applications of power by other men.”<sup>28</sup>

As one such nondominant masculine subject (Ward exhibited none of the virility of his peers, apparently not engaging in intercourse with the girls he oversaw), Ward’s access to power came from his ability to connect those above him in the patriarchal pyramid with other high-ranking members of the patriarchy, as well as with women. Yet his power and status were only ever conferred upon him temporarily: the withdrawal of support from his high-powered “friends” at his trial demonstrated the provisional nature of his

position in the pyramid, and Ward proved a suitable sacrifice for the maintenance of the hegemonic structure.

It is the ways in which Ward presents and identifies himself in terms of his (primarily but not exclusively) male relationships that brings matters of masculinity to the fore. Indeed, the performance of Ward's masculinities is irreducibly bound up with the musico-dramatic techniques of the opera. The libretto makes frequent reference to what it is to be a man, and the particular affordances of homosocial relationships within Ward's social milieu. But more telling is the way in which contrasts and juxtapositions of musical styles, on both small and large scales, draw attention to the conflicts and contradictions within social and individual conceptions of masculinity.

The key events of the Profumo affair are represented indirectly in the opera (see table 10.1).<sup>29</sup> Certain liberties taken with historical accuracy can be attributed to operatic expediency and the need to present the drama as concisely as possible (for instance, the dating in Scenes 3 and 4 of the meeting between Profumo and Yevgeny Ivanov,<sup>30</sup> a naval attaché at the Soviet Embassy).<sup>31</sup> But the fact that *That Man Stephen Ward* is a one-man opera results in the presentation of Ward (the solo baritone) as the sole narrating agent, so that his interpretation of the events (at least as imagined by Hyde and Norris) becomes the lens through which the audience experiences them. Significant in this respect is the interspersal through the opera of the Potter-esque fantasy sequences involving popular pastiche, of which the most important are the cabaret songs of scenes 1 and 4, the Cold War fantasy dance scene of scene 3, and the swan song of scene 6. These sequences recall the discursive shifts and (often) the ironic tone of the post-*Pierrot* tradition and provide the most prolonged explorations of Ward's multiple masculinities.

Masculinity is foregrounded at the start of the opera. The opera opens in 1963 as Ward tends to Lord Bill Astor, one of his clients.<sup>32</sup> In the background, a taped simulation of a BBC news radio broadcast is heard. The news report provides for the audience a handy overview of Ward's trial; it includes the police charges that "he, being a man, did on diverse dates between January the first 1961 and June the eighth 1963, knowingly live wholly, or in part, on the earnings of prostitution."<sup>33</sup> The first words we hear from Ward echo the report, interspersing a bitter mockery of the report with justifications of his actions to Lord Astor, who Ward chummily calls "Bill" (see fig. 10.1a). What follows consists of Ward narrating his version of events in a bid to both clear his name and restore his social standing. He attempts the latter by making frequent reference to the numerous weekend parties Ward held at Astor's



Table 10.1. Overall Scene Analysis of *That Man Stephen Ward*

Section	Rehearsal #	Content/CD track # and timeline
<b>Scene 1 – Consultation</b>		
Intrada	Start – A	[CD 1: 0:00–0:43] Fanfare-like flourishes in orchestra. Pre-recorded radio report begins shortly before end of section.
Walking Tune	A – D	[CD 1: 0:43–2:28] Cello has tune (based on pitch cycle); orchestra has nonsynchronized material above. Radio report continues.
[Ward talks to Astor]	D – E	[CD 1: 2:28–3:25] It is 1963. Ward is attending to Lord Bill Astor in his Harley Street practice. Ward alternates his responses to the radio with comments directed to Astor.
	E – J	[CD 1: 3:25–7:11] Ward continues speaking to Astor; topic of conversation turns to mutual friends as Ward reminds Astor of their connections and increasingly desperately tries to get a response.
	J – L	[CD 1: 7:11–8:17] Astor holds out his hand; Ward mistakenly takes it at first as a gesture of friendship, only to realize Astor is asking for the keys to Spring Cottage.
Cabaret Song	L – end of scene.	[CD 1: 8:17–10:12] Opening material reworks Intrada flourish, now alluding to 1920s cabaret topic (but clearly contemporary). Ward sings of Spring Cottage and the parties he once enjoyed there.
<b>Scene 2 – Conversation</b>		
[Ward talks to Keeler]	Start – C	[CD 2: 0:00–2:12] It is 1960. Ward is in Spring Cottage, sketching Christine Keeler and discussing their meeting and relationship. Material alludes briefly to Walking Tune (scene 1); orchestra is similarly non-synchronized. Keeler's material is accompanied by flute.
	C – E	[CD 2: 2:12–3:43] Shift to more lyrical and metrically regular accompaniment as Ward describes Keeler's beauty. Ward's over-the-top desire to mould Keeler ends comically, with Keeler laughing at him.
Tutorial	E – H	[CD 2: 3:43–6:29] Generally rhythmically free; Keeler and flute continue to be associated. At first Ward seems to be telling her how to hold herself; it is clear he is grooming her for how to act around John Profumo and the music becomes increasingly metrical.
Duet	H – J	[CD 2: 6:29–7:58] Baritone now alternates between falsetto (to represent Keeler) and natural tone to create a dialogue; orchestral accompaniment reinforces the distinction. Keeler is worried about her boyfriend, Johnny Edgecombe, and his reaction. Ward, ignoring her concerns, returns to his memories of how they met. Keeler's material from this point is restricted to a descending D major triad – the restriction here might be due to her capitulating to Ward's topic of conversation, or else his memory of the conversation being erroneous.

Enjambement	J – K	[CD 2: 7:58–8:41] Ward sketches Keeler; she moves to kiss him. Flute, once again, appears to be associated with Keeler.
	K – end	[CD 2: 8:41–9:07] Ward, to audience, claims he only kissed her forehead.

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### Scene 3 – Congregation

News-flash music	Start – E	[CD 3: 0:00–1:19] Orchestral introduction. At B, a pre-recorded tape part begins, describing the mounting of Cold War tensions.
[Party]	E – L	[CD 3: 1:19–3:50] It is October 1962; Ward is hosting a party at his home in Wimpole Mews; he introduces the guests and jokes with them. The jaunty rhythms of the accompaniment portray Ward as a jovial socialite.
	L – N	[CD 3: 3:50–4:16] John Profumo arrives (the orchestra refers back to the Cold War tensions of the news-flash music). Ward ushers over Keeler to accompany Profumo.
	N – S	[CD 3: 4:16–5:41] Ward, to the audience, wonders if the guest of honor – an unnamed member of the royal family – will arrive. Then, back in character, and a little drunk, he imagines how wonderful it would be for his party to receive such a guest.
A Hymn of Thanks	S – T	[CD 3: 5:41–7:19] Ward sings a hymn of praise; his thanks are for earthly pleasures.
	T – Y	[CD 3: 7:19–8:47] Eugene Ivanov arrives; the radio report begins again to reinforce the political tensions. Ward offers to help; he introduces Ivanov to Profumo. There is the sound of a gunshot.
Cold War Fantasy	Y – CC	[CD 3: 8:47–9:50] A change of lighting indicates that we are witnessing Ward's fantasy. Profumo and Ivanov break into a dance as Ward imagines how he might resolve the international crisis.
	CC	[CD 3: 9:50–10:03] The gunshot is repeated; the fantasy is over.

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### Scene 4 – Consternation

'Disaster!' Music	Start – F	[CD 4: 0:00–2:35] The scene follows on from the previous. Police whistles are heard. Ward shifts between reading (and commenting upon) newspaper reports of the shots and enacting the scene as it occurs, impersonating Edgcombe (who fired the shot at Ward's front door). The setting is largely in the manner of accompanied recitative.
	F – N	[CD 4: 2:35–7:37] Ward now also impersonates a policeman who arrives on the scene. The policeman is by turns ingratiating (to high-profile guests) and suspicious (to the girls). He notes the presence of Profumo and Ivanov, and cautions Keeler.
	N – P	[CD 4: 7:37–8:50] The party broken up, Ward reads again from the newspapers and of the growing scandal associated with his name. Back in the policeman's voice, Ward is asked to go to the station.

*(continues)*

Cabaret Song	P – end	[CD 4: 8:50–10:30] Another change of mood and lighting. Ward sings of his expectations for his friends to telephone to offer support.
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**Scene 5 – Condemnation**

Paparazzi Music	Start – A	[CD 5: 0:00–0:25] Skittish sixteenth notes in the orchestra generate mounting excitement.
[Preparing for court]	A – I	[CD 5: 0:25–4:09] It is Summer 1963. Ward is dressing in front of a mirror for his trial. He sings of his innocence, and of how he was simply doing favors for friends. There are sporadic interjections of the paparazzi music.
Twitching Tintinnabulations	I – N	[CD 5: 4:09–6:12] Orchestral interlude. Ward continually checks the telephone; the music is as fragmented as Ward is twitchy. He eventually trips on the telephone and falls to the floor.
	N – O	[CD 5: 6:12–6:42] A brief flourish in the orchestra and a short reprise of the walking tune. Ward is retreating into his memories.
[Childhood memory]	O – T	[CD 5: 6:42–10:01] Ward recalls a childhood incident in which he and some friends were caught in a “rumpus.” His voice moves between speech, <i>sprechstimme</i> and operatic lyricism. Ward recounts how he took the blame for the incident for his friends.
	T – end	[CD: 10:01–10:42] Varied reprise of the opening of the scene 1 cabaret song, as if Ward is now thinking of his current friends.

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**Scene 6 – Consummation**

	Start – D	[CD 6: 0:00–2:20] Orchestral introduction.
[Suicide note]	D – G	[CD 6: 2:20–4:24] July 30, 1963. Ward is writing his suicide note, vodka and pills to his side. The musical textures recall his opening dialogue with Astor; the implication is that Ward is writing to his friends.
Recollections	G – I	[CD 6: 4:24–6:00] The reference to the walking tune is the first in a series of recollections of material heard earlier in the opera.
Swan song (with pauses)	I – M	[CD 6: 6:00–9:24] The texture changes to a lyrical melody accompanied first by piano alone; the reference is to a quasi-Handelian aria. Ward sings of an idyllic day at the beach; his attempts to project happiness faltering with every pause.
Collapse	M – end	[CD 6: 9:24–12:19] Ward, silently, pours himself a drink and swallows the pills. The opera ends with ticking claves and increasingly isolated gestures in the orchestra. Ward, briefly, imagines one last party; he takes another drink and the music is cut off.

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cottage (these parties attracted high-profile guests, including politicians, diplomats and—rumors had it—royalty), as well as the fraternal support freely given to those within this social circle.<sup>34</sup>

Ward's material switches between pitched, albeit "almost speech-like," echoes of the news report (quarter note = c. 80, accompanied by piano), with spoken text, directed at Bill (quarter note = c. 112, accompanied by clarinet, violin, and cello). The contrasting types of music mirror the differently constructed masculinities that Ward is presenting: one that appeals to the homosocial norms of the hegemonic masculinity of the day ("You know, Bill . . . Being a man"), and the other that outlines the insalubrious activities of a high-class procurer, a role that is required by the hegemony but which confers shame upon the individual if made public. The first of these is how Ward imagines himself, secure in his placement in the patriarchal pyramid; the second is how society sees him, sundered from his former position of power. Such shifts of perspective also recall the flexible treatment of subject positions and vocal delivery found *Pierrot lunaire* and *Eight Songs for a Mad King*; they can be found too in the ways that Ward narrates his encounters with other figures.

Scenes 2 through 4 are set chronologically prior to this opening scene, offering both a potted history of the events that resulted in the Profumo affair being made public as well as a forensic account of Ward's positioning within the various social hierarchies in which he moved. Scene 2 of the opera, set at Astor's cottage in 1960, is something of a lyrical interlude, exploring how Ward and Keeler met and how he began grooming her for Profumo. It was at one of Ward's parties in the cottage in July 1961 (in the opera, the location and date is changed to Ward's London home in October 1962) that the real-life Profumo first met Keeler, and the next day the two of them, along with Ivanov, met again at the cottage for fun and games in the swimming pool. Ivanov was considered by British intelligence to be a potential defector, with Ward having been approached to act as an intermediary and Keeler considered as a possible honey trap. By the summer of 1962 stories were circulating that both Profumo and Ivanov were having affairs with Keeler (and with it, the possibility that official secrets might have been inadvertently passed on).

In December 1962, Johnny Edgecombe, Keeler's Antiguan then-boyfriend, fired a gun outside Ward's house after he was prevented from seeing Keeler, who was inside (scene 4; the opera elides this with the party depicted in scene 3). Edgecombe's subsequent trial in March 1963 (on charges of attempted murder) took place against a background of increasing political rumors and

♩=c.80  
*freely, almost speech*

That he, be-ing a man, know-ing-ly as-sis-ted pro-si-tutes in the ply-ing of their trade.

Snare drum (snares off) *mp* *Susp. cym.*

Pno *f*

♩=c.112      ♩=c.80      ♩=c.112

Bill, I on-ly wan-ted to help... And all the games they played You know, Bill... Be-ing a man...

Cl. *p* *sempre sotto voce* *mf* Pno *p*

Vln, con sord *p*

Vc. con sord Vc.

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system (measures c.80) features a vocal line in bass clef with lyrics: "That he, be-ing a man, know-ing-ly as-sis-ted pro-si-tutes in the ply-ing of their trade." The tempo is marked "♩=c.80" and the performance instruction is "freely, almost speech". The accompaniment includes a snare drum (snares off) with dynamics *pp* and *mp*, and a piano (Pno) with dynamic *f*. The second system (measures c.112) features a vocal line with lyrics: "Bill, I on-ly wan-ted to help... And all the games they played You know, Bill... Be-ing a man...". The tempo is marked "♩=c.112". The accompaniment includes a clarinet (Cl.) with dynamics *p* and *mf*, a violin with sordina (Vln, con sord) with dynamic *p*, and a viola with sordina (Vc. con sord).

Fig. 10.1a. *That Man Stephen Ward*. Scene 1 (reh. D–E). (© Thomas Hyde, used with permission.)

denials. Profumo eventually resigned on June 5, 1963, having admitted lying to the House of Commons about the affair; four days later, the tabloid *The News of the World* published “The Confessions of Christine,” in which, amidst the anticipated sexual revelations, Ward was portrayed as being in cahoots with the Soviets.

There is a strong correlation in scenes 2 through 4 between the frequency with which a particular social group is referred to and the hierarchies within Ward’s musical sense of self. Neither race nor class are mentioned directly in the libretto (in the next section I discuss how they are reflected in performance), but the role of Edgecombe and the (probably lower-class) policeman in bringing to an end the party in scenes 3 and 4 situates them in opposition to Ward’s own white, middle- to upper-class circle. It is noteworthy that Edgecombe and the policeman are denied physical presence in the score (they are not specifically allocated dancers in the score); only the

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system features a vocal line in bass clef with lyrics: "And eve-ry pen - ny that they made ... In an - y way I can... He was paid". The tempo is marked "♩=c.80". The accompaniment includes Piano (Pno), Clarinet (Cl.), Violin (Vln), and Violoncello (Vc.). The second system begins with a tempo change from "rubato" to "a tempo (♩=c.80)". The vocal line continues with the lyrics "Man to Man.". The accompaniment includes Piano (Pno), Clarinet (Cl.), Violin (Vln), Flute (Fl.), Harpsichord, Snare, Triangle, and Suspended Cymbal (Sus. Cym.). Dynamic markings such as *mf*, *p*, *mf*, *mp*, *f*, *pp*, and *sf* are used throughout.

Fig. 10.1b. Continuation of Scene 1 (reh. D–E) from *That Man Stephen Ward*.  
(© Thomas Hyde, used with permission.)

sound of police whistles and gunshots gives them any material substance beyond Ward's report of what they say. (Ward's performance of multiple roles again recalls the fluid approach to narration found in the *Pierrot* tradition.) And even in this reported speech, they barely figure musically: Edgcombe's words are either shouted or restricted to a semitonal motion from B to A $\sharp$ . The policeman fares little better: the recitative-like material given to him provides little scope for him to assert any sort of musical individuality, though the orchestral accompaniment suggests his alternately deferentially obsequious and insinuating responses to the party guests. Ward's musical narration of these characters, when contrasted with his own, full-bodied musical self-portraiture (see below), therefore, reinforces their inferior status within hegemonic masculinity (in Ward's eyes, at least, in comparison to his own perceived standing).

The next level of the social hierarchy concerns gender, and in particu-

lar the role of women. Christine Keeler (“Chrissie”) has the most prominent role: she is represented by a dancer in scene 2, often in conjunction with a lyrically seductive flute, and the dancer mimes along with Ward when he, in falsetto (yet another instance of the opera’s flexible and varied approach to vocal delivery), presents her words in a manner somewhere between arioso and recitative. We thereby learn that Keeler affords Edgecombe a gendered identity (“But what about Edgecombe? / He’s a man. My man now.” Scene 2),<sup>35</sup> something that Ward pays scant attention to. Nevertheless, the policeman (scene 4, rehearsal F<sup>6</sup>), repeating Edgecombe’s statement, reveals that Keeler “Looks down on him,” which could either be taken literally (Keeler viewing Edgecombe from a first-floor window of the party) or more likely figuratively, as Edgecombe’s station in 1960s British life was below her own.

The lyricism that infuses Ward’s (musical) relationship with Keeler reflects the way he presents himself to her as benevolent benefactor and chaste admirer. He is clearly infatuated with Keeler, pithily describing their physical relationship as “We often share a bed. / But that’s all” (scene 2),<sup>36</sup> the final two syllables pointedly accompanied by claves for emphasis. His descriptions of Keeler in scene 2 frequently lapse into rapt admiration; even when he is speaking,<sup>37</sup> the accompaniment is sonorously lyrical.<sup>38</sup> Yet Ward objectifies her no less than any of the other girls he mentions in passing in the party (scene 3, CD track 3: 2:35): (“And Linda. / So lovely. / So slim and so beautiful.”). For Ward, Keeler remains, ultimately, a means to an end. Ward duets with the flute (Keeler’s instrumental surrogate) in the middle of the scene 2 “Tutorial” (CD track 2: 6:13) as he anticipates Keeler’s meeting with Profumo (“Call him John. / And afterwards . . . Johnny. / He’s your man. / I promise.”).

While Ward’s performance for Keeler presents one type of masculinity, it differs significantly from those he presents to men in power. Here one must distinguish between the perceptions of Ward himself and of those around him. Ward regularly draws attention to his friendship with high-ranking members of the patriarchy, as if to sustain and maintain his own privileged position. Frequent assertions of friendship, and Ward’s immersion within such circles, punctuate the opera. The high point, and perhaps the moment where Ward’s self-image most closely maps onto those of his “friends” occurs in scene 3 (CD track 3: 1:19–3:50), as Ward converses with his party guests. Here the music is characterized by jaunty, dance-like rhythms and witty harmonic sleights of hand. Ward’s sociability culminates with a mock Hymn of Thanks (CD track 3: 1:19–3:50), delivered “in the style of a church psalm” (the

real-life Ward was the son of a vicar): “My father who is in Heaven— / Isn’t Heaven like this? / Isn’t it? / Friendship and laughter, / Here and hereafter; / Familiar faces, / Friends in high places . . . / Girls and Earls! / Isn’t it? / Isn’t this Heaven?” The mixture of allusions to musical topics—gregarious dances and communal, quasi-religious experiences—situates Ward (at least in his own mind) as the leader of the dance and high priest of parties.

Yet all is perhaps not what it seems. In his efforts to drop names, Ward recounted how Winston Churchill, on learning that Ward had provided osteopathic treatment to Jawaharlal Nehru, asked “Why didn’t you shtrangle [*sic*] the bugger? Any gentleman would!” (scene 3, CD track 3: 2:00). Only too late in the telling did Ward realize that Churchill did not consider him a gentleman. More pertinently, the scene opens with “news-flash music,” characterized by assertively repeated eighth notes that underpin radio reports of mounting Cold War tensions. This music recurs with the arrival of Profumo; it is a harbinger, too, of Ward’s own demise. Contrasted with the “news-flash music,” we hear the dance music and religious topics as part of the last hurrah of a particular type of masculine hegemony, just as the social world they portray in the opera are situated against the background of historical inevitability: the Profumo affair, the downfall of the Conservative government, the death of Ward, and, perhaps, the encroaching crisis of masculinity.

Scenes 5 and 6 follow on, chronologically, from scene 1. As speculation grew about the extent to which the ruling classes were engaged in affairs—not least with girls affiliated with Ward—he was charged with profiting off immoral earnings. In the opera, Ward continues to frame his actions, past and present, and indeed his sense of self, with respect to his homosocial circle of friends, acquaintances, and benefactors. Inevitably left unsupported by his former high society friends, Ward knew that a guilty verdict was guaranteed, and he took his own life (scene 6).

The discrepancies between Ward’s vision of homosocial friendship and those of his associates heard in scenes 1 and 3 are most pronounced in these final two scenes. In scene 5 (CD track 5, 9:47), Ward recalls how once at school he took the blame for a misdemeanor to protect his friends, resulting in a thrashing from the headmaster: “I own up. / I take the fall. / One for all. / And all my friends . . . / Behind me.” In this instance, skittish pizzicato figures in the strings and hollow piano chords undermine any sense of nobility behind Ward’s gesture. Mostly spoken, Ward’s delivery suddenly breaks into a rising D major fanfare-like figure of “One for all.” But there is no answering “And all for one”: Ward’s friends are as silent in this childhood reminiscence



as they are during his 1963 trial. No matter how Ward attempts to convince himself otherwise, he has never been in a secure position within the patriarchal pyramid, and his performances here are of victim, not savior.

It is thus only in the Dennis Potter–like fantasy sequences that Ward is fully able to enjoy his illusory status within masculine hegemony. Correspondingly, it is here that the music of the opera takes full flight. This includes the already-mentioned dance sequence in scene 3 between Ward, Profumo, and Ivanov as Ward imagines his intervention preventing war (the distance between the extent of his real influence and that he fantasizes for himself is telling), and, above all, the rapt quasi-Handelian aria in scene 6 as Ward allows himself one final idyllic image before his death. The two cabaret songs of scenes 1 and 4 are pastiche 1920s settings, alluding to melodic and rhythmic shapes but filtered through twenty-first-century musical sensibilities. Unlike Maxwell Davies's use of, say, foxtrot, there is no ironic or critical commentary on the musical topic; rather the almost unbearable, crushing irony inheres in the contrast between Ward's inner world (represented by the song) and external reality.

The second cabaret song, heard in scene 4, is perhaps the most affecting in this regard. Critics have noticed a similarity between the opening orchestral gesture (fig. 10.2) and Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer"; while this is unintentional, the inadvertent intertext certainly speaks to Ward's image of himself as someone who can connect his male friends with girls at parties.<sup>39</sup> But Ward's jaunty expectation that his friends will rescue him ("You can always rely on the powers that be. / Or even / A word in the judge's ear" (CD track 4, 9:21)) is at odds with reality; perhaps the continually shifting orchestral colors hint at this instability. The conclusion of the song "We're a club. / We dine, we drink, we agree about things; / Bill . . . He will . . . / won't he?" ends with a devastating moment of self-awareness as the harmony deflects away from the anticipated cadence.<sup>40</sup> He is always the scapegoat. He is not the man he thinks he is or wants to be.<sup>41</sup>

## Performing Masculinities

The previous section demonstrates how particular dramaturgical techniques can be interpreted as "composing in" masculine performativity and hegemonic hierarchies into the score.<sup>42</sup> These techniques might be thought of as a blueprint—or rather, as *potentialities*—when mapping out Ward's operatic

•=c.132

*mp*

I'm ex-pect-ing the te - le - phone to ring.

cf. Joplin, *The Entertainer*

Vln *f* Cl. *mp* Pno *mp* Fl. *mp*

Vln pizz. Cl. *mp* Vln, arco *mp*

Pno *f* Sus. Cym. *mp* Vc., arco *mp* Pno *mp* (small notes)

Vc., arco *mp*

*f* *p*

I know it will. Pe-ter, Doug-las, Asp-ers Or Bing... Or, prob-ab-ly, Bill.

[Fl.] *f* Cl. *f* Sus. Cym. *f*

Vln arco *f* Vc. arco *f*

*mp. sub.*

A - ny time now, A - ny time now, he will.

Cl. *mp* Fl. flutter *mp* Cl. *mp* Fl. flutter *mp* Cl. quasi gliss. *f*

Vln pizz. *p* Triangle *mp* Vln pizz. *p* Triangle *mp* Vln pizz. *f* Sus. Cym. *f*

Pno + Vc. pizz. *mp* Pno *f*

Fig. 10.2. *That Man Stephen Ward*. Scene 4, rehearsal Letters P–Q<sup>1</sup> (some percussion omitted for clarity) [CD track 4: 8:50–9:12]. (© Thomas Hyde, used with permission.)

narrative of his self. When realized on stage, however, such potentialities may be amplified or inhibited, or even placed in dialogue with new and unanticipated interpretive layers brought to bear by a director. The resultant *actualized* meanings are thus emergent in the act of performance.

To date, *That Man Stephen Ward* has been staged twice. The premiere was given on May 11, 2008, at the Hampstead and Highgate Festival, London, directed by Yvonne Fontane. Ward was performed by the baritone Andrew Slater, with George Vass conducting the Festival Ensemble. The opera was revived in 2015 by Nova Music Opera, again conducted by George Vass, with Damian Thantrey in the title role. Although only the latter is publicly available (via a studio CD recording made by the same performers the following year), I will in this section demonstrate how the two productions inflect the masculinities of the opera.

The score is notably restrained in its stipulation of stage directions. Those that exist serve primarily either to suggest particular physical gestures in response to the music, or (less frequently) to offer staging suggestions. In the former category, we can include indications of Ward's mounting desperation in scenes 1 and 5, and clarifications that musical pauses in scene 6 correspond to Ward's own increasing inability to speak as his suicide looms. Even in the latter case, stage directions are there to illuminate Ward's internal thoughts rather than to prescribe external actions as such. Thus the stage directions for both cabaret songs indicate "A sudden change of mood (and lighting). Ward turns directly to the audience." The Cold War fantasy notes "A change of lighting to show we are in Ward's fantasy world in which he is bringing Profumo and Ivanov together to save the world from nuclear war!" In the final scene, "Ward seems lost in his own thoughts and recollections. Then, he turns to the audience directly for his last song—his swansong—a lyrical farewell to the life that once he lead—or thought he lead [*sic*]." Specific productions, therefore, have considerable license in how they might realize the opera.

Both productions made use of simple staging in a theatrical black box. The orchestra was positioned stage right; minimal furnishing provided a sense of place. The 2008 production had three dancers—two male (representing at various points Astor, Profumo, Ivanov, and Edgcombe, as well as the judge and headmaster figures from scene 5) and one female (mainly Keeler, but in scene 3 the dancer could stand in for the girls at the party en masse). In fact, there was little dancing: for the most part, the figures bore silent testimony against Ward, and allowed him (in, for instance, scene 4) to play the role of the policeman, interrogating the party guests. Nevertheless, the presence of

the dancers could be used for significant purposes. During scene 2, Slater's body language for Ward was reserved; even towards the end of the scene, as Keeler placed a leg provocatively over the back of the chair on which Ward was seated, Slater leaned away. His final kiss on Keeler's forehead was pointedly nonsexual, his eyes training afterwards on the audience, as if to say "I told you so." During Ward's swan song, the female dancer briefly comes on stage to dance tenderly, but again unromantically, with Ward as he imagines his perfect day. Fontane's production thus emphasizes Ward's sexually restrained masculinity in a nonsensationalist, but theatrically powerful, manner.

Ward's address to the audience when kissing Keeler's forehead is one of numerous such modes of delivery. The opera offers a dense network of directed speech: sometimes Ward is talking to himself, at other times to his friends; there are moments in which Ward is enacting an event and elsewhere fantasizing about imaginary scenarios; and there are the aforementioned breakings of the fourth wall. Both productions observed these shifting addressees faithfully, responding to indications written in the vocal line in the score, but also the musical implications of manner of delivery (as in fig. 10.2) and shifting musical topics. This is a quality that was especially notable in Thantrey's performance. More so than Slater, Thantrey responded carefully to the nuances of the score, bringing out the distinctions between the various vocal demands. He also demonstrated an ability for accents, whether in the cod-Churchellian impression of scene 3, or in the scene 4 recreation of the policeman with a lower-class regional accent and Edgcombe with a pronounced West Indian accent.<sup>43</sup> These latter two examples are notable for the way they give particular emphasis to the underlying racial and class-based constructions of masculinity in the opera; accents were not specified in the score. Such performance decisions also lean into the cabaret tradition that nurtures the *Pierrot* lineage of music theater works to which *That Man Stephen Ward* belongs.

Thantrey's ability to convey so compellingly the multiple, distinctive characters inhabiting Ward's world (and mind) was reflected in certain staging decisions. Only two dancers were employed for the 2015 production, and in place of the readily identifiable stage furnishings of the premiere run, the props in the revival were covered in white sheets. Stripping away the material aspects of Ward's life (such as they were in the 2008 performance) served to heighten the psychological qualities of the work, intensifying the focus on Thantrey's performance and with it, by implication, the performance of Ward's multiple masculinities.

## Legitimizing Masculinity, Legitimizing the Self

Scholars have often drawn on Foucauldian notions of power and discourse when framing the performance of masculinities.<sup>44</sup> Foucault's association of the dominant discourse and social privilege uncovers the ways in which hegemonic masculinity might be legitimized through language. But the shifting discursive and narratological strategies of *That Man Stephen Ward*, composed into the score and realized in performance, challenges this hegemony by making visible the performative and conferred nature of masculinity, the hierarchical structures within which it operates, and alternatives to the hegemonic norm. The frequent addresses to the audience, derived from the theatrical practices of the *Pierrot* tradition and Dennis Potter, neatly implicates the audience within the hegemony, confronting and challenging their own assumptions and behavior. In this sense, the opera is a model of how contemporary opera more broadly engages with such topics.

But just as discourse can legitimize social practices, it can be placed in the service of legitimizing the self. Viewed as a psychological self-portrait, the opera tells us much about "that man" Stephen Ward and the ways in which he sought to maintain his own precarious position of power within the patriarchal pyramid. This he attempted through narration, and with it the attempt to rewrite his own history. We need not know the historical resonances of the *Pierrot* ensemble to hear that Ward's self-narration is contestable, undermined by the shifting orchestral colors, rapid shifts of musical topic and musical perspective, and alternative subject positions that arise. In failing to conform to the hegemonic masculine norms, Ward was Othered, unmanned; ultimately, he fulfilled the traditional role of the tragic operatic heroine. His actions only served to reproduce structural inequalities. Ward fails in his self-legitimation because he never stood a chance of succeeding: the hegemonic structures that he sought to benefit from were too rigorously patrolled to allow otherwise.

### Notes

1. See David Buchbinder, *Studying Men and Masculinities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 20.

2. Kate Whittaker, "Performing Masculinity/Masculinity in Performance," in *Masculinity in Opera: Gender, History, and New Musicology*, ed. Philip Purvis (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 9–30.

3. Philip Purvis, ed., *Masculinity in Opera: Gender, History, and New Musicology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

4. Only one of the twelve chapters in *Masculinity in Opera* considers a contemporary opera, and even then at least equal weight is given to Mozart. See Martin Iddon, "Giving Adam Voice: Troubling Gender and Identity in W. A. Mozart's *Zaide* and Chaya Czernowin's *Adama*," in Purvis, *Masculinity in Opera*, 167–93.

5. Philip Purvis, "The 'Crisis' of Masculinity in Poulenc's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*," in Purvis, *Masculinity in Opera*, 236–53.

6. Michael S. Kimmel has defined hegemonic masculinity as "the image of masculinity of those men who hold power, which has become the standard in psychological evaluations, sociological research, and self-help and advice literature for teaching young men to become 'real men.' The hegemonic definition of manhood is a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power." "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," in *Theorizing Masculinities* ed. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 125.

7. Instances of operatic "unmanning" in the scholarly literature tend to focus on the Othering of male subjects by means of race, age, and fool-like qualities (see Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing [St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1988], 118–36) or voice type (e.g. countertenor, falsetto) and sexuality (see Philip Brett, "Britten's Dream," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], 270). *Wozzeck*, as a white, heteronormative cis male, performed by a baritone (a *Fach* conventionally associated with authority), is unmanned primarily by his lower status compared to other males within the patriarchal system.

8. See, for instance, Tim Ashley, "Peter Grimes review— Compelling, Unsettling, and Ravishingly Sung," *The Guardian*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/mar/18/peter-grimes-britten-review-royal-opera-house-deborah-warner>

9. Michael S. Kimmel opens his survey of American and British masculinities with the chapter "Invisible Masculinities." See *The History of Men: Essays in the History of American and British Masculinities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 3–15.

10. For an equivalent discussion of how the contemporary crisis of masculinity has shaped theater practices post-1990, see Finton Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

11. In scene 3, the parents of Eddie (the modern version of Oedipus) form a Greek chorus to describe the plague ravishing the land. Their examples—industry and infrastructure falling into decline, political power battles, violence and fighting—link with examples of working-class racism and police brutality to reflect closely the Britain in the 1980s. On a more humorous note, the gentrification of typical working-class social spaces (the local pub) in the form of wine bars illustrates another way by which traditional social norms were being undermined.

12. See Andrew Clements, *Mark-Anthony Turnage* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 12–17.

13. See Anthony Bateman, "Playing Away: The Construction and Reception of a Football Opera (interview with the Composer Benedict Mason)." *Sport in Society* 17, no. 3 (2014): 358–70.

14. *That Man Stephen Ward* employs a small orchestra constituted of a flexible Pierrot

ensemble that is augmented by percussion and doublings (the pianist, for instance, also plays electric organ and harpsichord; the flautist doubles on both piccolo and alto flute, and the clarinetist on bass clarinet).

15. Jonathan Dunsby, *Schoenberg: Pierrot lunaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7.

16. Dunsby, *Schoenberg*, 9. Dunsby notes that Harrison Birtwistle's opera *Punch and Judy* (1967) offers a rare post-Martean engagement with the commedia tradition (Dunsby, *Schoenberg*). The aesthetic connections between Birtwistle's opera and *Pierrot lunaire*, however, are less pronounced than other works considered in this chapter.

17. For a history of this tradition see, in particular, Christopher Dromey, *The Pierrot Ensembles: Chronicle and Catalogue, 1912–2012* (London: Plumbago Books, 2012).

18. *King Harald's Saga* was written for Jane Manning, a notable interpreter of *Pierrot lunaire*. A related instrumental work, *King Harald Sails to Byzantium* (also 1979) uses instruments from the Pierrot ensemble.

19. For instance, see Potter's *Pennies from Heaven* (1978) and *The Singing Detective* (1986), both of which feature actors miming to popular music. A recent example of this dramatic technique can be found in "Waterloo," the seventh episode of season 7 of *Mad Men* (2014), in which the lead character Don Draper witnesses the recently deceased Bert Cooper perform a song and dance to "The Best Things in Life are Free." This is of a different order to the dreamlike states encountered in, say, *Erwartung* or the operas of Sciarrino (see Bertola, chapter 12, this volume).

20. See Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 174–88.

21. David S. Gutterman highlights the relational nature of the multiple identities of the self in his "Postmodernism and the Interrogation of Masculinity," in *Theorizing Masculinities*, ed. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 219–38.

22. Philip Larkin, "Annus Mirabilis" (1967), first published in *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974). The unsuccessful public prosecution of Penguin Books took place between October 20 and November 2, 1960. The Beatles released their first LP, *Please Please Me* on March 22, 1963. This period of sexual awakening for the nation almost exactly coincided with the Profumo affair: John Profumo met Christine Keeler in July 1961; Ward's trial began on July 28, 1963, and he took the overdose that eventually killed him two days later.

23. In part, this was in response to the strained relationship between the press and the government due to the 1962 publication of allegations about the sexuality of an Admiralty clerk, John Vassall (who had been caught up in a spying scandal), which led to the resignation of a government minister as well as the imprisonment of two journalists who refused to reveal their sources on their stories about Vassall. On learning of Profumo's affair, the British prime minister Harold MacMillan wrote in his diary (March 15, 1963), "I was forced to spend a great deal of today over a silly scrape (women this time, thank God, not boys)" (cited in Martin Kettle, "Profumo: A Scandal That Keeps Giving, Even after 50 Years," *The Guardian*, January 4, 2020). MacMillan was presumably thinking of the imprisonment of the MP Sir Ian Horobin the year before on multiple charges of indecent assault on children under sixteen.

24. Richard Farmer, "The Profumo Affair in Popular Culture: *The Keeler Affair* (1963) and 'the commercial exploitation of a public scandal'" *Contemporary British History* 31, no. 3 (2017): 452–70 (at 452–53).

25. Whittaker, "Performing Masculinity," 12.

26. Edgcombe maintained that "the idea of a black man sleeping with a white woman who was also sleeping with a government minister was too much for the times." See Mark Olden, "Johnny Edgcombe Obituary," *The Guardian*, September 30, 2010.

27. Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 79.

28. Buchbinder, *Studying Men and Masculinities*, 72

29. Score references refer to the composer's score, which is unpublished at the time of writing. CD track timings refer to *That Man Stephen Ward*, Damian Thantrey (bar.) and Nova Music Opera Ensemble cond. George Vass, Resonus Classics RES10197, 2017, compact disc.

30. The opera refers to Ivanov by his anglicized name of Eugene.

31. One might attribute Ward's lines "We must be correct. After all, this may be history" at the start of scene 4 as Hyde and Norris's wry meta-commentary on the historical liberties they took at this moment in the opera.

32. The dates given to scenes in the opera are taken from the synopsis in the CD liner notes to the recording of the opera. *That Man Stephen Ward*, Resonus Classics, 5.

33. There is a similarity here to Swallow's accusations against Peter Grimes in the Prologue of Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945). My thanks to Bryan White for this observation.

34. Kimmel notes that "We are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval." "Masculinity as Homophobia," 128. In this context, he cites the literary critic David Lenz, who claims that "ideologies of manhood have functioned primarily in relation to the gaze of male peers and male authority" (Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia," 129). Ward's self-narration here can be viewed precisely as his response to (what he perceives to be) Astor's male gaze (and by extension, the gaze of hegemonic masculinity).

35. CD track 2, 6:29.

36. CD track 2.

37. CD track 2 to 2:12.

38. The composer notes that Ward's admiration is expressed using deliberately "second-rate words and clichéd images." Thomas Hyde, personal communication with author, August 28, 2020.

39. Thomas Hyde, personal communication with author, July 13, 2020.

40. Ben Knights, surveying male narratives in fiction of the past century, notes that the "textual figure" of the "male unravelling under his own gaze, recurs repeatedly in the twentieth century." Hyde and Norris's treatment of Ward aligns closely with this literary tradition, and his ensuing overdose links too with Knight's later observation that "[o]ne recurrent motif of masculine narrative is the desire to anticipate the vengeance of the universe by a pre-emptive strike. The victim role in the ensuing narrative is apt to move around, and may even gravitate towards the hero himself. (As suicide figures demonstrate,



male violence is after all frequently directed against the self.)" *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1999), at 125, 128.

41. Nor could this be otherwise. As Berthold Schoene-Harwood observes, the "hegemonic configuration of masculinity is always bound to constitute an impossible, phantasmatic ideal that ultimately no man can live up to or fulfil. As a result, all flesh-and-blood masculinities must ineluctably find themselves in a position of either complicity, marginality or subordination." *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from Frankenstein to the New Man* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), xii.

42. The classic text on the performativity of gender is Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Subsequent scholarship on masculine performativity owes much to Butler's work.

43. All these are readily audible in the Resonus Classics recording.

44. For instance, see Buchbinder, *Studying Men and Masculinities*, chapter 4.

## Narrative Agencies in Annie Proulx and Charles Wuorinen's *Brokeback Mountain*

Yayoi Uno Everett

"Oppression and resistance and survival and heroic making are the stuff of gay history," John Clum writes, and "much of gay drama is an expression of what might be called the 'historical impulse' in gay literature—the impulse to depict and define the collective past of gay men to affirm a sense of identity and solidarity and to educate the dominant culture about the brutal effects of its heterosexism."<sup>1</sup> This may well be the dominant trend that defines post-Stonewall gay male literature and its representation in popular culture. If so, then it's all the more shocking to read Annie Proulx's 1997 short story *Brokeback Mountain*, which works against this impulse by depicting gay protagonists in a deeply homophobic setting in rural Wyoming circa 1960s. In the story, Ennis and Jack meet as young men at the fictional Brokeback Mountain and carry out their relationship away from prying eyes over the course of twenty years; while Ennis remains closeted due to the childhood trauma of witnessing gay cowboys being brutally murdered, Jack expresses a desire to live together openly and own a ranch, which ultimately costs him his life. Ennis's mantra, which he repeats to himself even after Jack's death, is: "if you can't fix it, you ought to be able to stand it." Survival, for Ennis, trumps fighting for one's true desires: he is unable to shake off the belief that either one plays within the rules of heteronormative society or ends up dead on the side of the road.

There is a reason why this story appealed to Charles Wuorinen as the stuff of opera. Contemporary operas that feature gay protagonists (e.g., Stewart Wallace's *Harvey Milk* (1989), Gregory Spears's *Fellow Travelers* (2016), Nico Muhly's *Two Boys* (2013), Terence Blanchard's *Champion: Opera in Jazz* (2013), Jorge Martin's *Before Night Falls* (2010)) more often than not portray

gay protagonists as tragic heroes or martyrs in the vein of victimized heroines in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century verismo operas, e.g., Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata*, Carmen in Bizet's *Carmen*, or Cho-cho san in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*.<sup>2</sup> In adapting the story to opera, Wuorinen envisioned the theme of *Brokeback Mountain* (2014) as "the impossibility for a man to accept himself, to express his feelings, to communicate. It also speaks of oppression, of the inability to escape by people who are trapped in a world they don't like."<sup>3</sup> The story centers on Ennis's resistance to acknowledging his gay identity, while embracing his love for Jack and his commitment to be a rancher. Because he is neither capable of standing up for himself nor of escape from rural Wyoming (he rejects Jack's idea to move somewhere else), Ennis must live with a fragmented self. What role does the orchestral music assume in underscoring the *Brokeback Mountain*'s agency in this story centered on societal oppression?

Drawing on the feminist theorist Seyla Benhabib, Sarah Lucas claims that "narrative agency refers to the subject's capacity to construct a meaningful narrative, and not to the actual content of the narrative."<sup>4</sup> She further breaks down narrative agency into three categories: *primary* (the capacity of an individual to say "I am. . ."), *relational* ("I" in relation to others), and *generative* (in the sense of contributing to or transforming collectively constructed norms), and she emphasizes that the capacity for agency should not be confused with assumptions about what a self *ought* to do think or do, which results in conflating narrative capacity with content. In *Brokeback Mountain*, the narrative content is shaped by the homophobic rural society and the inhabitants who reinforce this attitude, while the subject's capacity is expressed through the character's actions that resist and/or comply with the social norm. Stemming from a traumatic childhood experience, Ennis is convinced that the only way to survive in Wyoming as a rancher is to remain closeted, while Jack—unrestrained and idealistic—wishes to live openly as a couple and own a ranch together. The dramatic conflict arises from their fundamental disagreement over how to live their lives; during their twenty years together, Jack becomes increasingly more impatient with their long-distance relationship and travels to Mexico to seek sexual gratification. When Ennis hears about Jack's accidental death, he constructs a narrative of victimization by insisting that Jack died from a rigged tire explosion. Jack's capacity for agency rests with his desire to live openly, Ennis's with his conflicted self and his inability to change.

Narrative agencies in *Brokeback Mountain* operate at multiple registers when one considers the two protagonists' agencies as *primary*, the collective society's agencies as *relational*, and the mountain's role as *generative* and *relational*. Aguirre (keeper of Brokeback Mountain), Alma (Ennis's wife), Lureen (Jack's wife), Hogboy (Lureen's father), and the townspeople exert their agencies by expecting the men to conform to societal norms. Alma is especially unforgiving when she finds out about Ennis's tryst with Jack and lashes out at him (act II, scene 6). The mountain's agency is generative in the sense that it supposedly casts a spell over the two men; as Ennis says to Jack, "You got some kind of power over me. You and that damn Brokeback" (act II, scene 2). It is also relational in the sense that Wuorinen's music for the mountain provides shifting points of reference, first as material indices of the "evil" mountain and later as an expressive signifier of Ennis's trauma over Jack's untimely death.

By distinguishing the opera text (music, libretto, and stage directions prior to production) from the performance text (production components), David Levin argues that contemporary operatic productions generate "a surfeit of signifying systems" that are inherently polylogical: more often than not, operatic productions lend expression to "multiple, sometimes conflicting expressive registers."<sup>5</sup> In Ivo van Hove's scenography for the Teatro Real production, the stage is laterally divided into non-overlapping sections, juxtaposing the domestic lives of women on two sides of the stage while situating the two men carrying on a tryst at Motel Siesta in the center; while the characters do not see each other, the divided stage makes visible to the audience the irreconcilable nature of the situation. To this end, I introduce the concept of *focalization* to refer to the "point of view" the scenography establishes for the audience as opposed to what the characters see.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the polylogical construction of the opera extends to Wuorinen's atonal and dodecaphonic musical idioms, which hark back to early or mid-twentieth-century expressionistic operas (e.g., Strauss's *Salome* (1905), Berg's *Wozzeck* (1914–22) and *Lulu* (1929–35), Schoenberg's *Erwartung* (1909), Shostakovich's *Lady MacBeth from the Mtsenk District* (1934)), while van Hove's stage direction recreates scenes from Wyoming and Texas circa 1967 with a minimal, postmodern flair. Anthony Tommasini, for example, in his review of its American premiere in 2018 found the "unabashedly atonal, fiercely complex music" ineffectively intricate and too "brainy" in depicting the lives of two unsophisticated cowboys.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, James Jorden com-

mented in his review of the premiere that “Wuorinen’s expertly crafted music sounds dated and limited in its emotional response to the action (however internal) of the drama.”<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding such criticisms, I argue that Wuorinen’s musical style serves a broader dramaturgical purpose in giving voice to societal oppression that impinges on the protagonists’ selfhood. Paralleling topics common to twentieth-century expressionistic operas, the story revolves around the oppression and inescapability of a subject trapped in a patriarchal and heteronormative society. Ennis’s fractured subjectivity is articulated through his dualistic modes of singing: he sings in *Sprechstimme* when expressing his outward, disgruntled self and in lyrical mode when he is attuned to his internal desires.

Moreover, I claim that the orchestral music in expressionistic operas by Berg, Schoenberg, and Shostakovich conveys the unconscious desires and emotions of the protagonists more poignantly than the sung utterances. The mood established by the orchestra, be it yearning, anguish, mockery, and so forth, steers the listener toward examining the psychological underpinning of an “inner reality” of the character and of the situation.<sup>9</sup> Applied to *Brokeback Mountain*, the ominous and dissonant theme of the mountain *constrains* the viewer’s construction of meaning in a specific manner, while van Hove’s scenography shapes the viewer’s focalization with a broader range of associations and implications—what I refer to as *omniscient* narration—as will be discussed.

From the start of the opera, the mountain theme presents its persona as a place of dark magic. And this theme takes on narrative agency (or persona) in shaping the viewer’s interpretation through its *acousmatic* function. Michel Chion defines acousmatic sounds in film as those that tell a story in lieu of visual presentation; it has “the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power.”<sup>10</sup> The *unsettling* sound of the *Brokeback Mountain* theme, at first a descriptive marker of the mountain, becomes intertwined with Ennis’s psychological fear of oppression. Through its recurrence, it shapes the opera’s musico-dramatic structure and the range of meanings we attribute to it.<sup>11</sup> There are other instrumental motives and vocal themes associated with the men’s desire for freedom and their love for one another.<sup>12</sup> But these auxiliary themes do not unsettle because they have an embodied presence in the singing voices and the physical gestures that accompany them. In stark contrast, the *Brokeback Mountain* theme acquires narrative agency through its disembodied, acousmatic expression; the sounding of the

low  $C_1$  drone in the bass is all it takes to convey its omnipresence, that something much larger than people determines the fate of these characters. The acousmatic significance of the mountain theme is, I believe, one of the key elements that distinguishes the opera's dramaturgy from its counterparts in film and literary form.

What exactly did Proulx and Wuorinen have in mind when they collaborated on the operatic adaptation of *Brokeback Mountain*? How does the acousmatic function of the mountain theme play out in relationship to other themes and motives? How do Wuorinen's sketches for the opera (e.g., twelve-tone rows) provide a framework for understanding the opera's hidden musical logic? And, finally, in what sense does the opera's narrative relate to expressionistic and modernist operas that pit an individual against an oppressive collective environment?

In shedding light on such questions, this chapter proceeds with a background for preparing the operatic adaptation and compares it with Ang Lee's filmic adaptation of *Brokeback Mountain*, then discusses the acousmatic function of the mountain theme in relationship to the opera's dramaturgy as well as the significance of the scenography. It concludes with some observations about the opera's intertextual references to expressionistic operas. Wherever relevant, I will refer to specific tracks from Teatro Real's DVD recording of its production.<sup>13</sup>

## Background and Adaptations

As the youngest composer to win the Pulitzer Prize for the electronic work *Time's Encomium* (1970), Charles Wuorinen was recognized as a prolific composer who wrote more than 260 works. After composing a large-scale setting of Dylan Thomas's *A Winter's Tale* (1991), he devoted increasing attention to vocal works. Prior to *Brokeback Mountain*, he composed an opera set to a novel by Salman Rushdie called *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1997–2001), which premiered in 2004. Critics praised the comic opera for its “scintillating theatricality” and “wittily inflected vocal lines” that lead to a happy conclusion.<sup>14</sup>

Then came an opportunity to write a much darker opera on the subject of *Brokeback Mountain*. In 2006, Gerard Mortimer, then general director of the New York City Opera, commissioned Wuorinen to compose the opera, beginning a long and laborious process (over eight years) that culminated in

the premiere in Madrid at the Teatro Real on January 29, 2014. A second production at the Landstheater in Salzburg in 2016 followed, then a U.S. premiere took place at the New York City Opera on May 31, 2018. Proulx was at first reluctant to work with Wuorinen, as she was not pleased by Ang Lee's film, which sweetened and softened the hard life in the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming, where she lives to this day. It was only after Wuorinen visited the writer and toured those cold, harsh, imposing mountains that she agreed to write the libretto for the opera.<sup>15</sup> Suffice it to say, in adapting the short story into an operatic libretto, Proulx did away with the romantic impulse in the film in order to focus squarely on the oppressive environment of rural Wyoming.

In fact, the role of the mountain keeps shifting in the different versions of the story. In Annie Proulx's short story from 1997, the mountain assumes a metonymic role in identifying the place where the men first meet and work together as ranchers, but *not* a place where they ever return to visit. Over the course of twenty years, the men travel to other mountains and camp outdoors, exchanging stories about their children and the inconsequential affairs they carry on with people other than their wives.

The 2005 blockbuster film (directed by Ang Lee) dramatizes the men's forbidden relationship and their attachment to the mountain as a place of refuge from the outside world. Roger Ebert, in his review of the film, comments, "It is the story of a time and place where two men are forced to deny the only passion either one will ever feel. Their tragedy is universal. It could be about two women, or lovers from different religious or ethnic groups—any 'forbidden' love."<sup>16</sup> The soundtrack for Ang Lee's film features an acoustic guitar and Hawaiian steel guitar; set to a lilting triple meter, the melody imparts a sweet and mellow mood in G Mixolydian mode. The mountain becomes associated with the soundtrack, which comments on the men's nostalgic memories of the times they spent together.

In the operatic adaptation, the mountain acquires a dual signification as a place of threat and of refuge. The opera divides into two acts, the first spanning four years since the men's first encounter at the Brokeback Mountain, and the second chronicling the remaining sixteen years in which they maintain a long-distance relationship. Within act I, scenes 1 through 5 and 7 and 8 take place at the Brokeback Mountain, where the men meet in the summer of 1963. Interspersed between are scenes that deal with the women's lives: Alma's aspiration prior to her marriage to Ennis (scene 6) and Jack's encounter with Lureen in Texas (scene 9). The two women can't be more different from one another: Alma is headstrong, resists being married to a rancher,

and willfully pursues Ennis to change his occupation so that she can live in town and enjoy a lifestyle Ennis does not care for. Lureen, a college graduate, is more inward and tolerates Jack's indifference toward her. Scene 10 fast forwards to Alma and Ennis's married life together in Riverton four years later. Within act II, scenes 1 and 2 are focused on Ennis and Jack's reunion in 1967, then scenes 3 through 6 track their subsequent trips back to Brokeback Mountain, Lureen's disenchantment with Jack, and Ennis's divorce from Alma. The last five scenes (7 through 11) take place in 1983, beginning with Ennis's altercation with Jack, the latter's unexpected death, Ennis's visit to see Jack's parents and pay homage, and his final pledge to himself.

The characters' dispositions are expressed through *Fach* (vocal type) and styles of singing: Ennis Del Mar (bass-baritone), Jack Twist (lyric tenor), Ennis's wife Alma (soprano), Jack's wife Lureen (mezzo-soprano), the bartender (alto), and the mountain keeper Aguirre (bass). Lureen's father, Hog-boy (bass), appears as a ghost, an additional character Wuorinen and Proulx inserted in the opera, along with Jack's father (tenor) and mother (alto) at the end of the opera. Ennis is at first unable to connect with his emotions and often sings in *Sprechstimme*, while Jack, idealistic in nature, is more communicative and sings in a lyrical, vibrant manner. Only when Ennis expresses his desire openly does he adopt a lyrical singing style, as demonstrated in the duets they sing about their desire to be free. Compared to the original short story, the women in the opera are given substantial roles; they express their hopes, desires, and disenchantments with emotional candor and depth, so that the viewer is made to empathize with them. Alma's materialistic aspirations are brought out when she shops for a wedding dress that is far more expensive than what she can afford (act I, scene 6). Lureen is more gracious and accepting of Jack's aberrant behaviors, yet she is haunted by the ghost of her father who reminds her of his fundamental mistrust for Jack (act II, scene 4). Aguirre, along with the townspeople and Jack's parents, reinforce the oppressive, heteronormative standard of life in Wyoming during the twenty years of their relationship.

## Narrative Agency of the Brokeback Mountain Theme and Related Themes

Anyone who has heard the opera may be captivated by the dark and ominous orchestral prologue. The long, sustained drone on  $C_1$  is played simultaneously



by the contrabass, contrabassoon, piano, and tuba and is amplified by the rumbling bass drum prior to the entry of trombone's motif. But why invoke the notion of acousmatic music? Most importantly, one hears the theme against the projected image of the mountain, but its source (what the music refers to) remains ambiguous. At some point, the theme no longer serves as indices of lightning and storms of the mountain, but rather psychological indices of oppression and brutality in the society inhabited by Jack and Ennis. In describing the music, Wuorinen comments: "Sometimes the score evokes the icy clarity of the high-altitude freedom the characters enjoy there. But the mountain also breathes and storms, and the music projects this turbulence as well, especially when it *transfers* into the interior lives of the characters and their interactions in the human world."<sup>17</sup>

The Brokeback Mountain theme foregrounds the dark and threatening nature of the mountain, but also its serene, ethereal nature. The theme can be divided into alternating textures, labeled X and Y, as shown in figure 11.1. X is characterized by the tremolos in the low strings, piano, timpani and bass drum rolls, anchored to the low  $C_1$  drone, punctuated by the motive [C, D $\flat$ , B] played by trombone and timpani. This is answered by Y, with its ethereal texture made up of sustained woodwinds and string harmonics in the high register. The first time it is presented, it is punctuated by the harp's descending trichord, [D $\sharp$ , F, E]. The structure of the prologue alternates between the two textural types three times with a slight variation in Y.

Wuorinen's sketches indicate that the theme is derived from the twelve-tone row in its  $S_0$  (prime form), as shown below the reduced score. The row is composed of four trichords, labeled (a) through (d), which appear out of order in the prologue. As indicated by the circled passages, trichord (a) maps onto the melody in the trombone and timpani at the end of X, while the trichords (c) and (d) make up the initial statement of Y, and trichord (b) appears within the string harmonics at m. 18, where an aggregate is formed.

Furthermore, Wuorinen's sketches contain a macrocosmic plan for structuring the entire opera based on various transformations of the row, often pairing one transposition of the row against another, as shown in figure 11.2. Surface gestures (vocal and instrumental) are most often derived from the combination of the four trichords in the row.<sup>18</sup> Although Wuorinen deploys the four trichords as building blocks for composing out surface gestures, the frequent repetition of pitches and auxiliary materials render the presence of the twelve-tone rows nearly invisible at the foreground. At the macrocosmic level, the structure of scenes within acts I and II are governed by row trans-

m.1

X

Y

trb/tmp

a)

hrp

pno

trb

cb:

bdrm

*p* < *f* *p*

*p* < *f* *p*

*p*

11

X

Y

b) / c) / d)

xyl

vln

vln via

vlc

cb

(harmonics)

*ppp*

*p* < *f* *p*

*p* < *f* *p*

*p* < *mf* < *p* < *niente* < *mp*

S<sub>0</sub>:

a) b) c) d)

(012) (016) (012) (014)

Fig. 11.1. *Brokeback Mountain* theme and twelve-tone row structure. (Edition Peters; Howard Stokar, used with permission.)

positions that reflect the succession of pitches within  $S_0$ ; that is, successive scenes in act I are transposed to begin on subsequent pitch of  $S_0$ , so that following the prologue that begins on C, scene 1 begins on  $D\flat$ , scene 2 on B, and so forth, until all twelve pitches of the row are exhausted, while the accompanying retrograde rows are neither rigorously ordered nor complete. Act II reverses the ordering to create a palindrome; note how the pairing of S and R rows is flipped. Wuorinen uses the retrograde of each row beginning with  $R_7$  and concludes with  $R_0$ . It is as if the “hidden” logic underlying the row structure of the mountain theme governs the destiny of the two men: the music of this opera begins and ends with the  $S_0$  row, associated with the mountain.

Within act I, the Brokeback Mountain theme functions mainly as a descriptive marker of the mountain. In scene 1, for example, Aguirre, the keeper of the Brokeback Mountain, sings a solo passage that speaks of the

Act I										Act II											
Pr.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
S <sub>0</sub>	S <sub>1</sub>	S <sub>11</sub>	S <sub>9</sub>		S <sub>8</sub>	S <sub>2</sub>	S <sub>4</sub>	S <sub>5</sub>	S <sub>3</sub>	S <sub>10</sub> S <sub>6</sub> S <sub>7</sub>	R <sub>7</sub>	R <sub>6</sub>	R <sub>10</sub> R <sub>3</sub>	R <sub>5</sub>	R <sub>4</sub>	R <sub>2</sub>	R <sub>8</sub>	R <sub>9</sub>	R <sub>11</sub>	R <sub>1</sub>	R <sub>0</sub>
	R <sub>0</sub>		R <sub>10</sub> R <sub>3</sub> R <sub>5</sub>				R <sub>4</sub>	R <sub>2</sub>	R <sub>8</sub> R <sub>9</sub>	R <sub>11</sub> R <sub>1</sub>	S <sub>1</sub>		S <sub>11</sub> S <sub>9</sub> S <sub>8</sub>	S <sub>4</sub>		S <sub>5</sub>		S <sub>3</sub> S <sub>10</sub>		S <sub>0</sub>	

Fig. 11.2. Formal plan of *Brokeback Mountain* (based on the twelve-tone rows)

magical power the mountain possesses as follows: “Brokeback Mountain, old and hard, knife blade rising from the earth. Dark power. Lightning, blizzard, avalanche and flood, storm and falling rock, stones like skulls, jet streams, lion’s claw, an evil place that kills men.”

The elaborating sonic gestures function as material indices of the destructive forces of the mountain.<sup>19</sup> This is one of the few times when the angular vocal melody explicitly draws from the first hexachord of the S<sub>0</sub> row over the words “Brokeback mountain, old and hard,” then loosening the order of the second hexachord, while anchoring the angular melody to the sustained drone on C<sub>1</sub> from the prologue. On the words “dark power,” Aguirre’s vocal melody repeats the first trichord [C, D<sub>b</sub>, B], accompanied by rapid figurations in the strings and woodwinds that offer sonic images to the destructive power of the mountain: “lightning, blizzard, avalanche and flood.” Slightly later, when the two men are introduced to each other, the mountain theme recurs with the low drone, providing sonic images of darkened sky, lightning, and rumble of thunder.

Countering the ethos of threat associated with the mountain is the tender duet in which Jack and Ennis express their desire to be free, as shown in figure 11.3. As they look up at the sky, Ennis sings a lyrical melody outlining a succession of thirds (E<sub>b</sub>-G-B-D) on the words “we are like eagles, Jack.”<sup>20</sup> Continuing on, hearing the hawks cry, Ennis reflects on his own desire for freedom: “sounds like that hawk is sayin, ‘Free, we are free, you are free.’”<sup>21</sup> Note how the same ascending tertian motive connects the hawks with the idea of freedom. When the orchestral accompaniment is taken into consideration, an extended chord based on tertian construction emerges as shown

mm.544-45 [Eb, G, B, D]                      mm.553-55                      [Eb, G, B, D]                      vocal/orchestra

pine trees. We're like eag - les, Jack.                      Sounds like that hawk is say-in "Free. You are free."

Fig. 11.3. "Freedom" theme (act I, mm. 544–545; mm. 553–555)

to the furthest right of figure 11.3. The "freedom" motif returns later in act II (scene 2) when they carry on a tryst at Motel Siesta away from prying eyes. Reminiscing over the summer they spent together on the mountain, Ennis wistfully sings, "Ev'ry time I heard a hawk cry, I thought about us upon the mountain. They say Brokeback is a bad place. But for us it was good."<sup>22</sup> It is no coincidence that later when Ennis and Jack sing a duet confirming their feelings for one another, their contrapuntal voices feature thirds as the main harmonic building block (act II, mm. 260–268).

The darker resonances of the mountain theme return at a critical turning point when Ennis and Jack become lovers (act I, scene 5). In the beginning, they are stationed at opposite ends of the post and come together only to share a meal at the end of the day. One night, Ennis is too drunk to go back to his own tent and falls asleep by the campfire. The  $C_1$  drone reappears with the chromatic trichord at the point when Ennis utters "freezing cold" (m. 621) and Jack quickly pulls him inside the tent. Soon afterward, we see the silhouette of the two men making love inside the tent. As Proulx writes "In the dark the mountain's power swells and throbs" (m. 625), rapid figurations in the orchestra suggestive of storm and lightning accompany this turbulent scene.

For the remainder of the summer, their bond deepens while they respond differently to their feelings for one another: Jack wonders whether they can embrace this feeling, while Ennis flat out denies it as he reminds himself of his impending marriage to Alma. They leave the mountain without any indication that they will see each other again. Fast forward to four years later, Ennis and Jack are now married with children. One day, while cradling his newborn baby, Ennis receives a postcard from Jack that he will be coming into town for a visit. The final scene in act I closes with a note of anticipation of their reunion.

Act II begins with Jack's visit (scene 1), where Alma catches them kissing at the bottom of the staircase before Ennis brings Jack up to the apartment for an introduction. Over the course of the next sixteen years, the men carry

on their affair from prying eyes, meeting at first in Motel Siesta and later retreating to the mountain as a place of refuge. By the sixth year, Alma, fed up with Ennis, who remains closeted and unwilling to change his ways, divorces him and marries a grocer named Bill. At a Thanksgiving dinner (scene 6), Alma provokes Ennis about his secret life, which I refer to as the first moment of reckoning. The accompanying music builds up to a frenetic speed as she confronts Ennis about his relationship with Jack: “Jack Twist? Jack Nasty! You and him. . . . You and him. . . . You and him . . . It makes me sick! That’s why you don’t want to get married again. Why should you?”<sup>23</sup> Ennis responds by shouting back at her, but upon seeing his children, flees from the scene.

The Brokeback Mountain theme returns as acousmatic music when Ennis confronts the source of his psychological trauma (act II, scene 5). Soon after Ennis breaks the news about his divorce from Alma, Jack proposes that this will be an opportune moment for the two to start a ranch together, an idea that is met with a staunch refusal by Ennis. Ennis then tells Jack about his childhood experience of witnessing a couple of gay cowboys who were dragged to their death until they were turned to “meaty pulps.”<sup>24</sup> The  $C_1$  drone in the bass, associated with the mountain theme, returns at this salient moment once again. They argue over the enduring message of this incident: Ennis expresses his fear of meeting his death by “ordinary people” in this way, while Jack tries to shake off Ennis’s fear by insisting that times have changed. The two men part ways without reconciling their views on how to move forward.

In scene 8, Ennis receives a postcard about Jack’s unexpected death through a tire explosion and surmises that Jack was murdered in much the same way old gay ranchers were mutilated and dragged to their deaths. The townspeople gather around him and lay judgment on him as Ennis hurriedly calls Lureen to find out what happened.<sup>25</sup> This is also the moment when the acousmatic function of the mountain theme surfaces as a signifier of Ennis’s internalized trauma. The reduced score shown in figure 11.4a illustrates the scene when Ennis finds out about Jack’s death; struck at triple *forte*,  $C$  is played in unison across three octaves, then branches out to  $C\sharp$  and  $B$  to form the first trichord associated with the mountain theme. As Ennis’s voice cracks down and he screams “No! No! Jack! No!,” the bass drum’s pounding rhythm, followed by fragments of glissandi in the trombone, and the crashing dissonant chord at the piano, embody his psychosomatic response to Jack’s unexpected death.

As Ennis collapses to the ground and writhes in agony, the townspeople of Riverton (SATB chorus) surround him and criticize him for not fitting in:

The image shows a musical score for a scene in Act II. The score is written for five parts: Ennis (bass), Timp (snare drum), B.D. (bass drum), orch. (orchestra), and pno (piano). The Ennis part has lyrics: "De-ceased. DEAD!" and "(screams) No! No! Jack! No!". The orchestral part features a chromatic trichord [C, C#, B] circled in red. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (ff, fff, sf), articulation (accents), and phrasing (breathes, slurs).

Fig. 11.4a. Ennis's response to Jack's death (act II). (Edition Peters; Howard Stokar, used with permission.)

"What is wrong with him? Who is he? Works for Stoutamire. Bad news. He keeps to himself. Somethin' not right. He's a hard man. Always lookin' for a fight. Somethin' not right."

Proulx modeled the chorus after the Furies in Greek mythology, who are known for punishing men who commit crimes against the natural order. Emulating its role in Greek theater as external narrator, the chorus addresses the audience rather than speaking directly to Ennis. Curiously, when the chorus sings "to himself" and "not right," the dyad [F#, G] is exchanged between the linear and vertical configurations of choral writing to form a quasi-crucifix over C (mm. 1204–1206).<sup>26</sup> When Lureen tells Ennis that Jack "drowned in his own blood," the chorus echoes the phrase with the chromatic trichord [C#, D, E] (mm. 1249–1250), reinforcing the punishment that falls upon those who stray from the path. By connecting the pitch structure of the choral writing to those of the mountain theme, Wuorinen tells us that the townspeople and the mountain come from the same musical source.

Following Jack's death, Ennis visits Jack's parents' home to ask for their permission to spread his ashes in Brokeback Mountain, and with the encouragement of Jack's mother, he enters Jack's childhood room, where he discovers that Jack has kept the two shirts they wore when they first met over

The image shows a musical score for the closing scene of act II. It features a vocal line at the top and a complex orchestral texture below. The vocal line includes the lyrics "you, on ly you." and "Jack, I swear". The orchestral texture is marked with dynamics such as *mp*, *f*, *ff*, *sfff*, *pp*, and *fff ten.*. A circled section of the orchestral texture is labeled "X/Y". Below the main score, a melodic line labeled "Ro:" is shown in a 6/8 time signature.

Fig. 11.4b. Closing scene (act II). (Edition Peters; Howard Stokar, used with permission.)

twenty years ago. He takes them back to his trailer (scene 11), and in his parting words, Ennis pledges his love to Jack.<sup>27</sup> As shown in figure 11.4b, the sustained, “spectral” chord heard in the conclusion is derived from the  $R_0$  form of the twelve-tone row associated with the mountain theme, and its spacing recalls textures X and Y from the prologue. The chord crescendos to a thunderous volume. Ennis’s ascending vocal melody signifies his commitment to honoring his love for Jack, although the music denies any sense of real closure as his melody ends on  $C_{\sharp 4}$  against the sustained bass  $C_1$ .

In summary, my reading of the opera focuses primarily on the narrative agency accorded to the mountain through the orchestral music’s acousmatic function. Both the libretto and the music participate in anthropomorphizing the mountain in this way. As a place of dark magic, Proulx bestows human qualities by saying that “its power swells and throbs,” and so forth. The theme evolves from its initial signifier of the harsh, foreboding mountain into an entity that encompasses Ennis’s trauma and the social mores of rural Wyoming circa 1960s. As Chion puts it, “its voice comes from an immaterial and non-localized body, and it seems that no obstacle can stop it.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Brian Kane, in *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*, claims that the ontology of acousmatic sound comes *into being* only when its source, cause, and effect are spaced in time, a condition which he refers to as *acousmatic spacing*.<sup>29</sup> While the source of the unsettling theme associated with the mountain is uncovered early on, its cause and effect are revealed in due course by intertwining fragments of the theme with Ennis’s conviction

that nothing will change as history will repeat itself. By connecting the source of his trauma (witnessing the brutal deaths of gay cowboys) with the choral singing by the townspeople to various transformations of the mountain theme, the opera arguably conveys the message that human nature, as with the mountain, is unforgiving to those who stray from its norm.

## Tropes of Expressionism

Aside from the prominent role the Brokeback Mountain theme plays with respect to narrative agency in this opera, there are intertextual references to Expressionism and musical tropes of Expressionism that are worthy of mention. Regarding his “Four Orchestral Songs,” op. 22, Arnold Schoenberg famously proclaimed that “a piece of music does not come into being out of the logic of its own material but [is] guided by the feeling for internal or external processes, bringing these to *expression*, supporting itself on their logic and building on this.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, David Metzger calls upon Schoenberg’s music and Expressionist arts in general for “removing some of the last-standing barriers, social or artistic, placed on expression, so as to have utterances spring unfettered from dark psychic regions.”<sup>31</sup> In foregrounding oppression as a central theme in *Brokeback Mountain*, the music and libretto adopt familiar tropes of musical expressionism, notably the role of orchestral music in giving voice to the unconscious realm of a character, an uncanny symbolism associated with nature imagery (e.g., the moon), among others.

Returning to the scene of Jack’s death and Ennis’s psychosomatic response, the orchestral accompaniment in this scene subtly alludes to the murder scene from Berg’s *Wozzeck* (act III, scene 2, mm. 100–109). In the chilling moment leading up to Marie’s death, she looks up at the moon and remarks how red it is (“Wie der Mond roth aufgeht!”), as *Wozzeck* replies that it is like a bloody iron (“Wie ein blutig Eisen”) and begins to repeatedly stab her with a knife. The timpani’s accelerating beats mimic *Wozzeck*’s heartbeat as he perpetrates the act of murder and watches her body sink to the bottom of the pond. The embodied sensation induced by the “heartbeat” music and accompanying orchestral gestures (such as the tritone motive in the harp) generate the utmost suspense. Although the narrative context is different, the erratic rhythms in the bass drum and timpani in Wuorinen’s scoring of the comparable scene present a physical embodiment of Ennis’s trauma in much the same way. The sounding of the Brokeback Mountain theme, the C drone



and the chromatic trichord, becomes inextricably linked to Ennis's psychosomatic expression of trauma in this way. In short, the vocality of the mountain theme becomes *subjectivized* by being brought into contact with Ennis's trauma. Sonic effects of the mountain theme, which started out as descriptive indices of the mountain, are absorbed into and merged with Ennis's fractured subjectivity.

Additionally, orchestral music may assume an anthropomorphic role when it makes a satirical or ironic commentary on an event. For example, Wuorinen deploys short, solo motives in the violin and woodwinds to poke fun at Ennis and Jack, as if someone eavesdrops and mocks them. When they first get acquainted in a bar at the foot of Brokeback Mountain, Wuorinen introduces a quasi-comical rhythmic pattern (suggestive of laughter) in the accompaniment; he then interpolates a violin obbligato with triplet figuration (act I, scene 2, mm. 191–92) when Ennis awkwardly engages in a conversation (using *Sprechstimme*) with Jack about his humble working-class upbringing. The solo violin melody bursts into the scene as if it is a character that mocks Ennis's lack of ease at social interaction. While the context differs, it recalls the fourth scene in Shostakovich's *Lady MacBeth of Mtsenk District*, in which a sinister, chromatic melody played by the solo violin satirizes the situation in which Katrina sets out to kill her father-in-law, Boris, with poisoned mushroom soup. As the violin's chromatic figurations hovers above the pounding bass ostinato, Boris, oblivious, comments on how good the mushroom soup tastes (mm. 253–57). The instrumental obbligato emerges as a musical trope of Expressionism when it subtly or overtly undermines the protagonist's action and cast it in a sinister light.

Finally, a prominent musical imagery associated with Expressionism is the symbolism associated with the moon. In Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, the full moon is anthropomorphized repeatedly in the protagonist's irrational state of mind, turning her surroundings into phantasms in the depth of night; the deranged woman alternately describes the moon as "full of terror" (m. 105), "pale" (m. 133), "treacherous" (m. 160), and "swaying" (m. 320), as she imagines seeing a ghostly apparition. Similarly, in Strauss's *Salome*, the moon casts a strange spell on people; while Salome looks at the moon and compares it to a chaste woman who does not defile herself, Herodias's page sees "a dead woman," and John the Baptist recognizes it as an omen. In Berg's *Wozzeck*, Marie notices how the moon is "bloody" red before she meets her demise in the hands of her beloved. Although it does not reference death, the image

of the moon is similarly associated with the mountain's dark power and its capacity to cast an evil spell on people in the operatic adaptation of *Brokeback Mountain*.

## Scenography and Omniscient Narration

Van Hove's scenography of *Brokeback Mountain* complicates the viewer's understanding of the narrative. In act I, each scene is compartmentalized into its specific location: the men's initial meeting with Aguirre, drinking at the bar, various scenes that take place on the mountain, Alma at a dress shop, Lureen in Texas in the machinery shop, and so forth. In act II, however, van Hove's scenography juxtaposes the domestic lives of women on both sides of the stage while showcasing the reunion of men at the center of the stage. Take, for example, the scenography for the men's tryst at Motel Siesta in act II. At first, the lighting focuses on Alma, holding her baby, who reacts to Ennis's sudden departure with Jack in disbelief, muttering to herself, "I thought Jack will be a friend to both of us, but he hardly said a word." The silhouette of the two men in embrace appears against the darkened center of the stage while she sings at the front of the stage. A couple of minutes later, the lighting shifts its focus to reveal the intimate exchange carried on by the two men, while the women on both sides of the stage are steeped in darkness.

From the perspective of focalization, a "split" scenography of this sort draws attention to the irreconcilable position in which the male protagonists find themselves given the homophobic society around them. Aguirre is found spying on the two men in the mountain, condemning their behavior while remaining silent. When Alma catches sight of Ennis kissing Jack, she quickly shakes off the idea that there is anything wrong. The wives, for the most part, tolerate being abandoned rather than questioning the men's behavior. Instead of privileging one position over the other, the viewer is confronted with scenes in which the men's actions clash with the heteronormative and religiously conservative behaviors and expectations of their society. In this manner, van Hove exposes all positions at once, which in literary theory is known as *omniscient* narration, because it captures the feelings and thoughts of multiple characters at once. In act II, Ennis and Jack celebrate their reunion at Motel Fiesta, while the abandoned women carrying out domestic affairs are shown to the right and left of the stage. The situation flips when Ennis and

Jack fight over whether to have a life together following Ennis's divorce (act II, scene 5); behind them, we see Alma happily remarried and saying grace before a meal with her new family.<sup>32</sup>

The final two scenes, in contrast, resort to a minimal staging that involves Ennis's interaction with Jack's parents. The stage is darkened except for the projection of the Brokeback Mountain and focalizes on Ennis's act of grieving. In lieu of a split scenography, the *mise-en-scène* in this concluding scene is minimized as if to shine light on Ennis's solitary acknowledgment of his enduring love for Jack. There is no bonding with his older daughter, no promise of a better future nor a nostalgic remembrance of the past, as depicted in Ang Lee's film. In the closing scene, Ennis hangs the two shirts that Jack saved from the summer when they first met, as he pledges his enduring commitment to loving Jack. This moment signifies a kind of spiritual catharsis, when the two shirts slowly rise to the top of the stage as Ennis sings his last word. It is as if the shirts have ascended to "heaven" and the men can finally be at peace with one another. The dissonant spectral chord in the accompanying music, however, suggests otherwise. This is just one instance of how the performance text (production components) and the opera text (music and libretto) operate at conflicting registers and fail to provide closure, embodying the unease in Ennis's mantra that "if you can't fix it, you've got to stand it."<sup>33</sup>

## Concluding Thoughts

How does the operatic narrative of *Brokeback Mountain* compare with that of Thomas Hyde's *That Man Stephen Ward* (Venn, chapter 10, this volume) and other operas that involve a persecuted subject? Ennis clearly emerges as the tragic hero who chooses to bear the burden of his conflicted self, torn between his love for Jack and his fear of being ostracized and persecuted. Like Stephen Ward, Ennis fails to legitimize himself in the patriarchal society of rural Wyoming, yet he stoically carries on with his life as a rancher after Jack's death. Ennis's role, in this respect, may be similar to Hawk's in Gregory Spears's *Fellow Travelers* (2016) in the latter's outward denial of homosexuality that is driven by a strong desire to conform to societal pressure following the McCarthy-era interrogation. For both Ennis and Hawk, survival trumps striving for an authentic selfhood. Ennis is deliberate in the choices he makes and is willing to deal with the consequences of his actions, however flawed they may be.

Returning to the critics' rejection of Wuorinen's music as being too complex, I think they *misread* the opera's narrative as driven by a romantic impulse, centered on the men's forsaken love affair. If that were the case, Wuorinen would have chosen to set the music differently—perhaps giving more space to developing the lyrical duets the men sing and the tertian music that signifies their longing for freedom. If, instead, we were to honor Wuorinen and Proulx's intention that the opera is about oppression, then the essence of the narrative shifts the focus away from the men to the very source the oppression. Rather than pointing to the homophobic society as the source of evil, the mountain emerges as a *metonym* for all things good and evil. Brokeback Mountain, as a place of refuge, offers peace and solitude for the two men on the one hand. It exerts, on the other hand, its "dark magic" on people and, like nature itself, is unforgiving to those who stray from the path. Its ambivalence or dualistic significance is the narrative engine that drives the opera's dramaturgy.

## Notes

1. John Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 200. Clum mentions idealized TV dramas from the 1990s such as *Northern Exposure*, where a gay couple fits comfortably within the heterosexual community in Alaska.

2. For example, Stewart's *Harvey Milk* is a documentary opera that chronicles the life of San Francisco's first "unofficial" gay mayor from childhood to his assassination. Blanchard's *Champion* is about the real-life story of Emile Griffith, who tried unsuccessfully to reconcile his homosexuality in a hyper-macho world of boxing.

3. "Opera de Madrid. Esterno mundial" (Madrid Opera. World Premiere). In *Opera de Madrid* (February 2014), 68–77, 72.

4. See Sarah Drews Lucas, "The Primacy of Narrative Agency: Re-reading Seyla Benhabib on Narrativity," *Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (2018): 127. Lucas claims that the subject's agency precedes norms and narratives, which are arrived at collectively through social interaction.

5. See David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 12.

6. Focalization is Gérard Genette's term that refers to a restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator in the story world. See Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980). Here I repurpose it to refer to the range of information conveyed in the production's scenography and what it offers to the audience. Mieke Bal comments: "whenever events are presented they are always presented from within a certain 'vision.' A point of view is chosen, a certain way of seeing things, a certain angle, whether 'real' historical facts are concerned or fictitious events" (142). See Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

7. See Anthony Tommasini, "Review: 'Brokeback Mountain,' the Opera, Falls Short of its Potential," *New York Times*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/01/arts/music/review-brokeback-mountain-new-york-city-opera.html>

8. James Jorden, "'Brokeback Mountain' Opera Sings of Gay Love—Minus the Passion," *Observer*, June 1, 2018, <https://observer.com/2018/06/opera-review-charles-wuorinen-brrokeback-mountain-lacks-passion/>

9. "Inner reality" was the term often used by Kandinsky, who was in search of a truth that broke through a "lie" of convention and tradition. See David Fanning, "Expressionism," *Oxford Music Online*, January 20, 2001, <https://doi-org.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.09141>

10. Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 24.

11. In a previous publication, I have described Kaija Saariaho's music for the rape scene in *Adriana Mater* as acousmatic music. In the absence of visual representation, the music embodies the act of rape through the structured repetition and gendering of sound textures, and the same music returns later to signify moments of traumatic rupture. See Yayoi U. Everett, *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Operas: Osvaldo Golijov, Kaija Saariaho, John Adams, Tan Dun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 102–3.

12. The men participate in a lyrical duet, expressing their desires to be free like the hawks that circle the sky (DVD track 8, 25:10–40). The music returns when they see each other again in the Motel Siesta (DVD track 15). Ennis, in a rare moment of bliss, sings a lullaby to his daughter to lull her to sleep.

13. References in this chapter will be made specifically to scenes from the DVD of this production. See Charles Wuorinen and Annie Proulx, *Brokeback Mountain* (BelAir Media: DVD BAC111, 2015).

14. "Charles Wuorinen." Accessed on September 7, 2020. <https://www.charleswuorinen.com/biography/>

15. Charles Wuorinen, "Opera de Madrid. Esterno mundial," Program notes for *Brokeback Mountain* (Madrid Opera. World Premiere 2014), 72.

16. Roger Ebert, "Love on a Lonesome Trail," *RogerEbert.com*, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/brokeback-mountain-2005>

17. "On Brokeback Mountain," <https://www.charleswuorinen.com/operas/brokeback-mountain/>

18. I am grateful to Howard Stokar for making the sketches to this opera available following Charles Wuorinen's unexpected death in March 2020.

19. DVD track 3, 4:40–5:27.

20. The tertian motive is derived from the string harmonics (m.18) from texture Y' of the opening prologue, signifying the serene and ethereal beauty of the mountain. Motives based on a string of ascending thirds frequently appear in the orchestral writing preceding the two men's reunion.

21. DVD track 7, 25:10–25:40.

22. DVD track 15, 1:04:45–1:05.

23. DVD track 19, 1:30:26–1:30:38.

24. DVD track 18, 1:23:10–1:24:27.
25. DVD track 21, 1:43:31–1:44:35.
26. Given Wuorinen's affinity for Schoenberg's music, I think the vertical and linear exchange of dyads that form a crucifix is hardly coincidental.
27. DVD track 24, 2:03:45–2:04:45.
28. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 24.
29. Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 165.
30. David Fanning, "Expressionism."
31. See David Metzger, "Modern Silence," *Journal of Musicology* 23, no. 3 (August 2002): 373.
32. It may be worth mentioning that in the Salzburg production, scene changes were made by rotating sets around a central axis, so that the viewer experienced them in succession rather than via juxtaposition.
33. In Ang Lee's film adaptation, the older daughter, Alma Del Mar Jr., visits Ennis to tell him that she is getting married, he gives her his blessing, and father and daughter part on an optimistic note as the nostalgic theme song is heard once again. It begins and ends on this romantic tenor.

## From Subjectivity to Biopolitics

### *The Dream in Salvatore Sciarrino's Music Theater*

Mauro Fosco Bertola

Over the past three decades (1990s–2020s), the Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino has become one of the leading figures in Europe's contemporary operatic scene. Susan McClary, in her one-sided condemnation of the avant-garde experience of the 1950s and 1960s, has included Sciarrino among composers such as Kaija Saariaho or George Benjamin, who have “returned to techniques and sonorities pioneered by Messiaen, Boulez and others” but nevertheless “openly acknowledge the expressive and rhetorical power of their strategies” and thus “humanize its post-tonal idiom, making its power intelligible to audiences.”<sup>1</sup> David Metzger also highlights Sciarrino's expressive use of silence as a fitting example of the fluidity that music has achieved at the turn of the twenty-first century; by dialoguing with tradition (modernist or otherwise) and articulating anew its expressive power, Sciarrino recalls the allegedly historical category of the subject.<sup>2</sup> According to readings such as McClary's and Metzger's, Sciarrino's more fluid approach to the avant-garde and the operatic genre allows him to return opera to its Monteverdian roots; the operatic spectacle again becomes a privileged means for expressing human passions and their psychological intricacies.

The beauty of this reading so brilliantly summarized by McClary and Metzger is that it offers what seems an intuitively coherent explanation for the expressive power of Sciarrino's music while, at the same time, blatantly refuting (again) Fredric Jameson's famous thesis on the alleged “death of the subject” concerning aesthetic production from the 1980s onwards.<sup>3</sup> This reading, however, also seems to explain the strong ties between Sciarrino's music theater and the expressionism of the early twentieth century, especially as embodied in works like Schoenberg's *Erwartung* (1909) or *Die glückliche*

*Hand* (1910–13).<sup>4</sup> Through this reading, Sciarrino embodies a broader scholarly discourse that has gained momentum in recent years and frames music composed over the last three or four decades as “late modernism.” Characterized by a sense of loss and alienation in the face of the failed promises of the post-1945 musical avant-garde and its logic of innovation, late modernism marks a kind of nostalgic return to the early modernist experience, especially to expressionism.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of the 1990s, Hans-Thies Lehmann coined the label “postdramatic theatre” for designating a significant part of the theatrical production of the Western avant-garde since the end of the 1960s, a category that has also been adopted more recently within the opera studies.<sup>6</sup> In downplaying the centrality of plot and dramatic action in favor of the materiality and bodily dimensions of performance on stage, postdramatic theater, as Lehmann points out, builds on the early expressionist experience. In the expressionist theater of the early twentieth century, as he writes:

The sound is intended to transport affects rather than messages. It [the early expressionist theater] wants to go beyond drama as interpersonal dramaturgy of conflict and beyond the motifs inherent to it. It emphasizes the forms of monologue and choir and a more lyrically than dramatically determined succession of scenes [. . .]. Expressionism seeks ways of representing the unconscious whose nightmares and images of desire are not bound to any dramatic logic.<sup>7</sup>

Sciarrino’s operatic works, like those by Michel van der Aa, Charles Wuorinen, Chaya Czernowin, Olga Neuwirth, and others undoubtedly display all these features. And Lehmann’s words with respect to Oskar Kokoschka’s 1907 play *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen* (“*Murder, Hope of Women*”) as a work where the dramaturgical structure relies on “the model of the casual and kaleidoscopic succession of images and scenes of dream” and “the human being [is shown] as a creature of drives” seem to perfectly apply to Sciarrino’s musical theater from *Amore e Psiche* (1973) onward as well. Sciarrino’s theater also shares with the contemporary music-theatrical scene an ongoing exploration of extended vocal techniques like breathing, *Sprechgesang*, glottal sounds, screaming, coughing, and so forth. As the Italian theorist Adriana Cavarero has pointed out, the voice is a powerful instance of subjectivization.<sup>8</sup> It brings about a material, bodily presence that exceeds meaning.<sup>9</sup> By adopting these extended vocal techniques, contemporary musical theater



frees the operatic voice from past conventions and restores its bodily dimension. The voice thus becomes a powerful tool for expressing subjectivity. In some cases, as in Czernowin's *Infinite Now* or in Sciarrino's *Lohengrin*, it even makes possible for the composer—in a kind of music-theatrical equivalent of the literary technique of the stream of consciousness—to “tell” the story only from the perspective of the protagonist, immersing the audience within his or her psychic inner life.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, upon closer analysis, some questions arise: What kind of subject has returned, and in what sense? Who or what is expressed by this music, and to what end? Or, to put it closer to the central theme of this chapter: In what sense does Sciarrino rearticulate expressionism?

In this chapter, I tackle these and related questions by approaching Sciarrino's music theater from the perspective of dream. My aim is not to reject the focus on subjectivity that characterizes standard readings of Sciarrino's work, like those of McClary and Metzger mentioned above, but rather to shift this focus and therefore to reconsider Sciarrino's ties to the early Expressionist experience of the 1910s. After briefly explaining my reasons for choosing dream as a path of inquiry, I will outline Sciarrino's specific oneiropoetics (i.e., his understanding of dream as expressed in his writings). Subsequently, I will consider two music-theatrical works in more detail: *Lohengrin*, which Sciarrino composed in 1984, and *Superflumina*, a later work which premiered in 2010 and shares musical and dramaturgical features with the former. By comparing the two works along the shared topic of dream, I will highlight how Sciarrino has, over the decades, shifted the main focus of his music theater: If *Lohengrin* relies on a specific link between dream and (a somehow Lacanian kind of) subjectivity, three decades later, in *Superflumina*, Sciarrino frames dream as a sociopolitical, rather than subjective space, creating a new kind of music theater akin to the biopolitical reflections of the contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.

## Why Dream?

At first, considering Sciarrino's music theater from the perspective of dream may appear an odd choice. His works contain very few explicit references to dream, and he employs neither explicit dream scenes nor dream narrations. Even in his adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (2002), Sciarrino limits the

references to dreams to a single fleeting mention and focuses instead on the interaction between sleeplessness and hallucinations that ultimately ruins the Macbeths. Only *Da gelo a gelo* (2006) seems to represent at least a partial exception in this respect. Nevertheless, the libretto consists of extracts from the writings and poems of the Japanese poet Izumi Shikibu (ca. 976–1033). The unusual abundance of dream references must, thus, be ascribed to the specific function of dreams in medieval Japanese literature.<sup>11</sup> As for Sciarrino's poetological stances in his essays, interviews, and public lectures, some references to the topic of dream can be identified, although such references are mostly highly metaphorical.<sup>12</sup>

The lack of explicit references in Sciarrino's work, however, is only half of the story. Indeed, Sciarrino's theater contains all the features characterizing the presence of dreams within an aesthetic work as identified by Stefanie Kreuzer in *Traum und Erzählung* (2014). These features include temporal and spatial instabilities, the suspension of logic and causal laws, unclear identities, unreliable narrations, and discontinuities; all have been consistent elements of Sciarrino's music theater since its very beginning. Sciarrino's theater is a perfect example of what Kreuzer calls *autonome Traumdarstellungen* ("autonomous dream representations"). Autonomous dream representations are aesthetic artifacts that are not explicitly identified as dreams but are nevertheless structured using dream logic (e.g., most of Kafka's short stories, or Buñuel and Dalí's short film *Un chien andalou*).<sup>13</sup> Of course, as Kreuzer highlights, the aforementioned criteria for identifying the presence of dreams are quite broad and can easily apply to other aspects, such as madness, illness, and alternate realities.<sup>14</sup> Sciarrino, for his part, often seems to consciously exploit this ambiguity by choosing operatic subjects that revolve around psychologically complex protagonists on the verge of madness or mental breakdown. So, why, and to what end, is dream a recurring feature in the works of Sciarrino, acting as a structural element informing the musical and dramaturgical core of his oeuvre, while at the same time consistently defying any clear demarcation and mixing with other aspects?

## Sciarrino's (Oneiro-)Poetics: The Liminality of Dreams

In one of Sciarrino's longest poetological essays, *Origini delle idee sottili* (The origin of subtle ideas) from 1984, the composer writes,

Music lives in a liminal region. Like in dreams, where one thing is at the same time here and not here and [is] even another thing entirely. [. . .] These are sounds retrieved on the edge of perception, the sounds of the intra-uterine purgatory.<sup>15</sup>

The reference to dream at first appears unspecific or vague. Examining the quote more closely, however, enables the identification of three elements that are fundamental to Sciarrino's entire oneiro- and musical poetics:

1. An analogy established between dreams and music. In this respect, he positions his works within a longstanding musical and aesthetic discourse, which highlights the semantic openness shared by music and dreams and considers both as key elements for gaining a privileged access to some kind of deep (metaphysical, anthropological, psychological etc.) "truth" beyond Logos.<sup>16</sup>
2. A shared liminality that establishes a link between music and dream. Both elements are located on the edge of perception, that is, at the tipping point where perceptual categories like space and time fall apart. Dreams feature spatial inconsistencies and undermine identities. On its part, Sciarrino is aiming at an acoustic space where—as for the unborn baby in the womb—the divide between sound and vision, inside and outside, does not apply.
3. The liminality of both dreams and music points toward a prelapsarian unity with the world before subjectivization, that is, before the divide between subject and object, ego, and the outer world.

As we can see, Sciarrino's understanding of the oneiric cannot be easily reduced to the Freudian dialectic between conscious and unconscious; for Sciarrino, dreams are not the distorted voice of past traumas, unspeakable desires, or unconscious thoughts. Instead, by emphasizing dreams' liminal status, he seems more interested in highlighting their alienating power, their ability to blur the dreamers' perceptual categories and thus to rewrite the way people understand the world and interact with it. Nevertheless, at least in the early stages of his career, when he wrote the text quoted above, Sciarrino seems to have been unwilling to completely reject the link between dream and the subject: the above-mentioned reference to the "intra-uterine purgatory" points to a somehow paradoxical form of subjectivity prior to the very birth of the subject itself, an aspect I will discuss later in the chapter. But how does Sciarrino's oneiro-poetics insert itself within his broader musico-poetic views?

In his 2001 introduction to Sciarrino's collected writings, *Carte da suono*, Gianfranco Vinay points out two specific traits in Sciarrino's musical idiom. On the one hand, Vinay detects an "uncanny realism" as "a non-descriptive depiction of reality, based on deep analogical connections located between the conscious and the unconscious, dreaming and waking states, madness and normality." On the other hand, there is also a "metaphysical uncertainty" at work, consisting of "a transformation of single phenomena, through which these phenomena become, ultimately, interchangeable."<sup>17</sup>

It is not by chance that Vinay mentions dream here, even if only in passing. As the analysis in this chapter demonstrates, a deeper consideration of the main tenets of Sciarrino's musical poetic reveals that dream marks the space in which Sciarrino's entire music theater dwells, at both the poetological and compositional levels.

As has often been highlighted, Sciarrino's compositional starting point is sensory perception.<sup>18</sup> As the composer himself states: "In contrast to Ferenyough, I think that the work has to be given [*doit être donnée*] as much as possible to the listener. [. . .] Complexity is of no use, because, in the act of listening, we simplify. All my pieces try to understand what happens when somebody listens to them."<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, Sciarrino advocates a specific understanding of sensory perceptions based on the notion of synesthesia. As he writes in *Figure della musica* (1998):

Human perceptions act simultaneously. While listening, we don't cease to see, to smell. We also have some taste in our mouths, or we feel the contact of our skin [with a surface]. It is clear that the different senses mutually affect each other [. . .]. In defining the basic quality of a sound, we don't only adopt acoustic principles, but criteria coming from the other senses. [. . .] Human perception, thus, always consists of sensory globality [*globalità percettiva*] and we can call this mutual influence between the senses synesthetic inertia.<sup>20</sup>

According to Sciarrino, this synesthetic flux of perceptions is spontaneously organized by the listener's faculty of memory. Musical works thus unfold in a sequence of singularly perceived acoustic events, which our memory compares and positions in relation to each other. Using this strategy, "we bring ourselves out of the temporal dimension, of the present flow [of time], and we connect and locate [things] according to a purely spatial logic. [. . .] The field in which music takes place [*prende corpo*] is a strongly spatialized tempo-

ality."<sup>21</sup> In particular, according to Sciarrino, starting with Beethoven's classical symphonies, music began to be conceived more and more according to an architectural, and thus eminently spatial, logic. Music "doesn't become visible," it remains something that listeners perceive with their ears; nevertheless, "its organization, its logical connections flow to our minds from the visual, spatial world."<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, for Sciarrino, our experience of a musical work is based on a blurring together of space and time, of the acoustic and visual.

With his notion of *figura* [figures], Sciarrino intends to analytically grasp this complex interaction between the bodily dimension of our sensory experiences and the intellectual work of memory unfolding along a spatial logic. Under *figura*, Sciarrino understands organizational principles that structure and further activate the liminality that our entire experience of music relies upon.<sup>23</sup> According to the synesthetic nature of sensory perceptions, these figures operate across all artistic media. For instance, the figure based on the principle of accumulation can be observed in Rossini's crescendos; in the repetition of the same musical phrase by stepwise growing instrumentation; or in the introduction of Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps* (1913), which unfolds through the accretion of heterogeneous blocks of sound.

At the core of Sciarrino's entire poetic universe lies the concept of an *ecologia sonora* [sonic ecology], an exploration not of sound as such (as in the modernist tradition of Edgard Varèse or Giacinto Scelsi) but of the ways sound is perceived by listeners.<sup>24</sup> Composing, thus, becomes an inquiry into human perception, aiming not at discovering timeless perceptual archetypes but at exploring the ambiguity and multisensory ambivalence at the core of our acoustic experiences. Ultimately, Sciarrino's music and oneiropoetics go hand in hand, both music and dreams being conceived by the composer as located in a common space of perceptual and conceptual uncertainty.

Thus it is clear why dreams never stand alone for Sciarrino as specific dramaturgical and poetic spaces in their own right. In his theater, the oneiric functions as an implicit structural logic underlying the explicit dramaturgical level, where other aspects like madness, hallucination, and illness are prominently featured. But this does not indicate a lack of interest in the oneiric. On the contrary, this approach perfectly reflects the way in which Sciarrino understands dream as being located in an ontological, perceptual, and conceptual in-between. In his works, dreams are blurred, implicit, and embedded in different contexts because Sciarrino considers that these are precisely the features that define the dream phenomenon as such. Dream thus becomes the embodiment of both Sciarrino's musico-poetics; Sciarrino's ultimate goal

is to frame this open, ontologically undetermined space between mind and body where dreams dwell and use it as a viable tool for writing musical works.

### Pathologizing the Dream: Sciarrino's *Lohengrin*

One of the earliest works in which Sciarrino consciously explores this understanding of dream is *Lohengrin*. Composed between 1982 and 1984, this *azione invisibile* [invisible action] for female voice, male choir, and orchestra represents an early milestone in Sciarrino's theatrical oeuvre. *Lohengrin* contains all the stylistic and compositional features that characterize Sciarrino's music theater over the next four decades, although his understanding of the oneiric is not yet fully formed here.<sup>25</sup>

Sciarrino's aims in rewriting Lohengrin's *sujet* were straightforward; as he writes in the introductory notes to the work: "to evoke the inner space; this may be the epigraph to the new *Lohengrin*. In order to achieve this, the music [*la vicenda musicale*] is woven within Elsa's mad eyes."<sup>26</sup> Transformed into a monodrama, *Lohengrin* becomes the psychotic dream of a protagonist on the verge of madness. To accomplish this, Sciarrino based his work on a short novel titled *Lohengrin, fils de Parsifal* by the French poet Jules Laforgue (1860–1887).<sup>27</sup> In the latter work, Laforgue satirizes Wagner's ideals of redemption. In the first part of the novel, Elsa dreams of Lohengrin, and soon afterward the knight appears and rescues her from Ortrud's and Telramund's schemes. In the second part, the newly married couple quarrel, Lohengrin rejecting Elsa on the ground that she has limited sex appeal. In the end, he leaves her before they have even spent the night together. For Laforgue, in contrast to Wagner, love does not lead to redemption; the mundane spectacle of the numinous couple arguing about very human concerns effectively undermines Wagner's grandiloquent fantasies. Sciarrino, for his part, adopts Laforgue's text as the source for his libretto, although he doesn't share its satirical approach. The composer inverts the two parts of the novel; after the miserably failed wedding night and Lohengrin's angry departure, the audience witnesses Elsa's dream and Lohengrin's arrival. Sciarrino thus introduces the dreamlike logic of an open-ended *non sequitur* into the plot itself. Sciarrino's oneiro-poetics, however, also deeply informs the very compositional structure of the work.

For instance, in the short, purely instrumental prologue (see fig. 12.1), the composer demands from the various instruments an utterly unconventional,

Salvatore Sciarrino

# LOHENGRIN



## PROLOGO ATTRAVERSO UNA FINESTRA APERTA

**Animafo**

Fig. 12.1. First page of the score from *Lohengrin*, music by Salvatore Sciarrino. (Copyright © 1982 by Casa Ricordi Srl, International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reproduced by kind permission of Hal Leonard Europe Srl / Casa Ricordi Srl. 1.)

impure sound, a sound imbued with noisiness. As Metzger describes it, Sciarrino's peculiar instrumental sound is grounded in the "residues of performance," employing various techniques, from tongue stops to key clicks, and from knocks, breaths, or tongue noises to the scrape of bow against string.<sup>28</sup> Sciarrino thereby constructs from the very start of the work an uncanny acoustic experience that exists at the crossroad between sound and noise. The work does not contain any passages fully grounded in a more traditional symphonic sound but, conversely, it also does not contain any moments of pure noise. Sound and noise are only virtual archetypes, their presence felt only as ghostly points of reference. Listeners of the work experience an acoustic in-between suddenly interrupted by isolated sound-events, all abruptly silenced. From the very beginning, therefore, the acoustic space of the work is positioned as a no-man's-land between presence and absence, rooted in a deep sense of unreality.

At the end of the short prologue, the voice of the female soloist on stage, portraying Elsa, is heard, although she is not singing. Instead, the soloist mimics several times the barking of a dog, each time using a different vowel.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, her voice constructs the depth of the imaginary space in which the invisible action occurs, as the different barks suggest different degrees of remoteness. All elements of the section are meticulously written in the score by Sciarrino, who adopts his own proportional notation.

Throughout the work, Elsa mimics different natural and mechanical sounds, including the rushing of the wind on the sea, the chirping of a dove, and the ticking of a clock.<sup>30</sup> The composer also repeatedly requires the singer to use a more corporeal dimension of her voice, demanding that she cough, inhale, or exhale in various ways.<sup>31</sup> All these moments seamlessly flow into one another, generating a dreamlike process of continuous metamorphosis. Elsa's voice also takes over Lohengrin's part, creating the paradox of a monodrama punctuated by a series of highly emotional (imaginary) dialogues.

Ultimately, being created exclusively by Elsa's voice, all the persons, animals, objects, and even the space of the opera itself share an uncanny status, floating between inside and outside, presence and absence, dream and reality. In the foreword to the score, Sciarrino writes, "These sounds are already *per se* theatre. They don't need further illustration or to be dressed [*rivestiti*] by means of images."<sup>32</sup> In *Lohengrin*, Sciarrino is thus striving for an unsettling hybrid of the visual and acoustic that, by remaining structurally and semantically open, generates the uncanny, dreamlike liminality that deeply characterizes this work. Sciarrino's understanding of dream, his musical poetic, and



the compositional structure of the work all align, but it is also worthwhile to consider Sciarrino's ultimate goal in retelling the *Lohengrin* *sujet*. In this respect, the short epilogue of the work turns out to be crucial.

The epilogue represents a significant break within the overall structure of the work. The audience suddenly realizes that they are in a mental hospital, as Sciarrino's stage directions in the libretto make clear. All the previous scenes were just Elsa's nightly delirium. She is mentally ill and secluded in an institution. Here, at the end of the work, there is no longer any in-between, no dream. Reality, in its everyday sense, is here. The epilogue thus retroactively gives a perfectly intelligible meaning to all the uncanny atmospheres and strange sounds characterizing the previous scenes. Significantly, it is only in this instance that a conventional song is heard: Elsa sings a childlike melody describing the beauty of the sounds of bells and the smell of clean laundry on Sunday. At the end of the work, the dream and its liminality are dramaturgically and musically explained, that is, they are led back to the categories of our commonsense understanding of the world; Elsa is mentally ill and the dreamlike soundscape heard so far is just the sonic expression of this madness. Dream's liminality and its acoustic embodiment in Sciarrino's work are retroactively pathologized, marked as a psychological dysfunction; but, again, to what end?

In reassuming the topos of the hysterical woman on stage, Sciarrino overturns Wagner's own *Lohengrin*, as well as Wagner's understanding of dream. In her dream, Wagner's Elsa sees the truth of a noumenal dimension. Lohengrin is the embodiment of the redemptive power of love, which—guarded by the knights of the holy grail in a metaphysical region outside time and space—rescues her when the phenomenal world fails.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, for Sciarrino, Elsa's dream represents the realm of psychotic fantasies, of failed attempts at assuming a subjective position and thus at gaining the ability to distinguish between subject and object, between herself and the world. As Sciarrino writes in his notes on the work: "What torments [Elsa]? She is sick of unreality. Elsa identifies with the things [around her], with the night, with the sounds of the night, and we [the listeners] are not able to understand if they are true or if a glimmer of reason [*barlume*] remains in the depths of her eyes."<sup>34</sup> In Lacan's terms, Elsa becomes the stand-in for what is lost by going through the mirror stage and assuming a psychologically defined persona (i.e., the Real of an undivided oneness with the world). She is unable to accomplish the process of subjectivization and drifts from one fantasy to another, incapable of constructing a meaningful reality. Elsa's dream marks

the blind spot of the Real at the core of Lacan's barred subject, that blind spot that will unabashedly hunt the constituted ego in the form of phantasmatic sublime objects to which its psychic energy is attracted.<sup>35</sup> Thus, for Sciarrino, Elsa dwells in the perilous no-man's-land of the presymbolic domain, unable to become a subject, trapped in what Slavoj Žižek (referring to Hegel) calls "the night of the world."<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, in *Lohengrin*, Sciarrino frames the liminality of dream in psychological terms. The work embodies the archetypal drama of the birth of the barred Lacanian subject. Dream, subjectivized and pathologized, becomes one pole within a binary opposition between objective reality (the mental institution) and subjective fantasy (Elsa's dream world). Vocality itself is divided between (children's) song and a mimetic approach that exists outside conventional operatic singing. The ambiguity that was evident in Sciarrino's early poetic reflections on the link between music and dreams greatly informs the work; the epilogue suddenly brings to the fore the subjectivity of a full-fledged—even if pathologically mad—individual character, thus retroactively neutralizing the uncanny liminality of the dream logic explored by the composer up to that point. Three decades later, with *Superflumina*, Sciarrino abandons this focus on subjectivity, no longer using the stage as a magnifying glass to examine the protagonist's psyche.

### An Oneiric Zone of Inclusive-Exclusion: Sciarrino's *Superflumina*

*Superflumina* is Sciarrino's twelfth opera, and at first glance it may appear that not much has changed over the almost thirty years separating the work from *Lohengrin*. In terms of dramaturgical structure and plot, the two works share many features. *Superflumina* consists of a monologue by a homeless woman who is wandering through a train station in contemporary Italy from dusk to dawn. Interjections by a young man, a policeman, a distant voice, and various passersby, as well as announcements from the station's PA system, fleetingly punctuate the woman's random stream of thoughts, anxieties, and memories. A close reading of the libretto enables a tentative reconstruction of the contours of the trauma the woman has previously experienced. After a one-night stand with a man she believed to be her ideal lover, the woman fell pregnant. While she was giving birth, the man suddenly reappeared and took the baby away from her. This deception shattered the woman's aspirations

of love and caring, leading to her present predicament. As in *Lohengrin*, the basic idea of this opera is an extended, highly disconnected monologue. Similarly, as in *Lohengrin*, dream is not overtly present, but—mingled with trauma and a kind of grief dangerously close to madness—it forms the underlying structure of the entire work. At the compositional level, too, the work adopts a musical style very similar to that of *Lohengrin*, with the exception of one aspect that will be discussed later in this section.

Despite these similarities, however, in *Superflumina*, there is a radical difference: dream is no longer one pole within a binary opposition. On the contrary, the oneiric represents a zone of indistinction, a non-*lieu* of exclusion/inclusion between reality and fantasy that Sciarrino primarily frames not in psychological but sociopolitical terms. In this respect, three key aspects differentiate *Superflumina* from the early work:

1. The music-dramaturgical construction of *Superflumina* does not rely on a contrast between dream and reality. The associative, elliptical, and fragmented nature of the woman's inner monologues applies equally to her short dialogues with the policeman, the passersby, and the young man. The opera's realistic setting (e.g., the train station, the PA announcements, etc.) is also alienating, evoking a deep sense of uncanniness that is achieved mostly through fragmentation of plot and dialogues and an estranged musical setting. Even the short *intermezzo con annunzi* at the end of the first scene, which features an unaccompanied series of train announcements that Sciarrino himself recorded in different Italian stations, is deeply unsettling. The oneirism at the core of Sciarrino's uncanny realism is the only musical-dramaturgical principle governing the work.
2. The protagonist of *Superflumina* is by no means pathologized. Instead, as a homeless woman, she lives at the margins of society, occupying a borderline zone of inclusive-exclusion; although she is no longer an active part of the social body, she is not completely lost to it. She interacts with it, but *ex negativo* (i.e., in the form of her exclusion, rejection, and—at least potentially—reclusion); her interactions with the other characters make this clear.
3. The overall vocal gesture in the work is not structured along a distinction between song and a mimetic kind of vocality, painfully laboring with the sounds of the singer's body and the exterior world. In *Super-*

*flumina*, the protagonist's voice features a unified gesture based on a more articulated form of expression, in which the pure bodily dimension of the voice fades into the background. For instance, the second of the three songs at the center of the work displays not only a traditional, operatic ABA form with a concluding cadenza, but also consists of nothing but alienated references to the stereotypical gestures of operatic singing, such as *messa di voce* or coloraturas. These gestures mingle with silence, *parlando* passages, and even the sound of breaking glasses, resulting in an enhanced expressiveness with clear ties to the operatic topos of the lament.<sup>37</sup> The dimension of operatic singing in the work is, thus, inherent to vocality itself, albeit in a disjointed, broken form. It represents a continuous reference to an operatic song tradition, but it never freely resounds as such.

According to Metzger, Sciarrino's mature form of vocality unfolds in two ways: against a screen of silence through which the voices have to break to emerge, as in *Infinito nero* (1998), and as a song unabashedly haunted by "rings of indifferent silence" that represent the ultimate horizon to which singing is doomed to perpetually return, as in *Luci mie traditrici* (1998).<sup>38</sup> In both cases, silence is, for Metzger, "a floating realm existing outside of the vocal music," and vocality, through its own conflict with silence, marks the return of the subject and its depth model.<sup>39</sup> Sciarrino's vocality, with its "utterances spring[ing] unfettered from the dark psychic regions," is thus a direct heir of Expressionism. By establishing an additional screen of silence that the voices have to contend with, Sciarrino's singing ultimately strengthens the "emotional blasts" that lie at the core of Expressionism.<sup>40</sup> Marcelle Pierson detects at the core of Sciarrino's vocal writing a nostalgic vision "of an almost pre-modern voice, a voice before modernity usurped its magic."<sup>41</sup> By causing the song to be "only able to emerge out of its own negation," Sciarrino's vocality ultimately rehabilitates a long-standing discourse in Western thought that links voice to subjectivity.<sup>42</sup> The song becomes, once again, a place of truth and self-presence, though a noumenal one (i.e., it is "underdefined, unknown, and in a constant state of becoming").<sup>43</sup>

Metzger's and Pierson's writings constitute in-depth attempts to interpret Sciarrino's vocality beyond merely describing its compositional characteristics. They highlight important traits of Sciarrino's vocal writing and poetics, including its strong ties to the ideal of an unbounded, directed expressivity at

the core of Expressionism and the nostalgia for an undivided (or unbarred) subject that informs, to some degree, Sciarrino's overall oneiropoetics, as well as works like *Lohengrin*. Nevertheless, they ultimately fail in their analyses by reading these traits in isolation, rather than in relation to one another. Metzger fails, for instance, to grasp the interplay between silence and song; the expressive quality of Sciarrino's vocality lies not only in his song but also in its intermingling with silence. Pierson aptly highlights the way in which silence is a constitutive element of song itself, but reads the dialectic between the elements in terms of circularity, interpreting their entanglement as a continuously failed attempt at reaching a noumenal state of pure presence.<sup>44</sup> By reading Sciarrino's music theater as a stand-in for an aesthetic of subjective expression or impossible longing, both Metzger and Pierson transform it into a skillful but ultimately nostalgic attempt at looking back at previous musical experiences and understandings of the world.

Analyzing Sciarrino's mature vocal writing from the perspective of his oneiropoetics leads to a different conclusion. As highlighted above, Sciarrino's vocality in *Superflumina* exists outside the binary logic of traditional song versus bodily singing that characterizes *Lohengrin*. Instead, it is located in a no-man's-land between the two poles of silence and operatic song. These two poles are both suggested but are never reached. This vocality thus fully embodies the zone of indistinction in which, according to Sciarrino, the specific quality of dream (and of music itself) resides.

This does not mean, however, that the work exists in an amorphous, muddled vocalic space where anything is possible. Sciarrino's vocality in *Superflumina* subsists only so far as it is excluded from, or exists in a ban relationship to, operatic song. Like dream, which is not pure fantasy but lives in the in-between space of a distorted relationship with the reality of our conscious experience of the world, Sciarrino's mature vocality seeks to frame a very specific kind of oneiric space: a space structured along a logic of inclusive exclusion concerning the operatic tradition. Ultimately, like the protagonist of *Superflumina*, whose defining trait is her exclusion from society and its promises of love and care, Sciarrino's music theater exists only insofar as it is excluded from opera, to which it continuously refers *ex negativo*, in a distorted, uncanny way.

Overall, the liminality at the core of Sciarrino's oneiropoetics fully informs both the dramaturgy and vocality of *Superflumina*. The last section of this chapter will further investigate this liminal zone of inclusive exclusion, briefly sketching the contours of a different approach to Sciarrino's music theater.

## Sciarrino and the Biopolitics of Dreams

Since the 1990s, Giorgio Agamben has emerged as one of the philosophers most concerned with the logic of inclusive exclusion as constituting the very core of Western political culture. For Agamben, sovereignty consists not of making concrete political decisions, but rather of drawing a line between *zoē*—pure, unhampered biological life—and *bios*, the proper political life of a man, his membership of a political system, his citizenship. The sovereign (or the law) is the one who decides what is included in and excluded from the political body.<sup>45</sup> As Agamben aptly emphasizes, however, what is excluded from political life is not life as such; it is not a free state of nature, untroubled by politics and power. From the moment the sovereign draws the line between political and biological life, *zoē* is lost. Biological life becomes something that does not exist in its own right, but rather is defined by its existence outside the law.<sup>46</sup> The sovereign's decision thus defines not only what is within the law but also what is outside of it, in the form of an inclusive exclusion, of a ban. As Agamben puts it: "the rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it."<sup>47</sup>

Ultimately, Western politics is, at its core, biopolitics. Its defining moment consists of the factual and juridical creation of a form of life that is neither inside nor outside the law. Agamben identifies one of the first juridical formalizations of this zone of exception as the concept of *homo sacer* in Roman law, where a person may be killed with impunity but not sacrificed in a ritual.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, for Agamben, the most stunning embodiments of *homo sacer* in modernity are the *Muselmänner* in Nazi concentration camps, meaning those prisoners who, through starvation and exhaustion, became resigned to their impending deaths. Of such prisoners, Agamben writes, "one hesitates to call them living. One hesitates to call their death, death."<sup>49</sup> Though not included in the life of the polis, of the (in this case Aryan) community, the *Muselmänner* do not represent pure, unhampered biological life. Instead, they eke out what Agamben calls a *vita nuda* [bare life], a life situated in the zone of indistinction between political and biological life.<sup>50</sup>

Sciarrino's music theater shares with Agamben a concern with the logical figure of inclusive exclusion. At least in a mature work like *Superflumina*, there is more than a common interest in a logical figure; Sciarrino also partakes of the sociopolitical significance that Agamben attributes to this logic.<sup>51</sup> The protagonist of *Superflumina* is a homeless woman, who occupies the same sociopolitical zone of inclusive exclusion that informs Agamben's entire

philosophical effort. She is not free but is abandoned by the law, exposed to the arbitrariness of being simultaneously outside and within the law. She can be interrogated without valid reason by the police, she can be insulted with impunity by the passersby, she feeds on waste, and so on. Ultimately, *Superflumina* is both musically and dramaturgically an Agambian reflection on Western power and its biopolitical roots.

From this vantage point, the conventional reading of Sciarrino's theater as a return of the subject must be reconsidered. In her vocalic expressiveness, the homeless woman is by no means a subject, neither in the more traditional sense nor—as in *Lohengrin*—in the Lacanian sense. The woman's expressiveness refers to neither the suffering of a psychologically defined persona nor an unconscious realm within the subject, stifled by the contemporary world. The woman is neither Ego nor Id. Rather, she is nothing but a sociopolitical entity. She is a further embodiment of the *homo sacer*, a sociopolitical stand-in expressing not a subject but the zone of indistinction at the core of Western sovereignty.

Although the connections to the Expressionist experience of the early twentieth century can be discerned in Sciarrino's theater, the composer is not looking back nor offering an updated version of the "depth model" at the core of Expressionism, which relies on the split between ego and es, between the mask of our social persona and the "truth" of our hidden desires. The tension structuring Sciarrino's theater is not that between conscious versus unconscious regions of the psyche. Through the oneiric, Sciarrino is instead reflecting on the socio- and biopolitical space framing contemporary life.

## Notes

1. Susan McClary, "The Lure of the Sublime: Revisiting the Modernist Project," in *Transformations of Musical Modernism*, ed. Erling E. Guldbrandsen and Julian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 22.

2. David Metzer, *Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 24–26; 101–3.

3. See David Metzer, "Modern Silence," *Journal of Musicology* 23, no. 3 (2006): 372–74; and Metzer, *Musical Modernism*, 101–3.

4. See Metzer, "Modern Silence," 373.

5. For the link to the early modernist experience, see Julian Johnson, "Return of the Repressed. Particularity in Early and Late Modernism," in *Transformations of Musical Modernism*, ed. Erling E. Guldbrandsen and Julian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 36–52; and Metzer, *Musical Modernism*, 103.

6. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006). As for the reception of Lehmann's monograph within the opera

studies, see Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 3–40.

7. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 65.

8. Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. and with an introduction by Paul A. Kottman (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2005), 152. Cavarero's argument unfolds along a complex rereading of the entire history of Western metaphysics, starting with Aristotle's *Politics*, which understands man as a rationally speaking animal. According to Cavarero, this conflation of the phonic and semantic qualities of the human voice is highly misleading because it lies at the very core of the logocentric tradition of Western metaphysics, which privileges the mind over the body, the visual over the acoustic, and meaning over sound. Rather, the vocalic, the sonorous quality of the voice, is highly singular, belonging to a specific individual, located in specific spatial and temporal coordinates, as opposed to the "objective," impersonal dimension proper to rational meaning. For Cavarero, operatic singing represents a kind of "counter-history" in which the objective immateriality of meaning is defeated by the embodied, singular voice of the singer. For a critical reading of Cavarero's argument about the singularity of the voice and its political consequences, see Stuart J. Murray and Sarah K. Burgess, "Review of Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 39, no. 2 (2006): 166–69.

9. See Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 177.

10. See Joy H. Calico's chapter on Chaya Czernowin's opera *Infinite Now*, chapter 6 in this volume. A first, paradigmatic example of this music-theatrical counterpart of the stream-of-consciousness technique is, of course, Schönberg's expressionist monodrama *Erwartung*.

11. See Hayao Kawai, "Bedeutungsvolle Geschichten. Träume in der japanischen Literatur des Mittelalters," in *Die Wahrheit der Träume*, ed. Gaetano Benedetti and Erik Hornung (München: Fink, 1997); and Jörg B. Quenzer, "Traumwelten. Zur Medialität des Traums im japanischen Mittelalter," in *Mediale Wechselwirkungen. Adaptionen—Transformationen—Reinterpretationen*, ed. Iris Höger; Christine Oldörp, and Hanna Wimmer (Berlin: Reimer, 2013).

12. See Miriam Henzel, "Salvatore Sciarrino's Werkkommentare—Ansatzpunkte für die Analyse?," in *Salvatore Sciarrino 'Vanitas.' Kulturgeschichtliche Hintergründe, Kontexte, Traditionen*, ed. Sabine Ehrmann-Herfort (Hofheim: Wolke, 2018).

13. Stefanie Kreuzer, *Traum und Erzählen in Literatur, Film und Kunst* (Paderborn: Fink, 2014), 89. On Kafka and dreams, see Kreuzer, *Traum und Erzählen*, 248–56, 409–37, 594–613; Peter-André Alt, *Der Schlaf der Vernunft. Literatur und Traum in der Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit* (Munich: Beck, 2002), 350–67; and Manfred Engel, "Literarische Träume und traumhaftes Schreiben bei Franz Kafka. Ein Beitrag zur Oneiropoetik der Moderne," in *Träumungen. Traumerzählung in Film und Literatur*, ed. by Bernard Dieterle (St. Augustin: Gardez!, 2002).

14. Kreuzer, *Traum und Erzählen*, 84.

15. Salvatore Sciarrino, "Origine delle idee sottili [1984]," in *Carte da suono (1981–2001)*, ed. Dario Oliveri (Palermo: Edizioni Novecento 2001), 53. This and the following translations were done by the author of this chapter.



16. For a further discussion of this first aspect see Mauro Fosco Bertola, “Operatic Dreams. The Dream in Contemporary Opera (Wagner, Saariaho, Sciarrino),” in *Mediating the Dream / Les genres et médias du rêve*, ed. Bernard Dieterle and Manfred Engel (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2021).

17. Gianfranco Vinay, “Le carte da suono di Salvatore Sciarrino,” in *Carte da suono (1981–2001)*, ed. Dario Oliveri (Palermo: Edizioni Novecento, 2001), xix.

18. See Carlo Carratelli, “Il ‘Lohengrin’ di Salvatore Sciarrino: ‘Forma della coscienza.’ Un percorso attraverso la costellazione simbolica dello specchio,” *Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana* 40, no. 4 (2006); and Christian Utz, “Die Inszenierung von *Stille am Rande* ohrenbetäubenden Lärms. Morphologie und Präsenz in Salvatore Sciarrinos Kammermusik der 1980er Jahre,” *Die Tonkunst* 7, no. 3 (2013).

19. Martin Kaltenecker and Gérard Pesson, “Entretien avec Salvatore Sciarrino,” *Entretemps* 9 (1990): 136.

20. Salvatore Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica da Beethoven a oggi* (Milano: Ricordi, 1998), 61.

21. Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, 60.

22. Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*. At first sight, Sciarrino’s argument seems to stumble on its own words here: On the one hand, Sciarrino suddenly seems to hold to a conception of music as an auditory phenomenon, while on the other hand, he stresses the multisensory nature of musical experience. But at this point in his argument, by reminding us of the acoustic moment of music, Sciarrino only wants to emphasize the purely “physiological” fact that we detect sounds with our ears. The concrete act of perceiving these sounds activates all the other senses.

23. For an overview of Sciarrino’s notion of *figura*, see Grazia Giacco, *La notion de “figure” chez Salvatore Sciarrino* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001).

24. Salvatore Sciarrino and Stefano Nardelli, “Sciarrino, Per Un’ecologia Del Teatro Musicale,” <https://www.giornaledellamusica.it/articoli/sciarrino-unecologia-del-teatro-musicale> (2019).

25. See Gianfranco Vinay, *Immagini gesti parole suoni silenzi. Drammaturgia delle opere vocali e teatrali di Salvatore Sciarrino* (S.I. Ricordi, 2010); and Gianfranco Vinay, “Reine Illusionen wecken. Entstehung und Entwicklung von Sciarrinos Musiktheater,” in *Salvatore Sciarrino ‘Vanitas.’ Kulturgeschichtliche Hintergründe, Kontexte, Traditionen*, ed. Sabine Ehrmann-Herfort (Hofheim: Wolk, 2018), 5.

26. Salvatore Sciarrino, “Lohengrin. Azione invisibile,” in *Carte da suono (1981–2001)*, edited by Dario Oliveri (Palermo: Edizioni Novecento 2001), 82.

27. Jules Laforgue, *Moralités légendaires* (Paris: Librairie de la Revue Indépendante, 1887).

28. Metzger, *Musical Modernism*, 96.

29. Salvatore Sciarrino, *Lohengrin. Azione invisibile per solista, strumenti e voci (da J. Laforgue)* [score] (Milano: Ricordi, 1984), 4 ff.

30. Sciarrino, *Lohengrin* [score], 4–5 (barking), 68 ff. (rushing of the wind at sea), 82 (ticking of a clock).

31. Sciarrino, *Lohengrin* [score], 82–84.

32. Sciarrino, *Lohengrin* [score], unpag.

33. For a closer comparison of Wagner's and Sciarrino's *Lohengrin*, see Mauro Fosco Bertola, "An der Schwelle von Geburt und Tod: Elsas Traum in Salvatore Sciarrinos 'Lohengrin' (1983)," In *An den Rändern des Lebens. Träume vom Sterben und Geborenwerden in den Künsten*, ed. Mauro Fosco Bertola and Christiane Solte-Gresser (Paderborn: Fink, 2019).

34. Sciarrino, "Lohengrin," 82.

35. According to Lacan (and Žižek), this original moment of pure oneness never existed; it is only a retroactive fantasy of the subject itself. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2008), 11–16.

36. Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 353–54.

37. On the link to the *Lamento* tradition, see Sabine Ehrmann-Herfort, "Meine Musik hat immer die Kraft, eine Bühne zu öffnen. Zu Salvatore Sciarrinos Bühnenkonzepten," in *Salvatore Sciarrino 'Vanitas': Kulturgeschichtliche Hintergründe, Kontexte, Traditionen*, ed. Sabine Ehrmann-Herfort (Hofheim: Wolke, 2018), 164.

38. Metzger, *Musical Modernism*, 96; 100.

39. Metzger, *Musical Modernism*, 96.

40. Metzger, *Musical Modernism*, 103.

41. Marcelle Coulter Pierson, "The Voice under Erasure: Singing, Melody and Expression in Late Modernist Music" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2015), 80.

42. Pierson, "The Voice under Erasure," 58. On this point, see also Amanda Weidman, "Anthropology and Voice," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2014).

43. Pierson, "The Voice under Erasure," 41.

44. In this respect, see Sciarrino's preface to his 5th piano sonata, Salvatore Sciarrino, *V Sonata con 5 finali diversi per pianoforte* (Milano: Ricordi, 1994), unpag.

45. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 7–8. For an introduction to Agamben's biopolitical theories, see, in particular, Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 59–80. Although not part of this chapter, Agamben's recent stance on the response of the Italian government (and most of those in Western countries) to the Covid pandemic cannot go unmentioned. Beginning with a short intervention on his blog, aptly titled *The Invention of an Epidemic* in February 2020, Agamben has developed over the last two years (2020–2022) a coherent as well as persistent reading of the government's response to the Covid emergency. He understands it as a clearly pursued shift toward a new paradigm of governance, in which the idea of a "security state, which was based on terrorism, has now given way to a government paradigm that we can call 'biosecurity,' which is based on health," see G. Agamben, *A che punto siamo*, trans. MFB (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2020), 42. Agamben's thesis on the pandemic as such, which he sees as no more dangerous than the flu, and on government measures to contain the danger of infection, aligns him—a longtime, if sui generis, leftist—with right-wing movements and anti-vaxxers. In particular, Agamben's puzzling statements seem to emerge directly from the main body of his philosophical thought and thus, as in the case of Martin Heidegger or, *mutatis mutandis*, Richard Wagner, generate the suspicion of an internal aporia that taints the entire edifice of his philosophy. I think Eric Santner at best summarizes the kind of impasse in which

Agamben found himself: “I see Agamben’s statements about the pandemic as a transformation of his own work into a kind of ideology, something that makes him a far too easy target for his critics” (Santner in Adam Kotsko, “What Happened to Giorgio Agamben?” *Slate*, February 20, 2022. Online under <https://slate.com/human-interest/2022/02/giorgio-agamben-covid-holocaust-comparison-right-wing-protest.html>). In this respect, Adam Kotsko, who has translated several of Agamben’s writings into English, has provided an interesting reading of Agamben’s *cause celebre*. Instead of getting caught up in the futile attempt to assess the extent to which Agamben’s statements on Covid are connected to his philosophy, he reflexively reads the troubled waters in which Agamben maneuvered as a telling moment of truth in which the idiosyncratic understanding of freedom at the core of contemporary Western society is exposed in all its internal contradictions (Kotsko, “What Happened”; see also Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons. On the Political Theology of Late Capital* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018], 1–10; 97–126).

46. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 17–20.

47. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 18.

48. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 71–90

49. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 184–86.

50. In this respect, Agamben’s further reflections on humanism and its “anthropological machine” are particularly important: see Giorgio Agamben, *The Open. Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), particularly 33–38. Concerning the opera, see also Mauro Fosco Bertola, “The Trouble with the Bee-Keeper. Hans Werner Henze’s *Aristaeus* (2003) or: Operatic Metaphysics after Humanism,” *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 3 (2017), 16–52.

51. A similar reading can be advocated for *La porta della legge* from 2008 and *Macbeth* from 2002; all works that have a strong focus on sovereignty and law.

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