Title
The Politics of Performing Intimacy in New Music

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5gh8x704

Author
O'Shea, Farrah Elizabeth

Publication Date
2022

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Politics of Performing Intimacy in New Music

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy

in Theater and Performance Studies

by

Farrah Elizabeth O'Shea

2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Politics of Performing Intimacy in New Music

by

Farrah Elizabeth O'Shea

Doctor of Philosophy in Theater and Performance Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Sean Metzger, Co-Chair

Professor Elisabeth Le Guin, Co-Chair

This dissertation investigates the roles of composer, performer, and audience member as they cultivate, engage with, or encounter intimate performance in contemporary Western classical "new music." Through a selection of three pieces written in the last fifteen years, I investigate performances of intimacy in works by composers David Lang, Kaija Saariaho, and Kate Soper. Collectively, these pieces address normative modes of intimacy production in Western classical music with regard to audience address (Lang), relationships with God (Saariaho), and performer interaction (Soper). In each of these works, intimacy is proposed as a catalyst for social change, and as this dissertation shows, the effects of intimate performances are mixed, either repackaging tropes of sameness or intervening in them by calling attention to racial and gendered difference.

The first chapter, on David Lang's *the whisper opera* (2013), weighs the consciousness-raising potential of evoking intimacy among audience members through whispered and quiet instrumental performance delivered in close proximity. The work successfully deconstructs audience/performer connection through individualized engagement and the lack of a singular aural and visual focus. Ultimately, however, Lang's use of Google autocomplete to create an idealized, didactic listening environment positions the concert hall alongside the internet as a falsely universalizing space. The second chapter, on Kaija Saariaho's *La Passion de Simone* (2006), explores an intimate musical relationship with God and the supposedly suprabodied (unmarked) space of religious transcendence. Through particular focus on danced gesture, this chapter focuses on the racial and gendered inflections brought to the work in a performance by mixed-race soprano, Julia Bullock at the 2016 Ojai Music Festival. The third and fourth chapters explore the potential of Kate Soper's *Cipher*, for soprano and violin, from her larger work *Ipsa Dixit*, to engage the act of intimate performance to deconstruct dogmatic pillars of Western thought and their manifestations in Western classical music. The third chapter offers a close reading of *Cipher's* feminist musical interventions and reflects on Soper's collaborative relationship with violinist Josh Modney—Soper and Modney crafted the piece together through a series of workshops and performances. The fourth and final chapter offers my view into learning and performing *Cipher*, and illustrates the potential that performance brings to the interpretation and deconstruction of this work, and the Western sphere of thought and music in which it seeks to intervene. By highlighting intimate musical process, this chapter underlines the larger aim of the dissertation to illustrate the potential of performance to enter into larger conventional structures of meaning, specifically with regard to race and gender, offering uniquely inflected meanings to musical works, rather than repeat performances of works which refuse the inflection

of performer identity. A focus on bodies illustrates how their intimate connection across a wide

array of registers has the capability to begin to reshape norms within the Western classical

canon.

The dissertation of Farrah Elizabeth O'Shea is approved.

Susan McClary

Michelle Liu Carriger

Sean Metzger, Committee Co-Chair

Elisabeth Le Guin, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

For my parents, Patricia and Kevin O'Shea, and for my husband, Evan Hesketh

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

I owe the existence of this dissertation to the support of many individuals. First, to my parents and grandparents, for believing in and supporting my education, and for instilling in me a love of music and education. To my viola pedagogues, whose musical and life teachings helped shape me and my approach to the instrument, and to Diane Urista and Susan McClary, who fostered my early interest in techniques in performance analysis and facilitated my entrance into the field of performance studies. Finally, I owe this dissertation to the dedication and insights of my co-chairs, Sean Metzger and Elisabeth Le Guin—for joining me on this journey, for helping to shape this project, and for supporting me at every turn, thank you!

For their role in shaping my written and embodied approaches to music performance, I thank my colleagues and professors in theater and performance studies, musicology, and music as well as my students from across the UCLA campus. For her insightful comments and constant support of my scholarship and professional development, I especially thank Michelle Liu Carriger. For his lively seminars, our many conversations about my research and pedagogy, and his endless support throughout my doctoral study, I extend heartfelt thanks to Mitchell Morris. For the gift of his intellectual curiosity, collegiality, and friendship, I thank Pheaross Graham. The conversations around our yearlong conference, "Music Performance Studies Today" (MPST) continue to reverberate in my mind. For their support of MPST and for encouraging us to dream big, I thank Raymond Knapp and Holley Replogle-Wong. For exploring new musical paths with me, I thank Julia Johnson. The friendship that bloomed in and around learning and performing Kate Soper's *Cipher* lit up the end of my graduate studies and shines through this dissertation. Though the pandemic stopped our performance practice in its tracks, I'm grateful for our online opera watch group with Kimberly Mendez-McLeish, which was a welcome source

Biographical Sketch

Farrah Elizabeth O'Shea holds degrees in viola performance from Boston University (B.M.) and Cleveland Institute of Music (M.M. and Professional Studies Diploma). Her research investigates the racial, gendered, and sexual politics at play in recent "new music" performances that intend to stage and evoke intimacy. She was awarded UCLA's Graduate Dean's Scholar Award and her co-organized, yearlong conference, Music Performance Studies Today, won support from the UCLA Center for Musical Humanities, the UCLA Chancellor's Arts Initiative, and the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR). Her scholarly work is forthcoming in *Theatre Journal*. A dedicated educator, O'Shea's teaching has been recognized and supported by the UCLA Collegium of University Teaching Fellows. While at UCLA, O'Shea was co-organizer of Contact: Performing Proximity, the UCLA Theater and Performance Studies Graduate Conference. She was also organizer of UCLA QGrad, a queer graduate student conference. Her viola teachers have included Michelle La Course, Kirsten Docter, Lynne Ramsey, among others. O'Shea has performed nationally and internationally in orchestral and chamber music festivals, including as a fellow with the Youth Orchestra of the Americas and the National Repertory Orchestra.

INTRODUCTION

The erasure of the act of performance is a condition built into the set of works and practices we have come to call Western classical music; the privileged condition of the score means that performances of it can hope, at best, to be nearly perfect, never anything more. The result of this attitude toward performance has been that, over time, the classical music stage has become a place of reproduction, and that the erasure of labor and constant striving toward perfection has created a canon of works that are repeated ad nauseam.[1] In 1983, Joseph Kerman wrote about this phenomenon, noting a move among musicologists toward analysis of notes on the page, and describes a continuing view of performance as subservient to the musical score. This attitude manifests in what he terms "canonical performance," or a quality of reperformed adherence to the precise directions encoded into the musical score.[2] This disparaging attitude toward performance creates a distanced relationship with the audience: Attention to perfect reproduction doesn't challenge listeners who come to performances expecting it, and as

---

[1] In using the common, catchall term "classical music," I evoke the world in which it circulates. The ontology of the classical canon of works takes shape in its relationship to the flow of capital—what gets programed—which both regulates and defines what, through re-performance, we have come to label as "classical music."

[2] Joseph Kerman, "A Few Canonical Variations," Critical Inquiry 10, no. 1 (Sept. 1983): 107-126.

composer David Lang notes, commitment to perfection comes at the cost of gradually decreasing a quality of humanity in performance.[3]

This tendency among practitioners of Western classical music to view performance as secondary to the score results from privileging the composer and the composer's intention over performances, creating scenarios of idol worship. In such scenarios, as explored by Christopher Small, performance and performers are imperfect, and therefore never able to fully realize a composer's vision.[4] With the goal of approaching perfect reproduction, the training of the classical musician is a highly disciplined system of control and submission that intends to mold the performer toward the virtuosity required to execute scores with a level of perfection which is ephemeral at best and more than not "just out of reach." As portrayed in the film *The Piano Teacher* (2001)*,* directed by Michael Haneke, the idea of the composer as idol can have a destructive, even masochistic effect on the self-worth of performers, that extends to life beyond the practice room and concert hall.[5] In the film, this dominant/submissive dynamic manifests externally in a sadomasochistic relationship between teacher and student. Hanging over the affair is Franz Schubert's ghost: The piano teacher, masochist Erika Kohut, is a middle-aged woman who lives with her aging mother and teaches piano lessons at a prestigious Viennese

---

[3] Chris Vitiello, "104 Ears at the Time, David Lang's The Whisper Opera Recalibrates Attention," Indyweek, http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/104-ears-at-the-time-david-langs-the-whisper-opera-recalibrates-attention/Content?oid=4318492, accessed June 12, 2017.

[4] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2010).

[5] *The Piano Teacher*, directed by Michael Haneke (2001; France: MK2).

conservatory. Her mother, who treats Erika like a child, never gives up hope that Erika will be a star performer of Schubert's music, illuminating the enduring subsurvience of performer to musical idol.

In the last fifty years, the development of musical compositions which center performance as a constitutive part of the work have resisted these enduring views about the subservience of performance and performers. Among recent examples of these transgressive, performance-centric compositions are those that intend to stage and evoke intimacy. Often smaller in scale than their canonic counterparts, performances of "intimate" works either take place in small venues including black box theaters or around purpose-built stages, or if they are performed in larger spaces, make use of projection screens. Beyond staging, composers often ask performers to contravene in conventional performance traditions in Western classical music including the objective to strictly adhere to the instructions on the printed page. In these instances, the composers ask the performer to go against the grain of years of training, trading perfect performances for those that engage spontaneity, flexibility, and theatricality. As such, these works challenge performers, inviting an exposure of vulnerability that connects them with other performers and the audience. Where intimate strategies of the page and stage call on familiar techniques, elements of staged realism and connection to current events create an intimate connection with the audience. This immediacy and vulnerability is intended to be harnessed to audiences and to open the door for larger conversation about social change.

Tellingly, visual and aural spectacle are not broken with in the performance of works aimed at performing intimacy, but used in a different way that intends to train a new kind of listener. As expectations with regard to technique, musical form, and performance convention are subverted, intimate performance situations are created. As listeners are invited to lean in,

look at the small things, and consider relationships between performer and instrument mediated

by technology, they are invited to move beyond being passive receivers of information,

challenged and therefore conditioned in a new kind of interactive listening. For example, Kaija

Saariaho uses speech and recorded breath sounds in her solo instrumental pieces, a compositional

technique that brings performer embodiment to the foreground of performances of her music.

This compositional technique effectively breaks the repetitive system of canonical performance

by bringing the performer and their subjectivity to the foreground and is navigated by performer

and audience alike. Composer David Lang has another approach to intimate listening in *the

whisper opera,* in which performers go against their training in order to create an event more

focused on the act of performance. As I explore in my analysis of *the whisper opera*, "intimate"

performance is often constructed by asking performers to part with traditional methods of sound

production. Lang asks performers principally to use what are known as "extended techniques,"

designed to offer an expanded set of sounds from instruments which, by design and historical

use, offer a limited sonic spectrum. These techniques are freeing in their usurpation of

historically dictated convention, but performers who communicate solely through these

techniques also display "excess," which can feel painfully uncomfortable, especially as these

techniques can also mimic emotional states of discomfort.[6] Usually transparent sounding and

unwieldy to execute, extended techniques require an exposure of vulnerability present even in

---

[6] For example, playing "behind the bridge" as opposed to between the bridge and fingerboard

can be potentially anxiety inducing as the bow tends to skate across the strings in a way that

lacks control. As a result, the performer can often feel out of control as they execute it.

Furthermore, the sound produced is equally unpredictable in its sonic variations.

their name; technique that is extended beyond the "normal." This quality of self-conscious

vulnerability implicates the possibility of abject failure, the observation of which is possible (and

perhaps a draw) in all performance environments, but perhaps most keenly sensed in those that

are intimate. Ideally, for Lang, this foregrounded exposure of vulnerability by the performer

translates to an intimate relationship with the audience. There are varying degrees of this

relationship that extend from voyeurism to co-creative intimacy. These innovations and the

subsequent exposure of the performer create a shift in audience reception: Through intimate

performance, audiences' ears are ideally tuned in a new way, with implications both inside and

outside of the concert hall; as intimate developments in compositional and performance

technique train listeners to listen differently inside of the concert hall, they also open up the

possibility that audiences might listen differently in the outside world and impacts how we think

about intimacy.

      The quality of intimacy in performances that explore interactions between performers and

audience is decidedly different from what we see in canonical Western classical music

performance, and some might say, uncomfortable for listeners. Jennifer Doyle has written about

this phenomenon in relationship to performance art and museum performance.[7] Instead of

upholding boundaries between performer and audience, intimate performance tests the barrier of

performance, which no longer so clearly separates performance from real life. In her book, Doyle

writes about her experience with an immersive performance art experience in which the

participant interacts with the artist with increasing physical intimacy progressing from small talk,

---

[7] Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

to hand holding, to spooning on a bed. Though none of the performances I consider engages in direct physical contact with the audience, performers of new music express a level of intimacy on stage through the political eschewal of normative modes of musical production. No longer armed with the model of performance which seeks to project and perfect, performers are quite literally vulnerable to the audience, in a way, exposing themselves, which is sometimes difficult to watch and listen to. Additionally, given that many performers are also somehow connected with the commission or composition of the works they perform, many pieces seem autobiographical in performance, adding to this feeling of intimacy. For example, a piece by Du Yun, *An Empty Garlic* becomes biographical in performance as flutist Claire Chase, to whom the piece was dedicated, plays it to remember the life of a former lover who died of breast cancer.

It's no surprise that there are challenges associated with being intimate, which requires being vulnerable, in performance. But within this discomfort, there also exists a desire for a better future, what Lauren Berlant refers to as a hope for things to "turn out in a specific way."[8] Some of the specific ways envisioned in intimate music performance might be: that by listening differently, a myriad of goals can be achieved; classical music can circumvent the problem of the archive and take up a place in the present moment through an engagement with liveness; a new engagement with musical form and technology can mean a more intimate and present connection with the audience through an emphasis on performance; and finally, through communal, conscious listening, we can begin to understand what is possible when we interactively listen.

---

[8] Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998), 281.

Methodology

Queries in intimacy by Lauren Berlant examine the means by which individual attachments make people "public," and she urges us to think about how intimacy creates "trans personal" identities and subjectivities, leading to "a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective."[9] This question of scale is one that is particular to intimacy: Intimacy is experienced on a personal level; an audience member is affected by music, for example, yet institutions constructing that intimacy are determined by larger structures: for example, whiteness and masculinity are constructs in classical music that extend from the score to music pedagogy and manifest in music performance.

Martha Savigliano reminds us that it takes three to tango – two to dance and one to watch.[10] Following both the idealistic aims of composers of works that explore intimacy as well as scholars who position the act of performance as co-constitutive process, this dissertation enacts a scalar study of intimacy. Given their co-production in the intimacy onstage, the audience and performers, at once a public and a group of individuals, should be accounted for in a way that reflects this question of scale, something that according to Berlant, is a constant dilemma of intimacy: The intimate desire for connection between one or more people within "zones of familiarity and comfort:" the family; the couple, sources of love she calls "expressive and emancipating," are always already entangled with what she calls a "corresponding publicness," a

---

[9] Berlant, "Intimacy," 283.

[10] Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 73-74.

larger, public order, which I take to mean government, business, school, et cetera.[11] In the

negotiation between private and public, the individual encounters potential friction with the state

or another governing body. This friction, or the latent potential of it, is met with resilient

optimism on behalf of individuals, who, "consent to trust their desire for 'a life'" to these

governing bodies Berlant calls, "institutions of intimacy."[12]

Because of this scalar relationship, my dissertation investigates questions of performed or

public intimacy as well as my experience of intimacy as audience member and performer. In my

20 years as violist and performer of canonical and recent works of Western classical "new

music," I have come to know what it means to exist inside of the classical music world. I have an

intimate relationship with the production of music and have developed a sense of interiority with

my instrument and my relationship to musical works. My individuality/interiority as a violist

exists in constant tension with the mandate to erase myself, be transparent and subservient to the

score.

It bears noting that this dissertation approaches music through an analysis of

performance. As a part of this, I consider how the concept of interpretation, both by audience

member and performer, contributes to the larger structure of intimacy. I study both the

composer's ideas about the music as well as the performer's and audience member's (mine)

relationship to the music. This method builds on scholarship in the United States since the 1980s

in musicology that has engaged substantively with social critique. Joseph Kerman's 1980 essay,

"How We Got into Analysis and How to Get Out" was formative in what came to be called

---

[11] Berlant, "Intimacy," 281.

[12] Berlant, "Intimacy," 281.

"New Musicology," which includes music scholarship that engages substantively with social critique and locates the act of music performance as part of cultural production. I propose to use the toolkit of Performance Studies to examine Western classical music performance—something that has been very little done to date. Such studies respond to what Alejandro Madrid notes as a need for classical music studies (American Music) to occur outside of schools of music.[13] They also bring to performance studies the study of Western classical music, breaking down a seemingly impenetrable field (specialized language, methods, etc.) by focusing on the language and function of performance, building on the efforts of scholars such as Susan McClary, Elisabeth Le Guin, Suzanne Cusick and others who have led the way, proving the relevance of this research and its applicability beyond scholars who study music.[14]

A major consideration of the dissertation is the consideration of the "live" event and my experiences attempting to document it. Through a focus on performance, I challenge the process of writing about music in its material absence, inviting a conversation about the desire for *more* intimacy in the face of an ever-disappearing musical event. For example, in working through the

---

[13] Alejandro Madrid, "Why Music and Performance Studies? Why Now?: An Introduction to the Special Issue," *Trans-Transcultural Music Review* 13 (2009).

[14] See Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Suzanne Cusick, "Gender and the Cultural Work of a Classical Music Performance," *Repercussions* 3, no. 1 (1994).

chapter on Saariaho's *La Passion de Simone*, it became clear to me that my conceptions of what constituted performance and "the piece" needed clarification. Since I attended a festival performance of *La Passion de Simone*, my interest began with the live event, yet the act of writing required me to re-visit the event to write about it. An immediate response to this quandary seemed to be solved by accessing a recording of the exact event posted to YouTube. However, since the purpose of this recording largely serves as a performance document, the video was useful to consult the performance document to call to mind the visual aspects of performance, but lacked a finely tuned audio recording, which I felt I needed to consult in my analysis.

To part completely with musical analysis seems to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but it also becomes difficult to understand how to view practices that come out of such different quotidian moments (and with different historical complications/framings). What would happen if I limited myself to solely what I could remember? And then, since it is memory, it would be different than what actually *was*. It is not possible, then, to write about what happened in the moment. Furthermore, when at work in "the archive" there are certain disciplinary expectations about musical analysis that drive investments in things like musical scores, and "good" recordings.[15]

---

[15] The difficult materials that I have described above owe some of their tangles to attitudes toward performance and written documents in what performance theorist Diana Taylor identifies as tension between the "archive" of "supposedly enduring materials" and the "repertoire" of embodied performance (see Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Though, as Taylor argues, the

archive and the repertoire aren't inherently opposed or neatly ontologically divided. Rather, in

practice, "written documents have repeatedly announced the disappearance of the performance

practices involved in mnemonic transmission." Writing has been used as a means of excluding

embodied practices, even when it means to describe them. In classical music, this manifests as

something Lydia Goehr has termed the "work concept," classical music's version of the archive

and the repertoire (see Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the*

Philosophy of Music, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). Christopher Small also

discusses how, in classical music, concepts of performance are limited to the work itself,

referencing Johannes Brahms' opinion that ideal realization of the music is occurs while *reading*

the score (see Small, *Musicking*). The funny thing about Brahms' mentality, which has come to

represent ideas associated with classical music performance more generally, is that it

superficially "contains" the repertoire—the piece is thought of, and then written down; it is able

to be conceived of based on experiences in real time with the timbres of real instruments and

becomes more firmly rooted as a work in the archive over time. This displays Taylor's initial

claim that the archive and the repertoire aren't truly separate. It's been important for me to

discuss the archive and the repertoire because it relates to ideas associated with performance, and

specifically writing about performance. I wanted to outline why I have had the difficulties I have.

Attitudes toward performance in musicology have tended toward structuralist analysis of the

object–the work–and this directly influences attitudes toward performance, both in real time and

in writing about it.

Even though my analysis was rooted in performance and not the score, I still felt compelled to analyze the work's structural intricacies—something I wasn't able to do in the absence of a quality audio recording. How was I to do a "proper" analysis of this work without a suitable recording of "the music"? As a scholar of performance studies, I felt the YouTube recording (a plain, unedited recording with mediocre audio and visual quality) met my needs to jog my memory of the actual event. However, as I am also heavily invested in the field of musicology, the need for a clear sense of "the music" felt of equal weight to considerations of "the performance" as a larger, social event. In some ways, this performance analysis felt antithetical to the event, particularly since I felt compelled to consult a recording different from the one that inspired my writing.[16]

In order to address the difficulty I encountered in bringing together score and performance, I found myself asking questions about my scope of study: What do we *really* hear in performance? What role does formal analysis play in discussing performance? What counts as performance? Does it need to be live? In other words, I struggled to recreate the musical event while also writing about the music. Just as a musician rehearses over and over, a scholar must turn back to their object of analysis in the process of writing. And though a performance can't be repeated, it leaves traces that invite closer examination—through memory, through others' reactions, recordings, etc. My approach throughout the dissertation has been to constellate varied

---

[16] Instead of considering the work on its own or the performance on its own, I'd like to bring them together. While I investigate the idea of distant intimacy within the work, I show that each iteration of the piece brings its own resonance of the idea of distant intimacy to performance.

approaches gathered and arranged in service of reflecting on impulses relating to performances of intimacy in Western classical music.

One thing I had to consider was how to write about the intimacy—the connection between listener and music. When does it happen? Did I need to limit myself to the performance? Rely on my memory? Something musicologist Elisabeth Le Guin addresses the difficulty of recreating the musical event in analysis in her essay, "One Bar in Eight: Debussy and the Death of Description."[17] Le Guin opens with the recollection of a dream in which she is auditioning for a position as minister of a church. Drawing on a host of historical sources, she shows that the relationship of auditor to music is a methodical, sequential, rather than an instantaneous process. This is akin to Nina Eidsheim's description in *Sensing Sound* of the tree falling in the forest as a thick event: While the initial sound and thud is felt, there is also the dust clearing, the sound of the birds clearing, the squinting of the eyes that look up towards the sun as they fly away, the stinging of the eyes. The weighing of the event in the seconds following the fall, as well as the recounting of the story to friends after the fact. The impact of the event is not the event, but it is not *not* the event, either.

I recount these anecdotes from Le Guin and Eidsheim to underline my view that it seems necessary to consider the work alongside my reactions to it. This brings the analysis to life in a sense. In the analyses that follow, then, I sometimes consider the piece apart from the act of performance. Not only does it show what I hear in the piece, it shows the blind spots I have

---

[17] Elisabeth Le Guin, "One Bar in Eight: Debussy and the Death of Description," in *Beyond Structural Listening: Postmodern Modes of Hearing*, ed. Andrew Dell'Antonio (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 233-251.

inherited. Analysis of performance becomes a tricky business when considering intimacy—an act typically tied to questions of presence and absence. I hope that my transparent and self-reflective approach to the materials I consider will cast some light on matters related to analysis. I enact a method of analysis that engages in hermeneutic analysis but considers the resonances that performance brings to it. I give equal weight to the perspectives of all engaged in the piece-the composer, the director, the performers, and, for the basis of this project, myself – the perspectives of multiple audience members might be an interesting thing to consider at a later date.

Chapter Descriptions

The first chapter on David Lang's *the whisper opera* weighs the consciousness-raising potential of evoking intimacy among audience members through whispered and quiet instrumental performance delivered in close proximity. The work successfully deconstructs audience/performer connection through individualized engagement and the lack of a singular aural and visual focus. Ultimately, however, Lang's use of Google autocomplete to create an idealized, didactic listening environment positions the concert hall alongside the internet as a falsely universalizing space.

The second chapter focuses on the eighth of fifteen "stations" (of the cross) that make up Kaija Saariaho's oratorio, *La Passion de Simone*, inspired by early 20th-century French philosopher, political activist, and mystic Simone Weil. In this station, timbral musical shifts combine with themes of physical and spiritual presence and absence to present a multilayered, intimate relationship between Weil, the soprano narrator, and Jesus Christ, all played by the same performer. Through particular focus on danced gesture, this chapter focuses on the racial

and gendered inflections brought to a work about a white Jewish-Catholic mystic in a performance by mixed-race soprano, Julia Bullock at the 2016 Ojai Music Festival. Building on themes of unmarked sameness explored in the first chapter, this chapter considers how race and gender resonate within the supposedly supra-embodied space of religious transcendence.

The third and fourth chapters explore the potential of Kate Soper's *Cipher*, for soprano and violin, from her larger work *Ipsa Dixit* to engage the act of performance to deconstruct dogmatic pillars of Western thought and their manifestations in Western classical music. The third chapter offers a close reading of *Cipher's* feminist musical interventions and reflects on Soper's collaborative relationship with violinist Josh Modney—Soper and Modney crafted the piece together through a series of workshops and performances. Although Soper fails to mark her collaborator, violinist Josh Modney, as co-composer of the work, their intimate, feminist methods, built from a relationship rooted in trust and experimentation, part with pervasive notions of the solitary, genius composer and the superfluous, interchangeable performer. The fourth and final chapter offers our view into learning and performing *Cipher*, and illustrates the potential that performance brings to the interpretation and deconstruction of this work, and the Western sphere of thought and music in which it seeks to intervene. In this chapter, I offer an understanding of Soper's piece through our interactions with it, illustrating the tongue in cheek, theatrical invitations that I believe she invites performers to bring to the stage. Learning and performing this piece, my colleague and I developed feminist methods of learning and working, but found that our unconventional approach was challenged by our musical coaches, and that our insight was often at odds with Western classical performance conventions. These sticking points inspired further exploration that led us to consider *Cipher* as a catalyst for undoing heterosexual, masculine norms of learning that are typically associated with Western classical music, namely

obedience and monitored physical and moral submission to an exterior authority represented by the score and our teachers. By highlighting musical process, this chapter underlines the larger aim of the dissertation to illustrate the potential of performance to enter into larger conventional structures of meaning, specifically with regard to race, gender, and sexuality, offering uniquely inflected meanings to musical works, rather than repeat performances of works which refuse the inflection of performer identity. A focus on bodies illustrates how their intimate connection across a wide array of registers has the capability to begin to reshape norms within the Western classical canon.

CHAPTER ONE

Intimacy and Universality in David Lang's *the whisper opera*

"Everyone in the audience cries at exactly the same moment or laughs at a joke at

the same time…I don't really like that. This piece is more of an emotional

environment, and it gives people permission to enter as deeply as they would

like."[18]

-David Lang

In an interview about *the whisper opera* (2013), composer David Lang identifies a set of norms commonly associated with the opera-going experience, describing what I will refer to as a conventional (Western) opera experience in which the audience exists as a homogenous unit, laughing in unison at a singular point of action onstage. This set of associations identifies "the audience" as a homogenous unit, aligned by collective aural and visual attention to the development of a singular narrative. This normative, coercive opera-going experience doesn't account for its many subversions, certainly, but it encourages an understanding of opera rooted in its performances of canonical works in opera houses meant to seat thousands, which, based on the size of the hall, necessarily draw attention to a proscenium stage, and project sound throughout.

---

[18] David Lang quoted in Ben Johnson, "Music: David Lang composed The Whisper Opera for small, in-person audiences: Bold Opera Unplugs your Ears," *Post City Toronto,* February 25, 2015, http://www.postcity.com/Eat-Shop-Do/Do/February-2015/Music-Whisper-to-a-scream/.

The conditions of this normalizing construction of the operatic experience came out gradually over the course of the 19th century and are largely based around a structural divide between audience and performers. The orchestra pit, which creates a spatial barrier between the audience and performers, hides the orchestra from view so that the orchestra's disembodied sounds surround the audience, transporting them emotionally into the world of the opera that unfolds before it. This sonic transportation is aided by the sightlines enabled by conventional operatic performance practices involving a proscenium stage. From seats optimized to provide a full view of the stage and complete aural experience, the audience, sitting in darkened anonymity, guides their gaze forward to take in the action on a brightly lit stage, while vocalists, blinded by stage lights, look into a sea of black. The audience, united by a singular focal point in a hall projecting sound equally to all, is taken on an emotional journey structured by the paradigms of conventional opera going experiences in large proscenium spaces, meant to capture the full range of instrumental and vocal dynamics to provide a relatively complete experience of the operatic "work."[19]

In *the whisper opera,* Lang subverts conventional opera conventions, which privilege the development of singular narrative. By placing audience members and performers in close proximity, he and director/designer Jim Findlay of the Wooster Group build a sonic world "out of…sounds that are so fragile, and…information that is so quiet, that you wouldn't be able to

---

[19] Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

record it."[20] Mining sources like Twitter feeds and Tumblr posts via the Google search engine, Lang highlights what he calls "internet secrets," things people only share online, and never face-to-face.[21] Sharing internet secrets, Lang hopes to give voice to "conversations which are murmuring around us all the time," albeit silently, and hidden by the smooth exterior of the Google interface.[22] Through performance, these "hidden" secrets are animated, and with multiple performers performing them simultaneously, providing each audience member with a unique experience, Lang deconstructs conventional opera's focus on a singular narrative. With its multiple, concurrent sonic events, the piece can't be recorded, meaning that it also can't be disconnected (through the recording process) from aspects of performance endemic to the live moment; aspects such as the gaze of a performer as they whisper and the scent of sitting in close proximity to others on the plywood stage are critical to the experience of the piece. By creating an opera rooted in the live moment, Lang set up what seems to be an "intimate" listening environment that changes the way audience members listen inside and outside the concert hall. This chapter explores these deconstructions of listening and opera spectatorship, but also investigates how investments in universality endemic to Western classical music and the internet prevent *the whisper opera* from reaching the changes in human intimacy and listening toward which it aspires.

---

[20] William Robin, "Secrets Found Online, Shared Softly," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/04/arts/music/david-langs-whisper-opera-mines-truths-from-the-web.html.

[21] Robin, "Secrets."

[22] Robin, "Secrets."

"Conventional" Western opera practices

In the setting Lang describes, the sight lines and acoustic resonance built into the opera house are harnessed to support and develop linear narrative in a dramatic libretto that leads to the kind of "laugh on cue" response that he describes. Audience attention is directed forward, to action on the proscenium stage, and the music emerges from the orchestra in the pit and the singers on stage. This action is developed in libretti that move toward a dramatic climax. This structure is explored musically through arias, which explore intense emotions; recitative, which build momentum through dialog or asides; an opening orchestral piece (a prelude or overture) and orchestral pieces that separate each of the acts (intermezzi, entre'actes, various dance forms). These variously titled orchestral pieces differ in title across operas, but each serves to preview or develop musical material while allowing time for reflection and closure.

Each of these musical sections explores time differently. Recitative approximates the rhythm and pace of everyday speech, whereas arias, as Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker point out, seems to stop time, "[letting] nothing else happen while they unfold, allowing us to sample a kind of internal time, one in which the character's mind reveals itself."[23] Orchestral intervals, which originate from Italian intermedi performed between ancient comedies and later in commedia dell'arte, serve a practical end, marking time on a large scale by announcing the opening of the opera and the start of each new act.[24]

---

[23] Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2021), 25.

[24] David Nutter, "Intermedio," *Grove Music Online*, accessed September 30, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.13831.

In opera before 1900, these sections are developed according to tonal harmony, which, broadly speaking, creates musical tension and release that develops the action explored in the libretto. This style of composition relies on sonic projection from instrumentalists and vocalists that produces pitch, as opposed to vocal noise. Pitch is literally the frequency of vibration of vibration of sound waves that humans perceive when these waves touch the ear. These pitches, or musical notes, are connected to form the smallest unit of tension and release, the phrase, to communicate an emotional arc to each person in the hall.

What is currently recognized as operatic singing style focuses on the projection of evenness of tone across each note and is characterized by a warbling vibrato, which facilitates a sense of effortless connection between notes. This allows singers greater flexibility as they move between the highs and lows of the pitches and volumes of their vocal range in this style that has been honed over time to compete with instruments designed to project at increasingly louder volumes.[25] These techniques allow singers to project to the back seats of opera houses to halls that seat upwards of 4,000 patrons.[26] Vocal register is then employed variously to denote character "types," which correlate voice and musical composition with questions of identity according to the musical time period in question or to organize individuals into anonymity as a part of the chorus. In the case of individuals, identities are further developed through costuming, which reflects the individuality of each character as well as the larger narrative world of which they are apart, and stage sets, which combine with costuming to situate the characters in a specific time and place. The most famous example of a soprano "type" might be Richard

---

[25] Abbate and Parker, *A History of Opera,* 9

[26] Abbate and Parker, *A History of Opera,* 9

Wagner's Brünnhilde, who famously wears a horned helmet. A chorus that holds similar popularity is "Les voici! Voici la quadrille!" from Georges Bizet's *Carmen* in which a crowd, dressed in everyday clothes (the era of "everyday" is dependent on the production) announces the arrival of the matadors to the bullfight in the final act of the opera.

Interestingly, despite the fact that opera houses are built for vocal projection, as Abbate and Parker point out, hearing and understanding the text isn't paramount to the opera going experience.[27] Orchestration adds intensity to the libretto, but it can also obscure the lyrics.[28] Furthermore, so that vocalists may project and make beautiful, sonorous vowels, many words are pronounced differently than they are in everyday speech. This is in addition to the ornamentation of individual words in arias, which often stretch, emphasize, or repeat syllables beyond comprehension in the service of vocal virtuosity.[29] As such, what is being said has historically been valued less than how it is being sung.[30]

---

[27] Abbate and Parker, *A History of Opera,* 5

[28] Abbate and Parker, *A History of Opera,* 3.

[29] Abbate and Parker, *A History of Opera,* 3.

[30] Abbate and Parker, *A History of Opera,* 3.

Spatial subversion in *the whisper opera*

"The stage is in front of you and behind you, at the level of your shoulders or your neck…I saw

this idea with their heads popping up out of the stage. We just wanted their ears. We're not just

putting *them* on stage; we're putting their *ears* onstage."[31]

-Director/designer Jim Findlay

Whereas conventional opera houses separate the audience and performers, *the whisper opera* condenses this divide by parting with the orchestra pit and house seating. *[t]he whisper opera* director/designer Jim Findlay locates musicians, their instruments, and audience members together on the stage on a vaulted plywood structure.[32] The stage is divided into quadrants by parallel sets of bisecting cutouts that extend partway into the structure, and a semi-sheer, white curtain hangs from the ceiling in each cutout. Audience members, guided on stage by ushers, tuck in around its edges and sit under a bass drum, suspended by a fly in each quadrant.[33] Each of the eight cutouts seats a single row of five to seven audience members, who sit at a right angle to another row of patrons, and back to back with a parallel row and wait for the musicians to enter. This setting allows for a focus on the creation of a multi-sensory, indeterminate

---

[31] Chris Vitiello, "104 Ears at the Time, David Lang's *The Whisper Opera* Recalibrates Attention," *Indyweek*, January 14, 2015, https://indyweek.com/music/features/104-ears-time-david-lang-s-whisper-opera-recalibrates-attention/.

[32] Audience members are seated in small groups by ushers and await the entry of the musicians, signifying the start of the piece.

[33] See Figure 1.1

soundscape meant to provide infinite individual experiences as opposed to the kind of

homogenizing performance Lang dislikes.

Figure 1.1 Image: photograph of the NYU Skirball Center (New York, New York) stage set for a performance of *the whisper opera* in January, 2018. Image Credit: Farrah O'Shea.

　　[t]he whisper opera requires a full-bodied sense of engagement and demands that sight

and sound connect, as the in/ability to see behind or across the stage, and through the gauzy

curtains that divide the stage into quadrants combines with close listening. In close proximity

and under bright stage lights, audience members not only see, they are also seen. As they look

across and behind quadrants, audience members' gazes collide and performers, making eye

contact with audience members, break the fourth wall. Thus, looking becomes a reciprocal

activity and part of the action.

Given this setting, whispers and quiet instrumental and vocal music are presented directly to audience members, who must contemplate the act of music making in relationship to embodiment. As an audience member at two performances of *the whisper opera* in 2018, I had my own embodied experience with the piece. With musicians across the stage producing quiet sounds simultaneously, it was difficult for me to pinpoint each sound's point of origin. In order to connect sight and sound happening all around me, I found myself twisting in my minimally padded banquet chair to observe the other three quadrants of the stage. Listening to *the whisper opera* required me to engage my own body, refuting ideas that audience members sit passively in their seats. Furthermore, as musicians played bass drums hung from a thin wire just above audience members' heads, I considered the possibility that the instrument might fall on me, or that a performer might brush me as they were playing it; these elements produced further acknowledgement of my own physicality into my role as an audience member.

Bringing the audience and musicians together not only brings attention to audience recognition of embodiment, it also parts with ideas of transcendence enabled by disembodied instrumentalists. For instance, a small group of audience members who sit below a bass drum suspended from thin wire observes percussionist, Ross Karre's instrumental and interpersonal interactions as part of the dramatic action. No longer hitting the drum invisibly (with the intention of building on a harmonic structure, which requires a certain, base level of dynamic production), Karre plays the drum as quietly as possible, drawing attention to the quality of the touch as he whispers to audience members in his close vicinity. As they contemplate the weight and size of the instrument as it hangs above their heads and receive Karre's direct address—Lang notes in the score that sounds are to be "aimed," at audience members—spectators situate

themselves physically, and emotionally, in relationship to the actions onstage.[34] Thus, by bringing Karre's close proximity and address to audience members to the fore, Lang dispels previous notions of invisibility in instrumental performance and spectatorship. Furthermore, with other such events happening across the stage, audience members are confronted with a multifaceted experience that departs from a more passive act of viewing rooted in a conventional opera experience. These encounters, which happen throughout the opera, replace a sense of viewing rooted in large, theatricalized gesture to be projected to a large opera house with the experience of the individual.

As the previous anecdote suggests, in the absence of an orchestra pit, the opera's four instrumentalists—Claire Chase, flute; Zachary Good, clarinet; Chris Griss, cello; and Ross Karre, percussion—supplement the vocalists as operatic focal points. No longer disembodied since they are in full view of the audience, they create music with their instruments as a visible and material interaction. As I looked around, I found myself noticing the qualities of their touch, with mouths, bows, fingertips, even the padding of their feet on the creaking floor of the stage. I noticed the action of the instruments as they are played, and the rustle of clothes as performers moved across the stage. Such preparatory and "extra musical" sounds became part of the musical landscape, bringing dramatic attention to *how* performers make music with their bodies. The whisper, characterized by the expulsion of air from the lungs and shaped into words by the tongue and lips, seems to highlight these musical preparations most vividly. While I heard musicians inhale to begin the whispers, the exhalation, the whisper, seemed not all together

---

[34] David Lang, *the whisper opera (for soprano and four musicians),* (New York: Ricordi, 2013), 15.

much different from the preparation, the inhalation. The same was true of the actions of the instrumentalists, whose preparatory motions sounded and looked not unlike the resulting musical gestures. Furthermore, the role of the conductor—usually the only visible icon of the orchestra directing a seemingly disembodied and therefore transcendent sound—is obsolete. Musicians either work together, communally, as in chamber music, or are conducted transiently by one of the musicians for only a part of the scene. The latter of these instances indicates a kind of cooperative leadership where the temporary conductor is also an equal member of the ensemble, as opposed to an authority figure that stands apart from the ensemble of musicians.

Given this heterogeneous landscape, costuming is no longer important to differentiating instrumentalists and vocalists. Performers wear everyday street clothes in a monotone palette of greys that seem to have come from their own closets. This is instead of the plot-related costuming of the singers and the black clothes that instrumentalists are instructed to wear when playing in the pit of the opera orchestra, or on stage during a symphony orchestra concert. With singers and instrumentalists, the historic divide between pit musician and on-stage vocalists is diminished, an effect that further amplifies a shared use of the whisper. Rather than a strict divide between the two groups, the costuming underlines the ways in which they are the same.

This sameness is also apparent through everyone's use of the whisper and through communal engagement with percussion instruments installed throughout the stage.[35] As a result, the barrier between instrumentalists and singers is eliminated. Those who make their living as

---

[35] Only the owners of the flute, clarinet, and cello played these instruments, but every performer played percussion instruments (bass drums and cymbals), which were installed throughout the stage.

"instrumentalists," typically thought of in a supporting role, are now given equal attention to the one vocalist, soprano Tony Arnold. Questions of identity come into play in these moments. Are instrumentalists able to call themselves a flutist, a clarinetist, cellist, or a percussionist if these instruments aren't fully sounding? And what of the fact that these instrumentalists also speak, as does the "vocalist"? Arnold exercises her vocal range and volume only once in the entire piece, when she is off stage. The rest of the time, she isn't performing her "soprano role" but instead, singing simple melodies or whispering alongside the other performers. The whisper has limited pitch contour, which means that voice types no longer correlate with character. Furthermore, the whisper is commonplace, quotidian, and requires no special training. In *the whisper opera,* all performers whisper, which further disrupts the divide between instrumentalists and singers in conventional opera. It's not possible to string notes together to create a longer phrase, or even to communicate identity or emotion. Given these qualities of the whisper, it's difficult to know what to make of the meaning of the musicians' presence, and it's confusing that they both speak and play. This distortion of roles places all performers on equal footing, successfully deconstructing a divide rooted in ideas of disembodiment and transcendence.

"Is it possible that the meaning of hearing live music will change?"

Performers of *the whisper opera* give voice to a selection of everyday thoughts, which have been captured by Lang via the Google search engine. After testing hundreds of sentences, weeding out the ones that "produced way too many responses that were too familiar, or too commercial, or too pornographic," Lang arrived at the four sentences that structure the opera.[36]

---

[36] David Lang, *the whisper opera,* iii.

In order to create the libretto, Lang would type an incomplete sentence into the search box and "make a text by taking all the answers on the internet that completed it."[37] About this working method, Lang writes, "I can feel the vast range of all the voices on the internet – all the answers, from everywhere, from everyone, all equal and all present, and all available all the time."[38]

Interestingly, this method of working draws on the internet despite the fact that Lang feels it is detrimental to live performance. Commenting on the availability of music online, Lang writes:

> Almost all the music you could ever want is on the internet right now, recorded perfectly and played perfectly and accessible immediately, 24 hours a day. On the one hand this is fantastic—I can hear huge amounts of music, from different genres and time periods and traditions and cultures, any time I want. On the other hand, I love hearing music live. If most music is now available and recorded perfectly and ever present, is it possible that the meaning of hearing live music will change?[39]

To ensure his intentions for the work aren't compromised, there are strict constraints on performances. Under no circumstances is the work to be recorded or to be performed in concert form; it must be experienced as a live, theatrical event. It is also forbidden to provide in written form any of the libretto during performances. In making these rules, he preserves the individual

---

[37] David Lang, *the whisper opera,* iii.

[38] David Lang, *the whisper opera,* iii.

[39] David Lang, *the whisper opera,* ii.

experience of the work and fights against the notion that it might be possible to "[follow] along," rather than experience the piece. [40]

In this criticism of recordings online, I believe Lang is responding to a condition built into the set of works and practices known to Western audiences as "classical music," which privileges fidelity to the score (thus making the music reproducible and deemphasizing individual engagement). The result of this attitude toward performance has meant that, over time, the classical music stage has become a place of reproduction, where the erasure of labor and constant striving toward perfection have created a canon of works that are repeated ad nauseam.[41] This attitude toward performance in what Joseph Kerman calls "canonical classical music performance" creates a distanced relationship with the audience in the sense of not

---

[40] Interestingly, the effect of recordings can already be seen in live performances. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker recall a performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *Il trovatore* (1853) in which conductor Ricardo Muti, famous for his obedience to the score, insisted on excising an anachronistic, yet famous group of high Cs from Manrico's aria "De quella pira." *Loggionisti,"* opera fans who haunt the upper reaches of the theatre and who know every recording intimately," were enraged, and cries of "Vergogna" (shame) rained down on the stage during the 2000-2001 season at *La Scala.* Abbate and Parker, *A History of Opera*, 8.

[41] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008).

recognizing the particularity of different audiences.[42] This condition is exemplified in music

recordings, which alienate performance from the music. Theorist Guy Debord has thought of this

system in terms of spectacle, which he sees as the height of degradation of the human

experience.[43]

As he is describing how *the whisper opera* provides an alternative to this kind of canonic

performance, Lang mentions live recordings of jazz performance in which sounds that aren't part

of "the music" are part of the record: "Up until that moment, it's just an abstract piece of music,"

Lang says, "but the minute you hear that, you think, 'Is that the club? What were people

drinking?' The fact that there's something accidental and live means it has a social significance

that it doesn't have if it's just, 'Here are some chords, and here are some notes, and that harmony's

really nice.'"[44] Given this description, with *the whisper opera*, it seems that Lang wants to create

a musical experience that showcases the live moment.

Lang's comment indicates an interest in creating music performances that can't be

repeated and that have an emphasis on the moment in which they are happening. Insomuch as

conventional opera is a spectacle, *the whisper opera* is an example of what Debord might call a

"situation," a performance that attempts to create new situations, rather than reproduce, as in the

---

[42] Joseph Kerman, "A Few Canonical Variations," Critical Inquiry 10 no. 1 (1983): 107-126, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343408.

[43] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black & Red, 1977).

[44] Vitiello, "104 Ears at the Time."

ontology of spectacle.[45] Rather than coordinate around one emotional idea, *the whisper opera* sets up a unique experience for each audience member with shifting aural and visual channels; its use of whisper and soft instrumental sounds means that visual and aural focal points are never constant. In resolving to reform the group experience of the concert- or opera-going experience, Lang substitutes what he sees as a mass experience for one that is personal, unique. In order to do this, he parts from the model of performance wherein the concert hall is a resonating chamber for sound with a singular point of origin. Rather than the same sounds resonating throughout the hall, Lang wants individuals to be unique receivers of sound, and for them to catch snippets of musical moments perhaps more present for other audience members.

For Lang and director/designer and former Wooster Group member, Jim Findlay, this investment in performance has larger implications. In a sense, they hope to change the listener by bringing in their focus and fine-tuning their ears to a lower-level decibel. Jim Findlay speaks of a desire to affect audience members even after they leave the concert hall: "The piece tunes your senses to a lower level. You start to become aware of a much more granular sense of what's happening. My hope is that when the audience walks outside, they hear and see the world differently for a little while—for a moment or a day or a week or however long the hangover

---

[45] For more on constructed situations, see Frances Stracey, *Constructed Situations: A New History of the Situationist International* (London: Pluto Press, 2014).

lasts."[46] Furthermore, as Lang has said in interviews, he hopes that in performances of *the whisper opera*, he will reveal a level human interaction that is "essential" to life as a human.[47]

Subverting narrative in *the whisper opera*

"Putting the audience's ears onstage," allows Lang to negate conventional opera's suggested orientation towards a singular aural and focal narrative. While conventional opera provides a complete vision of a singular work, in this setting, each audience member would strain and fail, visually and aurally, to take in the entire stage and the action occurring on it; thus, a singular narrative is contested.[48] Instead of a musical/harmonic exploration of a single dramatic

---

[46] Vitiello, "104 Ears at the Time."

[47] Vitiello, "104 Ears at the Time." It makes sense that Lang would move away from what he sees as a spectacle-based model, but in another way, conventional concert going experience can be viewed as engaging in what Victor Turner calls *communitas;* a kind of transformational experience in which the group experience is greater than that of its individual parts. See Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969; repr. New York: Routledge, 2017), 94-130. It can be inferred from Lang's commentary that the classical music stage has *become* what Lang thinks of as an undesirable location due to reproduction, and perhaps this feeling of transformational *communitas* has also been sacrificed.

[48] When I attended two separate performances of this work in January 2018, each time I was greeted by a nagging sense that something was missing from my experience. From my minimally padded banquet chair, I needed to turn in my body to view and try to listen into activities in the other quadrants. I found myself straining to see through the semi-sheer panels to listen across to other areas of the room, something I had a strong desire to do in order to attempt to take in the

line, the libretto scripts multiple perspectives, which occur simultaneously. In the space of 65 minutes divided into four sections (Lang calls them scenes), musicians provide whispered answers to the following sentences, developed when Lang typed the beginnings of each sentence into Google, allowing the search engine to auto populate the rest: "When I am alone I always," "they said I was crazy but I," "when I think of you I think of," "it's not my fault that I am so."

As performers whisper their responses to the scene's title, they create a focus on fleeting encounters: thoughts and experiences that don't necessarily work in support of a larger narrative. Although the scene titles are listed in the program, the performers do not verbalize them. The result is a soft barrage of non-sequiturs, as opposed to a sustained emotional arc, as in the conventional operatic form. These fragmented utterances give the impression that performers are lost in thought, either on their way somewhere, or in the middle of something.[49] In fact, as each performer whispers a sentence, the "person" whose identity is assumed recedes as the performer shifts to the next "character" indicated by the following unrelated sentiment.

With responses to each of these prompts happening simultaneously, *the whisper opera* provides an assembly of multiple perspectives to be performed simultaneously, allowing Lang to deconstruct any possible audience focus on the projection of a large-scale fulfillment of a

---

entire performance. Travelling to New York from Los Angeles to experience the opera, I saw the work twice in an attempt to gain a full understanding of the work, while simultaneously fully aware of the futility of this desire.

[49] Though opera isn't meant to be "lifelike,"—breaking out into song, making public a private emotion can hardly be thought of as relatable—it's meant to provide an elaboration on an emotional experience.

harmonic plan at the global level, and the melodic lines that feed into it at the local level. With quiet events happening simultaneously, a focus on a singular harmonic agenda isn't possible. The quality of instrumental and vocal sound; the phrases that performers repeat; the timbre of performers' voices; all are influenced by the space on the stage from which the musicians speak or play and constitute the dramatic focus of the work, and a departure from the "complete" experience of conventional opera.

With no score, there is an emphasis on the movement within sections, as audience members become acquainted with the aesthetic of the piece and enter into its sonic and visual landscape. Each of the four scenes combines elements of chance (whisper and the production of un-notated, quiet playing on percussion instruments) with more scripted, explicitly melodic sections (instrumental interludes and quietly played and hummed/sung offstage "tunes.) For the audience, this means there is a constant emphasis on discovery, rather than development. In chance portions of *the whisper opera*, performers move about and interact freely, whispering and playing percussion instruments as quietly as possible. Through chance, Lang frees the musicians to rely on their ears, as opposed to the score, acting based on sonic and visual feedback and eschewing strict adherence to pitch and time as in conventional opera. These sections take inspiration from John Cage's *4'33''* and Pauline Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations*, both of which decenter concepts of "the work" in favor of a focus on performer and audience listening. While these sections are rehearsed, they are not executed according to a score. Instead, performers listen and react to one another as they feel their way through a series of responses to each scene's title. *[th]e whisper opera* parts with a mentality of composition and performance rooted in passive consumption and moves towards a mentality of performance and participation rooted in

close proximity and listening—Pauline Oliveros called this "Deep Listening."[50] Even in sections where instruments are playing from the score, the aural concentration of the opera is the relative in/audibility of whispers or instrumental noise, and a repetitive, minimalist structure or a simple tune never seems to dominate above the whispers. Furthermore, where material is written down, it re-inscribes a localized, in-the-moment form of listening endemic to a particular scene, as opposed to a large-scale harmonic contract that is a hallmark of tonal harmony. This quiet change between scenes is executed without applause, a departure from conventional Western opera practices.

The first scene, "When I am alone I always" is the quietest and has the subtlest shifts between and within chance and melodic sections. After the musicians appear onstage (individually, without applause), they begin the first chance section of the scene, spinning suspended cymbals for several minutes, beginning to whisper and touch knitting needles to the edge of the cymbals, making them buzz. Musicians gradually being to whisper, repeating the whispered text at will, lingering on passages that indicate relationality by making eye contact with audience members in texts such "feel like someone is watching me" or "thinking of you (sic),"[51] In this scene, there is a sense of voyeurism as the audience looks in on the private worlds suggested by the text. Whereas in first scene, the audience's introduction to the world of *the whisper opera* is the softest in volume, in the second scene, "they said I was crazy but I," whispers become sharper, and noticeably agitated. The speed of this scene is noticeably faster,

---

[50] "Deep Listening," The Center for Deep Listening, accessed January 14, 2021, https://www.deeplistening.rpi.edu/deep-listening/.

[51] David Lang, *the whisper opera,* iv.

and instrumentalists switch from touching the cymbals to rubbing bass drums suspended above audience members' heads. As in the first scene, there is a chance-informed movement between percussion noise from the bass drum, whispering, a simple tune, and a minimalist interlude. The rumble from the drums combines with texts such as "I'll show them," and "I am a man with ambition," and "I'm not the one whispering out loud" to explore a more ominous side of the whisper, akin to someone muttering under their breath.[52] The third scene, "when I think of you I think of," is more contemplative, moving between a ponderous andantino or walking tempo, and to and away from a more emotionally charged tempo. This movement breaks from the chance/tune/interlude structure of the previous two movements to luxuriate in wistfully wrung out deliveries of lines like "your sexy body," "the new sudan of hopes and dreams" and "us together, oh-oh" delivered by the soprano.[53] As Arnold (soprano) whispers, she elongates or truncates these phrases at will, carefully punctuating each one, skillfully combining diction and the expulsion of air from her mouth to vary and emphasize the text. These texts either feel suspended, or quickly rushed, depending on her delivery. With her voice, she conducts the bass flute, bass clarinet, and cello that support her whispers, drawing them out or speeding them along according to her desires. Near the end of this scene, the softest percussive sounds haunted the margins of my auditory sense, coming slowly into clarity as a percussionist moved around the perimeter of the stage and in and out of my line of sight. These sounds lead into the fourth and final scene, "it's not my fault that I am so," which begins with a glockenspiel solo and the soprano exiting the stage. It's in this scene that Arnold sings (though offstage) for the first time.

---

[52] David Lang, *the whisper opera,* vi.

[53] David Lang, *the whisper opera,* ix.

Perhaps because the soprano needs to hear everyone playing, this scene features the loudest volumes of the piece. The piece ends rather strangely in that it doesn't close with a slowing or softening. Instead, it ends when the soprano, Tony Arnold appears again onstage. Here, and throughout the piece, deconstructions of conventional practices of adherence to the score allows for a more exploratory opera-going experience, rooted in discovery, a direct contrast to conventional opera's development of a singular narrative over time.

Performing Universality

As Lang created the libretto, he curated the results along the way, editing out "responses that were too familiar, or too commercial, or too pornographic."[54] By excising this data and putting it forward for the individual, the very experience of control and infinite selection that Lang seems to want to lead his audience members away from remains at the core of the piece's production and libretto. Lang curates a supposed universality that is capable of reaching and transforming each individual listener. Lang's position in *the whisper opera* presents another way to circumvent the capitalist "mass" mentality that, as I alluded to earlier, the Situationists hoped, in one way or another, to escape. Lang's use of the internet in the creation of the libretto seems to undo or *detourn* the effects of the internet on live performance.[55] However, within this desire to reform the group concert experience, *the whisper opera* presents a vexed relationship to connection among individuals rooted in universalist ideals. Lang seems to want to unify people through *the whisper opera,* and creates the libretto in a spirit of inclusiveness, gathering

---

[54] David Lang, *the whisper opera,* iii.

[55] See Stracey, Constructed Situations."

responses from across the internet, hoping to give voice to a wide cross section of humanity. And yet, this action reveals a curation rooted in exclusion, rather than inclusion.

Universalism is a pet project of the elite, meant to cover over difference with a thin veneer of unification, where active conversation is necessary in order to enact real connection and change.[56] Since there is a good deal of evidence that opera audiences since at least 1720 have often ignored the words begin sung, opera would appear to be a perfect tool for universalist projects. Such universalist notions of a human race unmarked by difference in race, gender, sexuality or class persist in notions of the internet.

On February 8, 1996, John Perry Barlow, founder of Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit agency "defending digital privacy, free speech, and innovation for 30 years and counting," wrote a letter of declaration in response to the U.S. Telecommunications Act of 1996, meant to "promote competition and reduce regulation in order to secure lower prices and higher quality services for American telecommunications consumers and encourage the rapid deployment of new telecommunications technologies."[57] In response to the act, Barlow wrote a manifesto of sorts, addressed to "Governments of the Industrial World." In this fanciful manifesto, Barlow, who "comes from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind," writes to the "weary giants of flesh and steel" of the past. "You are not welcome among us," he says, "[y]ou have no

---

[56] For instance, see Safiya Noble's description of how tech titans engage universality to cover over difference. Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 63.

[57] Telecommunications Act of 1996, Public Law 104-104, U.S. Statutes at Large 110 (1996). https://www.congress.gov/104/plaws/publ104/PLAW-104publ104.pdf.

sovereignty where we gather."[58]In the rest of the Declaration, Barlow describes the Internet as a neutral "global social space" without government. He identifies this as the ideal position of "liberty," that without borders, government, and any kind of resultant tyranny. According to Barlow, with the Telecommunications Reform Act, the United States government has offended the views of "Jefferson, Washington, Mill, Madison, DeToqueville, and Brandeis. "Thus, he argues, "[t]hese dreams must now be born anew in us."[59]

And yet, as Safiya Noble argues in *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism,* the internet is not the neutral ideal that Barlow supposes. Says Noble,

> "it is not only an intangible space; it is also a physical space made of brick, mortar, metal trailers, electronics containing magnetisms and optical media, and fiber infrastructure. It is wholly material in all of its qualities, and our experiences with it are as real as any other aspect of life."[60]

Barlow's utopian liberalist ideals have since been linked to neoliberal individualism. As Noble states,

> "These linkages are import markers of the shift from public-or state-sponsored institutions, including information institutions, as the arbiters of social freedoms

---

[58] John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," *Electronic Frontier Foundation,* February 8, 1996, accessed January 11, 2021, https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence.

[59] Barlow, "Cyberspace."

[60] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 61.

to the idea that free markets, corporations, and individualized pursuits should

serve as the locus of social organization. These ideas are historically rooted in

notions of the universal human being, unmarked by difference, that serve as the

framework for a specific tradition of thinking about *individual* pursuits

of equality."[61]

Notably, Noble calls this utopic ideal, "the final goal of human transcendence."[62] This is a

problematic stance that haunts both the Internet and Western classical music. The argument that

an ideal humanity is the universal humanity, a position free of differences in race, gender,

sexuality or class, "is an important part of the narrative that somehow personal liberties can be

realized through technology because of its ability to supposedly strip us of our specifics and

make us equal."[63]

The laws of physics can be drawn on to explain cultural phenomena like

consonance/dissonance, and critics of music have long used them to argue for "universality" in

those phenomena. Remarks on Western classical music's universality were popularized in what

is known as the Romantic era of Western classical music and are tied most poignantly to the idea

of "absolute music." This term, initially coined in 1847 by Richard Wagner diminishes non-

referential music for its inability to serve a useful purpose in society, was famously reclaimed by

Eduard Hanslick in 1854 in the short treatise, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen (On the Musically*

Beautiful). In this treatise, Hanslick argued that it was precisely the fact that music didn't have to

---

[61] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 62.

[62] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 62.

[63] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 63.

be *about* anything that gave it its privileged position among the fine arts. As Mark Evan Bonds describes in *Absolute Music: the History of an Idea,* Hanslick's notions of music as a non-representational and therefore disembodied art have proliferated, and continue to guide concepts of listening today.[64] This period is when many enduring ideas about classical music performance became part of standard concert practice. The Romantic idea that musicians are the servants of the music led, on the one hand, to attempts at suppressing performer subjectivity, and, on the other, to extravagant refusals of this suppression, in the form of the career virtuoso. In symphonic settings, this idea shaped the enduring practice of musicians dressing in black clothing, covering all skin, and explains the only recent presence of women musicians in symphony orchestras.[65]

During the Romantic period, concepts of difference were often offered from a Eurocentric reflection on the "other." For instance, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's quotation, "[m]usic is the universal language of mankind, --poetry their universal pastime and delight," is oft reprinted on posters throughout schools and offered up in requests to donors to fund classical

---

[64] Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[65] For more on conditioned practices of Western classical music see Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2010).

music organizations.[66] This quotation appears in a chapter called "Ancient Spanish Ballads" in *Outre-Mer: A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea,* a kind of travelogue of Europe rooted in an Englishman's explorations of the French and Italian "other." Though Longfellow's remark seems to indicate a universal interest in the practice of making music co-opted in instances where Western classical music is performed by or for non-Europeans. These universalist sentiments surrounding Western classical music are intrinsic to Romanticism as a cultural movement; here is Thoreau, on the universality of Beethoven in *The Service*:

> "There is as much music in the world as virtue. In a world of peace and love music would be the universal language, and men greet each other in the fields such accents as a Beethoven now utters as rare intervals from a distance. All things obey music as they obey virtue. It is the herald of virtue, It is God's voice. In it are centripetal and centrifugal forces. The universe needed only to hear a divine melody, that every star might fall into its proper place and assume its true sphericity.[67]

---

[66] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Ancient Spanish Ballads," in *Outre-Mer: A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea, Volume II,* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1835), 4. Consider, for example, El Sistema, a training program which introduces Western classical music training programs into disadvantaged communities across the globe. The *El Sistema Sweden* website lists its "Core Value," thusly: "Music is one of the most powerful instruments to express feelings, norms, solidarity, harmony and mutual compassion. Music unites, builds bridges and is a universal language for all of humanity." "El Sistema Sweden," El Sistema Sweden, English, accessed January 15th, 2021, http://www.elsistema.se/om-el-sistema/in-english/.

[67] Henry David Thoreau, "What Music Shall We Have," in *The Service*, ed. F. B. Sanborn, (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1902), 12.

In this passage, Thoreau refers to Plato through his reference to "sphericity," and proffers

Western classical music as a language that resolves conflict (resulting in peace and love).

Creating a window into the internet

Lang hopes that, using Google to create the libretto, he creates an equalizing environment

through a libretto with "all the answers, from everywhere, from everyone, all equal and all

present, and all available all the time."[68] However, Lang's search results (and the libretto) are

presented in English, subject to his search location, and potentially to his previous search history,

all of which indicates that the libretto is tied to his own Google profile.[69] As such, the libretto

offers a view into Lang's personalized entry point into the internet, not the kind of globalized,

diverse atmosphere he professes to encompass.

While Lang is right that the internet does contain the interior and semi-private thoughts of

millions of people, the Google search engine (or any search engine) is hardly the place to access

such information directly. Such searches do not direct users to specific blog entries, Facebook

posts, or the like, and the search mechanism can be corrupted for various gains; it is not a neutral

---

[68] David Lang, *the whisper opera,* iii.

[69] At present, it is possible to turn off personalized and trending predictions and

recommendations, though it is unclear if Lang did so when he was working on the libretto. At the

very least, his searches would have been subject to his geographic location, as well as to the

popularity of various responses, the latter of which is a factor determined at least in part by

financial incentives.

mechanism. Lang's search queries show that he believes that people use search engines to sort out truth to find or create community, but Lang's search results indicate a tracking of popularity of a majority determined by a system of "up voting." In this process, searches are whittled down, away from specifics and toward the general. With its search tools, advertising services, communication and publishing tools, maps, statistical tools, and business-oriented products, Google is one of the Big Five technology companies (alongside Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft). In Google search, there is an autocomplete feature that "predicts" searches by looking at "real searches that happen on Google and show common and trending ones relevant to the characters that are entered and also related to your location and previous searches."[70] Lang does not explicitly say that he uses the Google search feature, referring only to "autocomplete" in an interview, but the search engine's ubiquity has caused many reviewers of *the whisper opera* to make the assumption that he used this search engine, which is also the number one visited site in the world, and has become, for many, synonymous with the internet itself. [71] This is notable given the fact that Lang indicates that he felt that in creating the libretto, he was creating a window into the internet:

---

[70] Danny Sullivan, "How Google Autocomplete Works in Search," Google, last modified April 20, 2018, https://blog.google/products/search/how-google-autocomplete-works-search/.

[71] David Lang and Ethan Philbrick, "Office Hours with David Lang and Ethan Philbrick," filmed on January 23, 2018 for NYU Skirball, Facebook live, https://www.facebook.com/nyuskirball/videos/office-hours-with-david-lang-and-ethan-philbrick/10155379554527725/.

"One of the paradoxes of the internet is that it is a public, searchable storage place

for the interior and semi-private thoughts of millions of people. Tweets, Facebook

postings, blog posts, chat room conversations, comments to other comments on

YouTube, trolling, ranting, song lyrics to songs no one knows –there is a lot of

text uploaded every second that may represent more the need of people to give

themselves voice than the need of other people to hear them. Many of these texts

are secrets, caught in a kind of paradox—personal things people feel compelled to

reveal anonymously to the ether but might have trouble saying out loud, to a real

person, face to face. For the libretto to *the whisper opera* I searched four

sentences of the internet that I hoped would uncover some of these secrets. I

actually searched hundreds of sentences until I found the ones that worked—some

sentences produced way too many responses that were too familiar, or too

commercial, or too pornographic. I would write a sentence that was incomplete

and I would make a text by taking all the answers on the internet that completed

it. What I love about working this way is that I can feel the vast range of all the

voices on the internet –all the answers, from everywhere, from everyone, all equal

and all present, and all available all the time.[72]

As Safiya Noble points out, the internet is created by people, citizens of material earth,

not infallible citizens of a perfect New World void of biases. The internet continues to be seen as

a neutral entity based on the collection of data through, "algorithmic, scientific, and

---

[72] David Lang, *the whisper opera,* iii.

mathematical solutions."[73] In searching on the internet, one enters into a space supposedly void

of sight. In her study on the Google search engine, Noble points out many myths about the

internet, namely the idea that search results indicate solely relative popularity. Search results are

indications of economic interest on the part of Google's paid advertisers, as well as an

intersection between "popular and commercial interests."[74] By collecting data on specific users

and projecting an audience base for particular sites, information on the internet is personalized in

an attempt to create a more perfect shopper. Users are monetized through their clicks, which are

measured by projections about who they are, gender, race, sexuality and class, based on the sites

they visit.

Noble, whose work on the internet centers on intersectional racial and gendered biases,

points out that search engine results are based on surprisingly few search words from users. As

Noble points out, the public is aware of the role the internet plays in everyday life, report relative

satisfaction with the results.[75] When enacting a search for "Black girls," hoping to search for an

activity to entertain her preteen stepdaughter and friends, Noble was astonished to find that the

search yielded HotBlackPussy.com as the first hit (in 2011). Since, as Noble points out, users

employ limited search terms, but that "the information retrieval systems are complex, and the

formulation of users' queries involves cognitive and emotional processes that are not necessarily

reflected in the system design."[76]

---

[73] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 37.

[74] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 37.

[75] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 35.

[76] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 37.

While common sense indicates that the top result would be the most relevant, applicable, or true result, based on past users' activities, as Noble comments, "much of the content surfaced in a web search in a commercial search engine is linked to paid advertising, which in part helps drive it to the top of the page rank."[77] With searchers associating Google search with the internet, and asking questions of it, it is especially concerning that "searchers are not typically clear about the distinctions between "real" information and advertising."[78] Furthermore, with Google facing backlash at the search results associated with some of their hits, they simply pushed the objectionable material to the bottom of the search query without indicating in the search results that this was happening. As Noble points out, this is problematic, as the search results, continued to present information as "factual and complete without mention of omission."[79] As Noble concludes, this behavior by Google indicates that despite continued presentation as objective and factual, search results are, in fact, "deeply contextual and easily manipulated."[80]

Google began predictive searching since 2008 with Autocomplete (known earlier as Google Suggest when it was an experimental feature beginning in 2004).[81] With this feature, users would begin a search in the search box, and related searches would appear in a box below.

---

[77] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 38.

[78] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,*38.

[79] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 45.

[80] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression,* 45.

[81] Danny Sullivan, "How Google Instant's Autocomplete Suggestions Work" *Search Engine Land,* April 6, 2011, https://searchengineland.com/how-google-instant-autocomplete-suggestions-work-62592.

In 2008, this search process was integrated with the Google home page, and several other search engines were using this style of searching.[82] Two years later, in 2010, Google rolled out Google Instant, which built on the search features by showing results as the user types.[83] These search results were based on popular searches, and varied by location and previously searched suggestions.[84] Google also mentions a "freshness layer" which allows for terms that spike in popularity to appear in suggestions alongside those which have more long term popularity, and personalized searches come before others.[85] Google indicates that if search suggestions violate their "autocomplete policies," users can make a report, initiating analysis from Google that may or may not result in the removal of the result.[86] As noted by Google, some predictions that go against the company's autocomplete policies are removed from results.[87] These disallowed

---

[82] Danny Sullivan, "Google.com Finally Gets Google Suggest Feature," *Search Engine Land*, August 25, 2008, https://searchengineland.com/googlecom-finally-gets-google-suggest-feature-14626.

[83] Matt McGee, "Google Instant Search: The Complete User's Guide," *Search Engine Land,* September 8, 2010, https://searchengineland.com/google-instant-complete-users-guide-50136.

[84] Sullivan, "Google Instant."

[85] Sullivan, "Google Instant."

[86] "Autocomplete policies," Google Search Help: Help Center, Google, accessed January 15, 2021, https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/7368877.

[87] "How Google Autocomplete Works in Search," The Keyword: Product Updates, Google, accessed January 15, 2021, https://blog.google/products/search/how-google-autocomplete-works-search/.

predictions include violent or gory predictions, sexually explicit, vulgar or profane predictions, hateful predictions against groups, sensitive and disparaging terms associated with named individuals, dangerous predictions, and elections related predictions.[88]

While Google doesn't explicitly state that predictions are influenced by ad revenue, it is known that Google "pushed for better algorithms to infer purchase intent from search keywords, because as a search engine company, it had ready access to a vast trove of search engine keyword data."[89] The idea behind Google search is that it saves the user time, but, as Megan Marrs, writing for an online advertising firm notes, this time saving gesture (supposedly 11 hours every second around the globe), serves as "further justification for keeping track of so many users' queries.[90] In 2021, as I am writing, Google no longer allows for disabling of the "suggest"

---

[88] Google, "Autocomplete Policies."

[89] Christian Sandvig, Kevin Hamilton, Karrie Karahalios, Cedric Langbort, "When the Algorith Itself is a Racist: Ethical Harm in the Basic Components of Software," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 4972-4990, http://social.cs.uiuc.edu/papers/pdfs/Sandvig-IJoC.pdf.

[90] Megan Marrs, "Predictive Search: Is This the Future or the End of Search?," The WordStream Blog, WordStream: Online Advertising Made Easy, last updated April 3, 2015, https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2013/06/24/predictive-search.

feature on Google.com, though users have developed work around solutions.[91] Therefore, the

suggestion feature has become synonymous with the Google search engine itself.

While Google search appears to offer a universalizing entry point into the multitudinous

minds of its users, the search engine suggest an ever narrowing subset of ideas that have been up

passively up-voted into popularity. As Noble indicates, search terms are used sparingly,

indicating haste, behavior conditioned in a user-base steeped in the habit of assisted searches.

This means that, theoretically, users could enter the search with one intention and change course

entirely, based on suggested results. This process whittles away difference as it conditions the

production of a set of normalized search terms. A search is typed in full enough times to generate

popularity, at which point it begins to show up as a suggested result. From there, it gains further

popularity, travelling up the suggested list, based on how many clicks it garners by users using

associated search terms. Furthermore, the Google search engine is also subject to corruption, as

evidenced by several famous "Google Bombings," wherein search terms lead to unrelated

websites for political or monetary means.

An ephemeral intimacy

[t]he whisper opera fits into others of Lang's compositions which favor live performance

as a means of deconstructing conventional modes of transmission in Western classical music. In

his program note for the piece, he references difficulty, community, and theatricality as key,

productive elements: "I have written pieces that are so hard that watching the musicians struggle

---

[91] Peter T, "How to Turn Off Predictive Search/Suggestion on Google.com site? I am Not

Asking Regarding Chrome," Community: Google Search Help, February 20, 2020,

"https://support.google.com/websearch/thread/29274711?hl=en.

to perform them becomes a central part of the experience; I have written concert pieces that have elaborate theatrical instructions; I have written pieces whose power comes from the emotionality of hearing them from inside a community of listeners."[92] Here, Lang adds to this list the term intimacy: "With *the whisper opera* I had another of these ideas —what if a piece were so quiet and so *intimate* and so personal to the performers that you needed to be right next them or you would hear almost nothing? A piece like this would have to be experienced live."[93]

Throughout *the whisper opera*, there are several aspects of live performance that call to mind intimate connection. As mentioned earlier, in *the whisper opera,* there is no sustained narrative, and performers recite lines from the text and quickly move on to another persona. This linear disjointedness combines with the sonic decay of the whisper to create a quickly evaporating atmosphere. Furthermore, the libretto cannot be projected or printed. That way, when the words are whispered, there is a sense that the words are secrets, fleeting, and that there are many things happening at once. Gentle rubs and taps on bass drums and soft breathing into a flute calls to mind the soft caress and breath of a lover. The cellist, wanting to hold his instrument as close as possible, forgoes an endpin stabbed into the ground, choosing instead to embrace it between his legs with as much bodily contact as possible. The size of the cello and the bass drums offers a particularly striking intimacy as the visual effect of the instruments belies their capabilities for greater decibels, and yet each is played with the utmost restraint and tenderness. Bass drums, suspended just above audiences' heads are rubbed to produce a low rumble, and a glockenspiel is gently tapped with fingertips.

---

[92] David Lang, *the whisper opera,* ii.

[93] David Lang, *the whisper opera,* ii; italics mine.

In terms of my own intimate connection to the work, with multiple events happening simultaneously, I felt more in touch with the connection between sight and sound. Rather than focus on a single visual focal point, I strained to connect whispers from adjacent quadrants with bodies barely visible through the gauzy curtains that divide the stage. Furthermore, as I suggest in the opening of this chapter, the audience, a small group of people, are seated very closely together.[94] In banquet chairs pushed together, there was potential for our clothes and bodies to touch. This is different from many opera hall settings, which feature arm rests—which introduce another kind of dynamic—that of who will dominate and claim the space. In this instance, I found that I was very aware of my proximity to others, and perhaps even more conscientious about not allowing my person or personal effects touch anyone.

Since neither listening or whispering directly engage the physical union of bodies, the whisper might be considered as an impersonal evocation of intimacy that calls to mind a very light, sensitive touch; one that involves no direct bodily contact, but instead, conjures memories of what intimate moments feel like, the closeness that is implied in the delivery of a whisper. The senses are engaged as a result of being whispered to: the sensation of breath on skin, the scent of bodies, and the warmth of almost touching skin. Insomuch as the whisper is akin to touch, *the whisper opera* suggests a politics of intimacy predicated on distance. Whispers presuppose the physical nearness of an intimate exchange as in the relationship between lovers, a child and

---

[94] Each quadrant has two cutouts for audience members on its inner ninety-degree angles. These cutouts contain chairs without armrests, meaning that there are no physical boundaries between row-mates. There is room for twelve people around each quadrant with seven on one side and five on the other. See Figure 1.1.

parent, in the telling of a secret."[95] However, according to Xinghua Li, despite their personal, specific connotations, whispers lack acoustic longevity, are less embodied, and are therefore, a less personal form of vocality:

> Many signifying elements of regular speech are either lost or changed. Voiced fricatives and stops lose their voicing. Nasals become faint. Regular tonalities of the speech mostly disappear […]. Vocal signatures of the speaker, such as age or accent, also become harder to detect. So do the paralinguistic cues like pitch or intonation, which communicate the speaker's emotions, moods or attitudes.[96]

Given the whisper's simultaneous presence/distance, and the physicality of sound waves that touch the body, its use in *the whisper opera* seems in line with Sara Ahmed's consideration of intimacy, which employs distance through "touch." "Being touched," Ahmed writes, "suggests becoming closer to each other in which *movement* across the division of self-other may take place, but a movement which does not abolish the division as such."[97] Ahmed proposes "touch" as an alternative to the idea of "getting closer," on which intimacy is normally supposed. "Getting closer," Ahmed writes, does not "abolish the distance which installs the very necessity

---

[95] Joceline Anderson, "Now You've Got the Shiveries: Affect, Intimacy, and the ASMR Whisper Community," *Television & New Media* 2015 Vol 26 (8): 683-700.

[96] Xinghua Li, "Whispering: the murmur of power in a lo-fi world," *Media, Culture, & Society* 33(1), 21.

[97] Sarah Ahmed, "Intimate Touches: Proximity and Distance in International Feminist Dialogues," *Oxford Literary Review* 19 no. 1/2 (1997): 28.

of the event of getting closer in the first place,"[98] In fact, she argues, the fantasies on which these spatial notions are predicated have an element of violence in their subsuming of the "other" with whom closeness is desired: "any fantasy of intimacy as an over-coming of distance would make impossible an intimate relation: it would violate an-other by assuming her place."[99] Distance, she argues, is not "reducible to physical space; it also implies the impossibility of simply being-together or being-as-one."[100] In arguing for the distance that touch allows, Ahmed suggests that touch, in fact, provides a politics of 'getting closer' to others that will enable the distance and differences between us, to move the political terrain in which it is possible to speak and hear."[101]

In the case of *the whisper opera*, coming in contact with an(other) seems to spark a connection based in ephemerality. Knowing that the moment will pass is part and parcel of the experience, rather than the act of weaving an "aspirational narrative about oneself and another that will turn out in a specific way."[102] In arguing for an intimacy based on touch, Ahmed follows Julia Kristeva who "calls for a politics of touch in relation to approaching otherness: 'Let us not seek to solidify, to turn the otherness of the foreigner into a thing. Let us merely touch it,

---

[98] Ahmed, "Intimate Touches," 21.

[99] Ahmed, "Intimate Touches," 21.

[100] Ahmed, "Intimate Touches," 21.

[101] Ahmed, "Intimate Touches," 31.

[102] Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 281.

brush by it, without giving it a permanent structure'"[103] Answering Kristeva, Ahmed suggests in touch, the "movement towards" is "already *a movement away.*"[104]

Given its connection to physical touch (Dolar) and its lack of vocality (Li), the whisper illustrates an ideal sense of vocality with which to engage an(other). Not only does the whisper presuppose listening and vulnerability, but the whisper doesn't loudly announce ideas about oneself or the other; it reveals a desire to connect, using "the "sparest of signs and gestures." [105] In all senses, it moves forward and away, thus answering Ahmed's concern that intimacy not be built upon fantasies of assuming the place of an-other. One doesn't "drone on" in a whisper; using it, the whisperer communicates only that which needs to be said. Sonically, it also leaves room for an(other), decaying quickly no matter the acoustic.

In *the whisper opera,* the delivery of the whisper and of instrumental sound, which can be likened to a whisper, are also rooted in this move forward and away. By virtue of the whisper, the performers disassociate themselves from identification with any one persona and disallow audience connection even to a linear musical narrative, despite demanding closer attention.[106] This effect is magnified by the libretto, which is viscerally immediate in its seemingly random execution—despite knowing how sentences begin, the audience never knows how sentences will

---

[103] Quoted in Ahmed, "Intimate Touches," 28.

[104] Ahmed, "Intimate Touches," 28; italics mine.

[105] Berlant, "Intimacy," 281.

[106] Fechner's Law identifies "a perfect balancing mechanism of the human perceptive system that compensates for weak stimulus with increased sensitivity and strong stimulus with reduced effects" quoted in Li, "Whispering: the murmur of power in a lo-fi world," 21.

end. There is no way to predict how the overlap of sounds will occur, and what meaning will

take shape as a result. As soon as a performer connects with an audience member, the whisper,

the sound, recedes, and so, too, any identification with a particular performer vanishes. Not only

is there is no way to know how this piece sounds prior to coming into the space, engagement

with the "other" is left completely up to chance. Audience members don't know if sentences are

meant for them, or if the text reveals a shard of truth about the performer.

Re-thinking proximity

     the whisper opera seems to suggest that, through connection to individual audience

members, there is a chance for real change to occur in the concert hall and beyond. However,

while these displays of intimacy are meant to connect with each individual audience member, the

forced connection that takes place is distinctly un-intimate. Throughout *the whisper opera,*

audience members are hailed as individuals through connection rooted in proximity (quietly

produced sound aimed at audience members, eye contact between performers and audience

members), but not a touch that invites an acknowledgement of "an-other," as defined by Ahmed

as a key practice of intimacy. In the lived experience of *the whisper opera*, I believe that

surveillance masquerades as intimacy; while Lang successfully employs intimate connection

between performers and their instruments, deconstructing the limiting relationship of musician to

score, the connection between performers and audience members does not, in fact, create a

community of intimately listening audience members.

     When my partner and I attend Western classical music concerts together (we are both

professional musicians in this tradition), we often know a piece being performed and share

intimacies surrounding the performance, connecting across the arm rests, touching each other

when observing something we like, an interpretation or a gesture of a symphonic work that is part of the canonic repertoire. Our touch, our whispers, and our broken gaze feel like transgressions; of the armrests, the quiet of the hall, the demand that gazes be cast forward. The fact that we are in close proximity to strangers heightens such transgressions. In the setting of *the whisper opera,* these interactions (the whisper, connecting gazes) seem to structure the event, and yet, the surveillance of the event seems to preclude any engagement in this form of intimacy. With audience members positioned facing each other, lateral intimacy in a darkened space afforded audience members in conventional opera settings is absent. Anthony Tomassini, in a review for the *New York Times*, writes that several audience members had their eyes closed for long stretches of the performance and "blissed out for whole stretches." This, he writes immediately before his own observation that he became "exasperated" when performers looked down at him and whispered things he couldn't quite understand. His choice of adjective makes me wonder, based on my own experiences, if people were truly relaxed, or if they were relieving themselves of intrusive human contact. Isn't that what we do, after all, when we put in headphones and close our eyes or bury ourselves in our phones when riding the subway?

Instead, as the performance pulled at the conventions of concert-going rules, I felt the awkwardness at receiving the affect of the performers since I felt that I was very much on display. Recalling Anthony Tommasini's experience of frustration, I wondered if his frustration was rooted in a similar feeling about the need to pay attention, and inability to seek a personal retreat. Rather than being "blissed out," as Tomassini describes those audience members who closed their eyes, I suspect those audience members may have been retreating from a barrage of unwanted, overwhelming attention. Typically, in a state of repose, one doesn't feel like one is being watched. Occasionally, in a classical music concert, I'll nod off, but the idea that I would

fall asleep or close my eyes, in *the whisper opera*, seems to me, considerably less plausible. Far from a relaxing, soothing experience with chills running down my spine, I felt extreme discomfort and self-consciousness.

[t]he whisper opera demands that the audience stay in one place, and that they be attentive to the goings on of the stage. Instead of a reciprocal interchange, the audience was positioned as voyeurs: the audience was able to witness intimacy, almost able to participate, but not quite. The audience's close proximity to the stage presents the opportunity for close proximity to performers, an effect that is magnified by strong, intentional eye contact, which, in many cultures is read as aggressive and even violent. Throughout the performance, there is ambiguity as to the terms of interpersonal interchange; it's not clear whether it it's appropriate to disengage or not. If I chose to look away, I had to do so knowing that it was fully possible that I would miss a potential interaction with a performer.

Because of the strictures of concert-going decorum, audience members can't whisper back to performers, or to each other. To appear disengaged or to have a side conversation would have been to appear out of step with the performance, to make oneself vulnerable in a way that would interrupt rather than invite. Unlike the typical concert hall setting, audience members at *the whisper opera* weren't able to disappear into the masses. As such, the audience is not a liberated subject. Due to the strictures of performance, they are subjected to the experience of the piece. Although there are ways of resisting through intentional sensory deprivation such as closing one's eyes, the Romantic-era master/servant relationship between musicians and composer wherein the musician is the servant of the composer seems in this case only to have been remapped onto the performers and the audience respectively. So, while the opera's use of

whisper seems to gesture toward a similar politics of touch as suggested by Ahmed, these are unilateral connections with uncomfortable results.

To play so quietly is technically and emotionally challenging for performers, too. Finding proper balance of projection and clarity, as the medium of the whisper is not often used in performance settings. Claire Chase, flutist of the ensemble says: "This piece…asks us to do an incredibly vulnerable thing, which is to barely play our instruments and to barely speak, and do it for an hour!"[107] By simultaneously "disappearing," in terms of sound and musical production, performers expose vulnerability and invite the audience to invest in an engagement with them in the present moment. The discomfort that Chase expresses has a couple of layers. First, the instrument or voice might fail to produce sound. The instruments, as well as the training the performers have cultivated for years, do not invite such quiet playing, and to attempt to locate the lower levels of sound invite the potential for ugly, scratchy sounds to crop up as individuals struggle to use less breath, less bow, less pressure.

It is difficult, both physically and emotionally, to play at low volumes. Rather than feeling the connection of a chamber ensemble or orchestra, or the support of a soloist by a chorus and orchestra, it's every person for themselves. Musicians are certainly listening to one another, but a cohesive, group product isn't the goal of the performance; sounds bump into one another, wrap around each other, but not with an intentional and careful touch. The performers seem mostly focused on delivering their parts and making connections with the audience members.

---

[107] Marin Sander Holzman, Jim Findlay, Claire Chase, Joshua Rubin and Tony Arnold, "David Lang's The Whisper Opera," filmed in 2016 for Mount Tremper Arts, accessed June 12, 2017, https://vimeo.com/136341963.

The effect is of individuals in a shared space. This feeling not only travels across the divide of

the stage to audience, but is invited in the one to one interactions between audience members and

performers.

Conclusion

Writing about the UN International Women's conference, Ahmed is thinking about how

to successfully leverage intimacy to create material coalitions across borders and languages. In

the international conference, Ahmed notes a tendency to bring women together in close

proximity as the sum and total of intimate connection. She notes a need for recognition of

difference in order to overcome the kind of universalist narratives on which intimacy is

predicated:

> This process involves an unlearning of a desire to represent; to speak for the
>
> other, often in the form of protecting the other's rights. But that unlearning does
>
> not stop there (as with cultural relativism). But taking from the differences
>
> between us, the necessity of listening and reading more closely, but being open to
>
> the surprise of the other's future, I may, as yet, hear an-other speaking. I may be
>
> touched by what I hear even if?, or indeed because, what I hear remains a secret
>
> that cannot be translated.[108]

This practice harnesses touching as a means of combatting universalizing narratives that are as

much a part of international feminism as they are of Western classical music. Ahmed suggests a

move to "re-think how feminism can render 'cultural difference and distance' a point of entry for

---

[108] Ahmed, "Intimate Touches," 43

dialog rather than a problem. She suggests a politics of touch rather than forced closeness rooted in universalism, which supposes sameness; that everyone can enter the conversation equally.

Lang employs the internet in service of live performance, giving voice to semi-hidden thoughts from the internet. While these methods allow Lang to chip away at his overarching concern that the effects of this storehouse have on live musical performance, they are problematic (for reasons already described). They do not employ the kinds of gestures that Lang appears to desire. Instead, they underline a kind of universalist narrative that is routinely employed in performances of Western classical music. There are online communities where internet users create intimacy, but these are spaces of conversation, rather than confessional exposures. When these questions are performed, there isn't a mutual exchange. Lang has preselected sections of this information that the audience is subjected to; they are no longer part of the curatorial process as in Google search.

The experience of *the whisper opera* left me wanting more. I heard about this piece from friends, who described the work and their own expectations for it---close proximity to the performers, who whispered content to audience members. Trying to imagine what was "intimate" about this opera, my mind went to the only other performance experience I knew that blended personal, intimate, space between performer and participant: a haunted house. As I imagined the excited-yet-terrified-heightened-sensory-feel of this kind of performance, I wasn't sure how I would potentially feel about *the whisper opera* performers being "intimate" with me. I wondered, what did "intimate" mean? Were the performers going to touch the audience? Deliberately make them uncomfortable? Not knowing the answers to any of my questions, my friends promised to disclose details of the opera upon their return, while urging me to see it and simultaneously knowing I might never have the chance.

Past experience indicated to me that performed intimacy would be somehow uncomfortable. Given that I was prepared for terror, I found myself somewhat underwhelmed. Jeremy Hirsch, in a review for the opera blog, *Schmopera,* also felt that the opera left him feeling disappointed. He comments on his impression of the opera, which he feels suffers from intimacy issues:

> This production generally suffered from a misconception of theatrical intimacy. Bass drums hung over the audience. At each drum, an instrumentalist perched, and, while whispering earnestly and barely tapping the drum head with a finger, locked eyes with the individuals below her. Intimacy requires warmth, friendship, affinity, but this was a confrontation neither party desired. The performer seemed like the prisoner of a kinky taskmaster who demands she whisper his angsty poetry to unwitting strangers as a bizarre act of forced seduction. Her mouth moved obediently while her eyes said, "help."[109]

Hirsch, a vocalist, also indicates his general disappointment with the fact that Tony Arnold's talents as a singer in the new music community are being limited to the whisper. He is also unconvinced by the general affect and delivery of the whisper to deliver theatrical intimacy, indicating reciprocity. Where I argue that the piece loosens the grip of the composer over the musicians, Hirsch reads into the affect an affect of domination; a forced intimacy that neither audience member or performer desire.

---

[109] Jeremy Hirsch, "David Lang's The Whisper Opera Has Intimacy Issues," *Schmopera*, February 25, 2018, https://www.schmopera.com/david-langs-the-whisper-opera-has-intimacy-issues/.

Like Hirsch, I was underwhelmed by the effect of the performance on me. Expectations demanded that the piece produce an affect. I feel ambivalent about this piece. On the one hand, I can appreciate its transgressions, which attempt to resist some of the normative, coercive practices I described at the beginning of this chapter. On the other hand, it didn't live up to my expectations about what a performance of theatrical intimacy might be. I was prepared for contact with performers, to be scared, or somehow invaded. I was keen to catch any crumb, and eagerly awaited contact with the performers. When this did happen, I felt unfulfilled, and uncomfortable. In order to change the way I listen, the piece would need to teach me something about how to listen, and to make me think differently about the community in which I listen. The piece didn't teach me how to communicate with those who I shared the experience with, and it didn't invite enough discomfort for us to have a shared experience created through the piece. We left as we appeared, individuals attending a new music concert.

CHAPTER TWO

Material Realities: Dancing Decreation in *La Passion de Simone*

This chapter examines Simone Weil's practice of "decreation" in the eighth station of composer Kaija Saariaho's oratorio, *La Passion de Simone*, to explore how the performance of a racialized body shifts the understanding of this work and the idea of transcendence in Western classical music, with a specific focus on its articulations in operatic performance. I engage the American premiere of the chamber version of the piece at the Ojai Music Festival directed by Peter Sellars on June 9, 2016. Saariaho's use of spectral compositional methods to represent Weil's decreation challenges ideals and musical explorations of disembodiment and transcendence in Western classical music. The Ojai production was explicitly staged to reflect on race relations in the era of Black Lives Matter. Sellars and soprano Julia Bullock further evoke questions of embodiment in relation to Weil's meditation on decreation, a practice of detachment from body and persona meant to create intimate connection with God. Thus, this 2016 performance offers a lens through which to view not only Weil's transcendence, but also its connections to and departures from narratives of disembodied transcendence in that can lead to sexist and racist practices that reverberate in performances of Western classical music today.

Composer Kaija Saariaho's oratorio, *La Passion de Simone* (2006), in some places subtitled as "musical journey in fifteen stations," is a piece for soprano solo, chorus and

orchestra.[110] The oratorio, which is just over one hour long, is divided into fifteen movements

called stations, as in "stations of the cross," with each station lasting between three and six

minutes in length. In the oratorio, Simone Weil, early twentieth century philosopher, mystic, and

political activist, is substituted for Jesus Christ, whose life she revered and imitated. During the

second world war, Weil died of self-starvation in solidarity with children denied milk in German

occupied France. This martyrized Weil, who is celebrated in the production for her apophatic

mysticism and social activism.

  La Passion de Simone is the product of a collaboration between composer Kaija Saariaho,

librettist Amin Maalouf, and director Peter Sellars, all of whom conceived the work together.

The piece brings together Saariaho's and Sellars' appreciation for Simone Weil. Both have

returned to Weil throughout their lives; Saariaho for Weil's "striving for abstract (mathematical)

and spiritual-intellectual goals," and Sellars for her "social awareness and political activities."[111]

Maalouf came to Weil with fresh eyes, and "brought out the gaping discrepancy between her

philosophy and her life, showing the fate of the frail human being amongst great ideas."[112]

  The piece exists in two forms: the original version for soprano narrator, full orchestra,

and chorus (2006), and a chamber version (2013) which condenses the orchestra and chorus to

---

[110] Anne Midgette, "Music Review: 'La Passion De Simone' An Earnest Meditation on a Life

Devoted to Human Suffering," *New York Times,* November 29, 2006,

https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/29/arts/music/29simo.html.

[111] Kaija Saariaho, "Programme Note: *La Passion de Simone* (2006)," accessed May 27,

2021, https://saariaho.org/works/la-passion-de-simone/.

[112] Saariaho, "Programme Note."

one instrument and one voice on each part.[113] Aside from the chamber orchestra and four-person

chorus, in the chamber version of the piece, the soprano narrator delivers a spoken line of text

from Weil's publication *Gravity and Grace* that punctuates every other movement or so. This is

a significant departure from the symphonic version of the oratorio, in which these spoken

interjections are delivered by a recorded and technologically-altered woman's voice. In the

chamber version performed at the Ojai Music Festival in 2016, the recorded voice occurred just

once, in the eighth station, in a duet with the soprano narrator, played by Bullock.

For this performance of *La Passion de Simone,* Julia Bullock, a mixed race (Black and

white) soprano (I will use the term "mixed" hereafter), and the oratorio's main performer, stood

barefooted and dressed in loose-fitting, casual black clothing, on top of a raised platform, placed

in the middle of the Ojai Music Festival's main stage, the Libbey Bowl.[114] This performance

venue is an outdoor amphitheater that seats 973 audience members, and accommodates between

---

[113] Susan McClary, *The Passions of Peter Sellars: Staging the Music* (Ann Arbor: University

of Michigan Press, 2019), 128. As Susan McClary notes, several the stations relate directly to

those in the Catholic rite: station 2 references the taking up of the cross, station 4 considers the

relationship of the martyr to parents, station 6 considers facial images, station 13 recounts the

deaths, and station 15 anticipates resurrection.

[114] Julia Bullock, Thomas Hampson, Anthony McGill, "Thursdays with Thomas: Soprano

Julia Bullock and Clarinetist Anthony McGill," IDAGIO Music Streaming, Powered by Zoom,

Streamed live on Jun 4, 2020, YouTube video, 1:25,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUEbOR9LpU4. Bullock prefers not to use the term "race"

when self-describing, since it further reifies the construct of "race" itself.

200-300 more on picnic blankets on a lawn that overlooks the Bowl.[115] The chamber orchestra

flanked the platform on the right, and the four chorus members stood along its left edge. There

were two screens on either side of the amphitheater where subtitles were projected for the

audience. The only prop—aside from a copy of Weil's *Gravity and Grace* carried by Bullock—

was a light box designed by Ben Zamora that stood at the back of the platform. Throughout the

performance, Bullock engaged with the lightbox, which was a few feet taller than she, but

narrower than her arm span. Bullock positioned herself in relation to the lightbox: in addition to

illuminating her in its hues, which changed to reflect shifts in tone scripted by the libretto,

Bullock used it as a prop to disappear behind, as a backlight to stand in front of, and a flash to be

blinded by, to name but a few theatrical moments.

As in the tradition of the Passion, in *La Passion de Simone,* Weil is martyrized as

simultaneously fragile (human) and superhuman (God-like). This musical martyrization of Weil

is underlined by calling the work an oratorio, thus identifying Weil as a religious figure, and by

dividing the work into stations, a nod to the tradition of Stations of the Cross paintings depicting

Jesus Christ's path to crucifixion along Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem. Mirroring the tradition's

physical journey from painting to painting, the oratorio's stations provide snapshots of specific,

powerful moments in Weil's life, providing an immersive, yet nonlinear teleology of events.

Thus, the goal of the oratorio is not necessarily to "get to know" Weil through a linear

progression of her life, which might suppose her (staged) presence, but to meditate on the *idea* of

her. In fifteen episodic movements (stations of the cross) a soprano narrator ponders Weil's life

---

[115] "Home," Venue Information, Libbey Bowl, accessed May 27, 2021,

https://libbeybowl.org/.

as a mystic and activist, celebrating her sacrifices while also trying to come to terms with how Weil's choices must have affected her family.[116] Within a single station, the narrator often switches between conflicting viewpoints, reflecting on Weil as an older (wise) sister and younger (naïve) sister. This ambivalence destabilizes the identity of the soprano narrator, who seems simultaneously to assume the role of Weil's actual sibling, and a modern-day reader looking to Weil as a figurative sister in religion and politics. The ambiguous identity of the soprano narrator is magnified in the chamber version of the piece performed at the 2016 Ojai Music Festival, which includes punctuations of Bullock's verbal citations of Weil throughout. In these moments, Bullock seems to incarnate Weil through spoken invocation of her philosophical texts.

This chapter focuses on the Ojai performance of the only station where this ambivalence of identity—where Bullock is simultaneously modern-day reader, Weil, figurative and literal sister—evaporates. As already mentioned, in the eighth station of the chamber version, the soprano narrator speaks a line of Weil's text in unison with the spoken vocal track. With the addition of this vocal recording—a technologically-altered female voice (the identity of the speaker is unclear)—Weil is evoked separately from Bullock, and for the first time, Bullock's voice sounds definitively separate from Weil's. Bullock abandons her previous approach to weighing Weil's actions, instead, singing a single line from Weil's *Gravity and Grace* in unison with a spoken recording of the same text, in which the woman's voice has been altered by technology to draw out the use of breath and lengthen various syllables for emphasis. This technological alteration of a recording of a spoken woman's voice calls to mind the *suggestion* of

---

[116] The oratorio doesn't refer to them by name, but her parents were affluent Jewish immigrants to Paris, and she was sister to well-known mathematician André Weil.

Weil's physical presence while underlining her simultaneous absence. The separation of Bullock from Weil is magnified in that, for the first time, Bullock does not read one of these texts. Rather, she sings a line in unison with a spoken vocal recording, which seems to stage Weil's theory of decreation, hinted at throughout the oratorio but not otherwise explored until this moment. As such, the addition of this technologized voice presents Weil in her disembodied ideal in which she separates herself from body and persona to unite herself with God.

La Passion de Simone

To clearly set up the specific station in which this separation between Weil and Bullock occurs, I will sketch the music and choreography of the 2016 premiere at the Ojai Music Festival, focusing on specific moments in which Bullock and Weil are figuratively intertwined. Saariaho's choice in the chamber version of the piece to have the soprano narrator read Weil's aphorisms (instead of the vocal recording, which plays *only* in the 8th station) sets up merging of Weil and Bullock that is magnified by Peter Sellars' choreography. Specifically, in this performance of the chamber version of the work, there is a scripting/choreographic focus on evoking Weil's *materiality* through Bullock. Throughout the work, Bullock's embodied gestures reflect those individuals who would have known Weil and leave the viewer wondering about the nature of the soprano narrator's own relationship to Weil. In performing these various roles, the soprano narrator destabilizes any one positionality.

Throughout the oratorio, the soprano narrator reflects on Weil in four main ways: contemplative music and choreography which indicate the narrator's multiple subject voices, verbal reflection on the emotional cost of Weil's philosophies on Weil and those around her, verbal recounting and re-enactment of her Marxist politics through highly embodied music and

gesture, and in the eighth station, exploration of the experience of Weil's philosophy of decreation through song and movement. In the first four stations, which fall into the first of these categories, the soprano narrator lifts Weil up as a martyr and mourns the cost of Weil's activism on her loved ones. In these stations, Bullock assumes both the role of loved one and contemporary reader. As narrator, Bullock approaches each of these positions with ambivalence—she is sympathetic for Weil's loved ones, critical of Weil for hurting them and herself, and admiring of Weil's sacrifices in support of her political and religious views. This multilayered response is reflected in the choreography and music. In one gesture, Bullock holds Weil's book aloft, as if it were a bible, and in the next, she paces in thought, and the music of these three stations suggests unrest through dissonant harmonies.

The fifth and sixth stations relate to Weil's factory work, through which she attempts to remedy the "lameness" of her hands by aligning herself with workers' causes and joining the workforce.[117] The mechanical sounds and choreography in the fifth station are markedly different from Bullock's conflicting views and contemplation in the previous four stations. In the fifth station, Bullock embodies Weil's labor, enacting angular, machine-like choreography to align with the imitative music. With the line, "You laid your cross on the ground; you left the factory,/With the feeling of having been scarred for life,/Branded, as slaves are branded,"

---

[117] From the second station: "These torments that never left/Your schoolgirl's head nor your child's hands/Your lame hands that made you/Ashamed of your body to the point of tears." Kaija Saariaho, *La Passion de Simone: For Soprano Solo, Chorus and Chamber Orchestra,* libretto by Amin Maalouf, (London: Chester, 2006-2013) 13-25.

Bullock lifts an arm in a salute of Black power, seeming to connect Weil's worker's politics with the Black Lives Matter movement.

The sixth station begins without a break from the fifth, carrying over the mechanical music from the previous station, but it centers on a description of Weil's worker's identification card, a stark image reproduced on the two supertitle screens. The sixth station follows the fifth in its focus on text painting, likening her worker's card to the identification photos of WWII deportees. The monotonous, militaristic music of this station seems musically to portray the coldness of this "charcoal and ivory image," which was projected onto the screens when her identification number, "*A-neuf-six-six-trois-zéro-Weil*," was referenced. This number recurred as a refrain, always with rapid-fire delivery, which Susan McClary notes calls to mind a Nazi firing squad, or tattoo needles entering the skin.[118] Each of these stations centers Weil's politics and its relationship to her body, which is then embodied by Bullock in performance. For much of this station, Bullock stands in front of the lightbox, which emits a bright white light. At various points, Bullock seems to be caught in a flash, and uses her arms to frame herself, as in Weil's image.

The seventh station returns to the opening stations' more contemplative affect in music and choreography and reflects on Weil's dampened spirit, recounting her loss of faith in the "myths and promises" of human society and distrust in parties, nations, and churches after leaving the factory. Since Weil now regarded these as "nothing but prisons for the spirit," the soprano narrator asks, "What did you believe in, then, Simone, my elder sister?/Only in that flame…" The music in this station moves away from text painting with a bass drum climax,

---

[118] McClary, *The Passions of Peter Sellars,* 131.

followed by a brief silence, in which the audience can hear Bullock's breathing.[119] This break

initiates a return to the reader's contemplation of Weil, this time with a focus on Weil's

apophatic mysticism. A solo oboe plays a sorrowful tune as the soprano references "light and

gravity," and "that trembling flame/That enlightens us, purifies us, /And raises us towards our

freedom, /When the gravity of earth drags us down/Towards greed, and towards servitude."

Reciting these terms, Bullock stands on one foot, arm aloft, embodying the figurative

juxtaposition between earth and heaven suggested by Weil's writings on gravity and grace. This

specific reference to greed and servitude, and the movement away from the gravity it supposes,

is then emphasized in the phrase that begins the eighth station: "God withdraws/So as not to be

loved/As a treasure is loved by a miser." Here I argue that the soprano narrator enacts this

withdrawal in a way that resonates with Weil's theory of decreation. This music is markedly

different from that so far explored in the rest of the piece. It's slow and contemplative, and casts

heightened focus on Bullock's choreography (I will examine this station in more depth later in

the chapter).

While the eighth station seems to allow a full immersion in this theory of decreation, the

9th and 10th stations seem committed to a return appraisal of Weil's actions. The eleventh station

takes this further, making the claim that though Weil decried war, she enacted it on herself—her

thirst for sacrifice, in fact, led her to the ultimate sacrifice. The twelfth station introduces Weil's

self-starvation from the point of view of the chorus as Julia Bullock lies on the ground, enacting

---

[119] It's unclear whether Bullock was mic'd. It's possible that the breathing sounds were only

audible to the audience of the recorded video since her breathing could have been picked up by

the production team.

Weil's death, while the four-person chorus deliver lines about Weil withdrawing herself from the world. The thirteenth station compares Weil to Alexander the Great and Jesus Christ. Like Alexander, Weil refused to drink because her people weren't eating, and Weil sought to imitate Christ. The fourteenth station announces Weil's death, framing it as a sacrifice for humanity, and positioning her as the figure through whom evil is destroyed. Bullock speaks Weil's line, "Every evil aroused in the world travels from head to head until it falls upon a perfectly pure victim who is subjected to all the suffering and by whom evil is ultimately destroyed." In this station, as Bullock holds Weil's face (featured on the cover of *Gravity and Grace*) next to her own, McClary argues for the first separation between Bullock and Weil: "She sings of the world's loss of Weil to the book cover, then holds the book with its picture of Weil next to her own face, cementing their union even if now separate beings."[120] In the final station, Weil is further marked as a martyr with the text, "By your death, everything that you had said/Was transformed into a testament." It points, in the end, to her resurrection, martyrizing her further, but at the same time referencing the abandonment of those left on earth, "where innocents tremble."

Eighth Station

For Weil, the experience of music is one in which she "rises above the flesh to listen and find 'perfect joy' in the 'unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words.'"[121] One way to read her account of "rising above the flesh" is in terms of her practice of self-annihilation; what

---

[120] McClary, *The Passions of Peter Sellars,* 131.

[121] Sharon Cameron, "The Practice of Attention: Simone Weil's Performance of Impersonality," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 216.

Weil calls "decreation." In this process, Weil attempts to separate personality from being (and body) to ascend to a more perfect union with God.[122] Entering this state requires strict attention and will. As Sharon Cameron describes in "The Practice of Attention: Simone Weil's Performance of Impersonality," decreation is enacted through a practice of attention on a specific point, usually to separate the self from the experience of pain, and furthermore, the self, or personality from being.[123] It is from this attentive state that "objects are relinquished;" elements of the material world fade into the distance in favor of a nebulously described, transcendent, out-of-body communion with God.[124] In other words, ridding the experience of "being" creates figurative space for grace to guide one's direction in the world, rather than gravity.

The idea of Weil's disappearance is introduced early in the oratorio and is the crux of this weighing of Weil's ideas. Her decision to "dissolve, to vanish," though fully explored in the eighth station, is presented throughout the oratorio as simultaneously something that elevates her to martyrdom, and also something that makes her foolish, a "schoolgirl" ashamed of her soft hands. The concept of decreation is first introduced in the third station, as the soprano notes: "To be no more than a gaze, as if/She who was looking was nothing, as if/She wanted to melt into what she gazed upon. /To melt, to dissolve, to vanish. To exist only thru [sic] her attention to the world. /To its sighs, to its whispers, /To its silence."[125] This self-negation is a theme throughout Weil's work and resurfaces throughout the oratorio.

---

[122] Cameron, "The Practice of Attention," 218.

[123] Cameron, "The Practice of Attention," 216-217.

[124] Cameron, "The Practice of Attention," 216.

[125] Saariaho, "Programme Note."

Interestingly, Saariaho's means of staging decreation is through an emphasis on embodiment. As I will discuss in detail, the introduction to grace is through the embodied referent, breath, suggesting that the pathway to understanding Weil's theory is tied to physicality. As the speech is technologically stretched, it calls to mind the speaker's mouth, tongue and lips, and the closeness of a whisper. Furthermore, slowing the speech moves it past the communication of language. It takes on a musical form as breath becomes akin to a musical gesture and calls to mind the physical movements that inspire them.

This sense of musical physicality is most fully explored in the eight station, which I argue sets Weil's decreation in two ways: first, by musically setting Weil's recession and second, by creating a weightless, suspended feeling evocative of disembodied "grace." The station opens with one line of Weil's text on detachment from her posthumously published notebook, *Gravity and Grace*: "God withdraws/So as not to be loved/As a treasure is loved by a miser." In its first and only utterance, this line is delivered in a just-out-of-sync unison by the soprano narrator and electronics (recorded voice). After this duet, the movement explores an instrumental version of the soprano's eight-bar melody. In the instrumental exploration of the soprano's phrase, Weil exists only in terms of memory, offering the audience an experience of her theory through contemplation: The audience interfaces directly with the orchestral music, experiencing firsthand what Saariaho imagines to be the peak of Weil's disappearance of self and subsequent union with God.

The text in this station comes from a chapter in *Gravity and Grace,* titled "Detachment," which outlines the need to distance oneself from the material world to convene fully with God. From my understanding of Weil's theories, which are interconnected, to enact this kind of detachment, one would need to employ decreation, the practice of detachment as it relates to

one's relationship with oneself. From a physical standpoint, decreation suggests a feeling of suspension, a lack of the experience of gravity normatively tied to embodiment.

Weil's recession begins first with her evocation. Throughout the oratorio, electronic vocal recordings are used to share sections of Weil's writing, but in this station, the vocal track's spoken text has been technologically slowed and exaggerated to deliver an emphasis on the shape the breath takes in forming this phrase. The use of emphasized mouth noises, breath, plosives, and fricatives, evoke a hyper-embodied impression of Weil that poignantly lacks a physical body. This adds to an overall feeling of Weil's spiritual, immaterial presence, meaningful physical absence, and fleeting sonic/spiritual presence.[126] Furthermore, this representation underlines decreation as an embodied practice. It challenges ideas about transcendence as a disembodied practice in which Weil "rises above [the] wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words."[127]

---

[126] Michele Chion refers to this disembodied phenomenon as the "acousmatic voice" or *asousmêtre* in Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Because Bullock has her own sung lines, she resists identification with this voice, refusing Chion's practice of "deacousmatization," or identification of this disembodied voice with a corporeal form.

[127] Simone Weil, "Letter IV: Spiritual Autobiography," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), 68.

Weil is further evoked by Julia Bullock's engagement with the vocal track. As she sings with it, Bullock seems to be energized by the vocal track's expulsions of air. This reaction to the physicality in the recording, though one-sided, gives the vocal track the impression of being vitally charged in its ability to inspire, further humanizing the track and, by extension, the disembodied Weil. Furthermore, Bullock's physical presence (to be analyzed in depth anon) magnifies Weil's material absence as it emphasizes Weil's subsequent meaningful (and martyrized) recession from the piece.

The vocal interaction between Bullock and the vocal track introduces a feeling of suspension evocative of Weil's concept of "grace" that is then explored instrumentally throughout the rest of the station. The music in this station seems softer, more cushioned, and more exploratory than the rest of the piece. The opening two bars of the station begin with glassy percussive sounds and effervescent chimes. Gradually, the chimes fade, revealing a soft bed of strings, which grow rich with vocal-like timbre and swell to meet the duet between the soprano and spoken vocal recording. Throughout, there is a feeling of suspension that seems to emanate from the action of an expulsion of breath. For instance, as the recorded voice enters, through the use of electronics, recorded speech is altered to add a hyper-emphasis on the plosive articulation of "*dieu*," the first word of the phrase, which provides a feeling of suspension and subsequent forward motion. A firm "d" is immediately softened by the expulsion of breath, which, in its slowed state, transforms the rhythm of inhalation and exhalation into a musical gesture. This musical breathing is emphasized by strings that follow the duet like a halo of sound, spotlighting the vocal track, and then Bullock's vocal line, mimicking exhalation with sympathetic sigh motives.

This phenomenon of suspension and physical movement continues throughout the station. After the eight-bar unison, human voices recede, and various soprano instruments take up the refrain of the soprano with similar sigh motives, and the rest of the piece explores mutations of this soprano theme explored through various instrumental textures. In these sections, the soprano instruments seem to lead the way consistently, however, the aural focus is constantly moving between instruments. Changes are seamless, and through a manipulation of sonic color, instruments seem to blend into one another. This musical exploration of decreation and subsequent grace invites the audience member to become immersed in a feeling of suspension that calls to mind supposed physical transcendence.

Saariaho's transgressive remaking of transcendence

In spectral music, composers manipulate a sound's component spectra, allowing them to explore anamorphosis, or "change in" as opposed to metamorphosis or "change between."[128] This focus on anamorphosis means that spectral composition operates according to "a central belief that music is ultimately sound evolving in time."[129] This is a move away from formal

---

[128] Michael Rofe, "Capturing Time and Giving it Form: *Nymphéa"* in *Kaija Saariaho: Visions, Narratives, Dialogues,* eds. Tim Howell, Jon Hargreaves, Michael Rofe (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011), 89.

[129] Joshua Fineberg, "Spectral Music," *Contemporary Music Review* 19, part 2, (2000): 2.

musical structures based on pitch and tonal harmony and toward structures which use texture and timbre to "[cause] minute changes in listener perception, which are tracked globally."[130]

Spectralism can be traced back to a variety of locations in Europe in the mid-1970s, though it's worth noting that its composers often refute the term. Perhaps this is because its composers don't engage a "system" of composition, per se. Where these composers align, is in their use of the harmonic series as a compositional device. Spectral music relies on analysis of a sound/tone's component frequencies, often made available by using computer analysis. In "instrumental additive synthesis" (composition based on timbral analysis), each assigned partial is replaced by a complex sound, and frequencies (called partials) are orchestrated accorded to harmonicity (consonance with the fundamental or lowest, most audible part of the sound) or inharmonicity (dissonance with the fundamental). Spectralism often echoes tonal music's pull toward a key center, even as it departs from its modulation through different keys. Partials that are farther away from the fundamental have a greater degree of inharmonicity, and string, wind, breath, or electronic noise is often introduced to emphasize an increasing inharmonic state. Working with a fundamental's resultant spectra, spectral composers expand beyond the limited available moves of tonal harmony, or even twelve-tone composition.

Spectralists proffer a compositional approach to data that is different from those used by modernists including those using twelve-tone composition. In spectralism, there is a desire to make "process" audible—a reaction against modernist styles of mathematical composition which rely on rigorous mathematical models that could be studied, but that aren't audible to the ear.

---

[130] Kari E. Besharse, "The Role of Texture in French Spectral Music" (DMA diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009), 2.

Saariaho disparagingly calls the latter "paper music," choosing instead to compose based on those partials that appeal most to her ear. This tension and release forms "a new sense of harmonic direction based on structural parallelisms without the use of a hierarchical system."[131]

As Susan McClary discusses in "The Lure of the Sublime: Revisiting the Modernist Project," Saariaho's harmonic direction marks a return to beauty and engagement of the audience. Whereas the Modernists were concerned with numbers and systems, Saariaho, using similar data, takes an approach to composition rooted in sensory perception. Using her ear, rather than graphs and diagrams, Saariaho composes music meant to envelop the listener in music that acts according to familiar concepts (such as tension and release) but operates outside of the hierarchical confines of tonal harmony.[132] This method of composition references embodiment to engage the listener, and when employed in service of recreating "transcendence," as in the eighth station of *La Passion de Simone*, there is a marked difference from dominant models of musical transcendence informed by ideals of music's self-sufficiency and non-referentiality, a school of thought which has shaped and continues to inform attitudes about Western classical music in academia and in concert programming and performance practice.

Broadly speaking, this suite of ideas and ideals, as famously espoused by Romanic-era music critics, Eduard Hanslick and E.T.A Hoffman, eschews engagement with referential

---

[131] François Rose, "Introduction to the Pitch Organization of French Spectral Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 34, no. 2 (1996): 36.

[132] Susan McClary, "The Lure of the Sublime: Revisiting the Modernist Project" in *Transformations of Musical Modernism*, eds. Erling E. Guldbrandsen and Julian Johnson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21–35.

musical content, discouraging affective understandings of music and arguing for a transcendence of embodied and emotional connection to music that clears the path for a transcendent musical realm. Hoffman identifies within this music a spiritual experience that transcends the embodied realm, famously describing absolute music as "an unknown kingdom, a world having nothing in common with the external sensual world which surrounds him and in which he leaves behind him all definite feelings in order to abandon himself to an inexpressible longing."[133]

Such sentiments idealize wordless, instrumental music through the lens of material transcendence and continue to shape the subsequent study, analysis, and performance of musical works. In academia, "absolute" works continue to be venerated through the analytical paradigms developed by Heinrich Schenker, who created a system of analysis tailored to the German musical works of the "common practice period," including Johann Sebastian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Johannes Brahms. This system of analysis (still taught in music schools) is a German-nationalist project that locates "genius" within works that adhere to its reductionist agenda and disparages those that fall outside of the parameters of tonal harmony. Those works that fit this paradigm are then praised by Schenkerians for having both organic and transcendental qualities. Such attitudes not only shape what "counts" in academia, they have direct effects on concert programming and have shaped a canon of regularly performed works.

---

[133] E. T. A. Hoffmann and Arthur Ware Locke, "Beethoven's Instrumental Music: Translated from E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Kreisleriana* with an Introductory Note by Arthur Ware Locke," *The Musical Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (January 1917), 127.

The contemporary popularity of Schenkerian analysis indicates sustained interest in celebrating the non-referential in music. In fact, music theorist Bryan J. Parkhurst identifies Schenker's insistence that music signifies beyond "the music itself" as a direct extension of Hanslickian absolutism.[134] Parkhurst traces a connection between Schenker's reductive analysis and the particular cognitive posture Hanslick calls "pure intuition," a Kantian-inflected state in which sensibilities are isolated from "material interests," such as corporeal and affective engagement through which Hanslick "obliges listeners to get themselves into a particular cognitive posture with respect to what they hear."[135]

In the context of this chapter, Parkhurst's reading of what Hanslick terms "material interest" is worth parsing. "Interest" Parkhurst notes, is intended by Hanslick as a double entendre, referring to listeners' material (corporeal, affective) *interest* in being moved by sounds, and in also identifying what is deemed artistically "interesting."[136] While "Material," Parkhurst notes, is a triple entendre, referring to the materiality of bodies, the vibrations of matter, and musical subject matter or content.[137] For his own part, Hanslick maintains that "music in fact has no material," arguing for a departure from material tendencies applied to it in listening through "pure intuition,' which Parkhurst notes is "a form of abstraction that provides an antidote to

---

[134] Bryan J. Parkhurst, "Making a Virtue of Necessity: Schenker and Kantian Teleology," *Journal of Music Theory* 61:1 (April 2017): 74.

[135] Parkhurst, "Making a Virtue of Necessity," 77.

[136] Parkhurst, "Making a Virtue of Necessity," 78.

[137] Parkhurst, "Making a Virtue of Necessity," 78.

listeners' misbegotten interest and their unreflective ties to materiality (in all senses):… These kinds of departments of experience are to be stricken from the phenomenological record."[138]

In "good music" bodies are "transcended," and for that reason, performances of it must also eschew embodiment. The idea of a "pure" music without external references has a problematic relationship to the labor and visibility of the human bodies involved in making that music. In an environment where women and people of color are marked with excess, and whiteness is unmarked, traditions of disembodiment are weighted in favor white males. Susan McClary's exploration of gendered narrative in relation to these so-called "absolute" works in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* and Philip Ewell's experiences in #Schenkergate of summer 2020 are excellent examples of the ways in which the specter of white maleness hangs over Western classical music. [139] These Romantic works continue to loom large and inform ideas about the institution from conservatories to concert halls.

---

[138] Parkhurst, "Making a Virtue of Necessity," 78-79.

[139] See Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). In November 2019, music theorist Philip Ewell delivered a plenary talk at the annual meeting of the Society for Music Theory (SMT) titled, "Music Theory's White Racial Frame," which directly linked Heinrich Schenker's white supremacy to his approach to music analysis. The talk drew on a longer paper, which has since been published in Music Theory Online. See Philip Ewell, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (September 2020). Following Ewell's plenary at SMT, for which he received a standing ovation, the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies* (University of North Texas) issued a call for papers responding to Ewell's talk. The issue, which was not peer reviewed,

Using referents from the "real world" in combination with sounds produced by instruments, Saariaho works with a model of musical expectation that is related to, yet different from expectations of tension and release that have been coded with white masculinity by Susan McClary.[140] Saariaho is a member of the second wave of Spectralism known for conflating timbre, texture and harmony. In her words, "harmony […] provides the impetus for movement, whilst timbre constitutes the matter which follows this movement."[141] However, Saariaho offers an exploration of harmony distinct from tonal harmony: in the latter, tension is produced according to expectations within a fixed set of notes. Instead, for Saariaho, tension and release is a product of "extended techniques" that create a difference between "smooth" and "grainy" sound. She terms this the "sound/noise axis." Some of her most popular techniques for producing more textured sound are human breath (which she uses to render breath musical in *La Passion de*

---

featured articles in which authors espoused racist thought and issued personal attacks on Ewell, who was not contacted about contributing to the journal, nor asked for a draft of his article manuscript, then in progress (Colleen Flaherty, "Whose Music Theory," *Inside Higher Ed.*, August 7, 2020). #Schenkergate refers to the online conversation about anti-blackness in Western classical music that was sparked in response to what Ewell refers to as the "latent white supremacy" in Western classical music laid bare by the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies* and its contributors. See Flaherty, "Whose Music Theory."

[140] McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*; Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet: Carmen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992);

[141] Kaija Saariaho, "Timbre and Harmony: Interpolations of Timbral Structures" Contemporary Music Review 2, no. 1 (1987): 94.

Simone), vocal articulation through wind instruments, and various extended techniques involving the bow on stringed instruments. Practically, this constitutes movement between noisier sounds, which are partials farther away from the fundamental that produce tension, and pure or smooth sounds, which are closer to the fundamental, and suggest embodied release. These sounds also draw on gestures inherent in recorded sounds often present in her compositions, such as breath or ocean waves.

Unlike listening to "absolute music," in which listeners are expected to transcend materiality, Saariaho's music references the body as it suggests transcendence from it. This effect, which I have described as meditative and dreamlike, is a result of a departure from fundamental listening practices within tonal harmony. In spectral music, it is impossible to determine the initial sound from which the piece is derived. The ear is guided by what might be described as shifting clouds of sound, rather than large-scale harmonic motion. This departure from goal-oriented listening can be further read as related to Weil's goal to separate personality from being. In the absence of tonal harmony's organizing principles, the piece lacks linear development of Weil. Instead, the slow, large-scale motions fundamental to Saariaho's compositions provide a poignant means for representing the ideal relationship with God as outlined by Weil, adding to the ambiguous sense of Weil as she is seen through shifting mirrors of a multi-layered, ambiguous narrator. Weil's practice of decreative transcendence in which she "rises above the flesh" shares much in common with Hanslick's practice of "pure intuition," yet Saariaho's evocation of it poignantly locates the body as central to its musical representation. Through the exploration of another kind of transcendence, mapped out through a non-linear, *explicitly* embodied way, Saariaho paves the way for a performance which further deconstructs notions of white, masculine transcendence. Kaija Saariaho's piece allows for a slowly shifting

sense of unfurling movement that is suggestive of embodiment and is separate from existing

musical representations of disembodiment. Saariaho achieves a kind of dreamlike effect of

disembodiment.

The wordless quality of the eighth station, and its cultivated meditative quality closely

relate to Saariaho's ideas about both the body and dreaming, a space where possibilities for

varied experiences of embodiment abound. While Saariaho herself has not made this connection

with reference to *La Passion de Simone*, "she has spoken elsewhere of her strong belief, rooted

in Freudian principles, that a dream often tries to communicate its central latent dream thoughts

by presenting them repeatedly, in different guises. As she has stated, 'When [in a dream] there

are some really important things, then the thing comes again and again, tries to get the message

across to you, but always in a different way.'"[142] As a child, Saariaho notes that she was very

"sensitive." For instance, "There was some music that frightened me, and some that I liked. We

had an old-fashioned radio at home, so I listened to music on that. But I also heard music when I

was a girl that didn't come from a radio." This music came from her imagination, though she

says, "I imagined that it came from my pillow. My mother remembered me asking her to turn the

---

[142] Kaija Saariaho, "Radio Interview with Saariaho," interview by Olli Koskelin, YLE Radio

1, September 7, 2002, audio, quoted in Anni Oskala, "Dreams about Music, Music About

Dreams," in *Kaija Saariaho: Visions, Narratives, Dialogues,* eds. Tim Howell, Jon Hargreaves,

Michael Rofe (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011), 45.

pillow off at night when I couldn't sleep; to turn off the music that I imagined inside my head."[143]

This dream-like reality described by Saariaho seems to reflect the transcendence Saariaho composes in the eighth station. Located in the gravitational grey zone between sleep and wakefulness, this music, which references embodiment and its absence, also seems to have been a part of Saariaho's musical experience from a young age, as evident in her description of music as related to dreaming and sleep.

Formal description of Bullock's performance

Saariaho's music offers an alternative way to *experience and embody* transcendence that challenges the whiteness that often shrouds instrumental representations of contemplation. The listener is invited into a slowly unfurling, meditative experience of Weil's distant intimacy with God. However, since Weil is absent, it is no longer tied to her, but instead experienced by the dancing Julia Bullock. In the eighth station, Bullock's dancing is juxtaposed with the effect of weightlessness created by the slowly changing, large-scale spectral shifts fundamental to Saariaho's compositions.

In her music, Saariaho calls on explicitly embodied metaphors as she musically creates Weil's transcendence. This sets the stage for Bullock's performance to deconstruct racialized assumptions of transcendence; both with orchestral "absolute" music – which this moment affectively references – and with the operatic requirement that non-white divas "transcend" race,

---

[143] Tom Service, "A Guide to Kaija Saariaho's Music," *The Guardian,* July 9, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/music/tomserviceblog/2012/jul/09/kaija-saariaho-contemporary-music-guide.

something often overlooked due to the demographics of operatic vocal performance, which has historically featured white performers primarily. This performance by Bullock restages/remakes tropes of transcendence tied to white disembodiment.

Until this station, Bullock's performance has been preoccupied with representations of Weil, which has led to a staging not unlike those explored in many colorblind castings. As Bullock puts herself in Weil's shoes in the stations leading up to the eighth, Weil is not exactly "gone, but not forgotten;" since Weil is evoked as a spiritual figure, she looms large throughout the performance. Bullock walks in Weil's shoes, *becoming* her as she does so, but never fully embodying her. This effect is due to the previously discussed fluidity regarding the narrator's identity, but also because Bullock cannot fully become Weil, as the bodies of women of color connote a material history of representation.

As Weil recedes, through a focus on Bullock's dancing body, there is a reversal of the notion of decreation as a practice of disembodiment. Bullock moves from addressing Weil with arms up (figure 2.1), to reading (figure 2.2) to contemplation (figure 2. 3), to crying (figure 2.4), to searching (figure 2.5), to realization (figure 2.6), to creation (figure 2.7) to nourishing herself (figure 2.8) to Black power (figure 2.9), to her own occupation of Christ on the cross (figure 2.10). This choreographic sequence holds a particular weight for Bullock as a woman of color in the Western operatic tradition, given its history of exclusionary practices and continued employment of colorblind casting. Bullock's performance complicates decreation, meant to be a kind of disembodied transcendence, to proclaim through dance, her presence in a musical world that continually reinscribes the absence of women of color. The fact that the video cuts away before Bullock fully extends her fist, and cuts back to her as she lowers her arm, hand open,

raises questions of resistance to the white gaze by women of color in Western classical and high

art performance settings (see figures 2.11, 2.12, 2.13).

 Figure 2.2 Image: Arms up. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Figure 3.2 Image: Reading. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Figure 2.4 Image: Contemplation. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Figure 2.5 Image: Crying. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Figure 2.6 Image: Searching. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Figure 2.7 Image: Realization. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Figure 2.8 Image: Creation. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Figure 2.9 Image: Self-nourishment. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Figure 2.10 Image: Black power. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Figure 2.11 Image: Occupation of Christ on the cross. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Figure 2.12 Image: Preparing to raise Black power fist. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Figure 2.13 Image: Extending Black power fist. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Figure 2.14 Image: Cutting away from Black power fist. Still from Ojai Music Festival, "Ojai Music Festival 2016: Thursday, June 9 at Passion de Simone at 8pm," YouTube video, 1:10:32, June 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1auH7AtE7Fg.

Weil's transcendence in this oratorio represents a feminist intervention into the stations of the cross narrative, especially given Saariaho's direct reference to the body, which has historically been excluded from conversations of transcendence within and beyond Western classical music. That said, when performed by a white woman, the oratorio may in some senses continue Western classical music performance as an idealized, disembodied state, since disembodiment is regularly afforded white women singers of Western classical music. When performing a repertoire with a set of performance practices meant for white bodies, white performers may "disappear" into the performance as they take on various roles. Women of color, on the other hand, are expected to *transcend* embodiment, but because of a lack of roles which feature performers of color, are not afforded the same privilege, however much opera's practices of colorblind casting may seem to demand it. In this station, something different happens. Using electronics to emphasize spoken text, Weil appears in her own transcended way, and then leaves. The introductory eight bar duet between the vocal recording and the soprano narrator finally

identifies Bullock and Weil as separate. Without Weil, but with her memory present, Bullock commands the stage in this sonic landscape of decreation, enacting transcendence as a mixed soprano who demands to be seen, and not just heard. Bullock engages transcendence in an embodied fashion, engaging her politics on the ground, with Black power fists and self-care. In another possible reading of this moment, Bullock engages this moment of decreative transcendence as a moment away from demands of the operatic gaze, since this moment is separate from Weil.

While Bullock's performance of resistance doesn't figure into the music or libretto, through danced gesture, Bullock draws on embodiment to voice a politics of change. Since race isn't explicitly discussed in the libretto, Bullock's performance operates in the domain of what James C. Scott calls the "hidden" transcript, which takes place "beyond direct observation by powerholders, as opposed to the "public" transcript or the "open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate."[144] In this instance, the domain of the public transcript is the music and libretto, and the content of the hidden transcript takes place within those elements that can't be written down, specifically, the choreography. While the choreography is by director Peter Sellars, a white male, which might suggest that the white male gaze continues to script the performance, Bullock's performance draws attention to the farce of transcendence as a disembodied, racially neutral phenomenon and invites further explorations of the embodied experiences of people of color in operatic performance.

---

[144] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 4.

Kneeling on the stage of the Libbey Bowl at the Ojai Music Festival, Bullock has her arms and face raised to the heavens. In exact unison with the sound of glass chimes, crotales and celesta, a light box behind Bullock has turned from orange to purple, illuminating Bullock's brown skin in its glow. The percussion sounds decay, revealing a soft cushion of violin, viola, and cello sounds before the entry of a recorded, closely mic'd voice. In a deliberately out of sync unison, Bullock, arms and face still raised upward, begins to sing with this voice. Together, they deliver the aforementioned phrase from the "Detachment" chapter of Weil's *Gravity and Grace:* "God withdraws/So as not to be loved/As a treasure is loved by a miser."

After this eerie, out of sync duet between vocal track and soprano has ended, Bullock lowers her arms, picks up the nearby copy of Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, and begins to read, silently. Then, standing up, Bullock faces the musicians, lost in thought, and puts her hands on her face, indicating that she is crying. Looking again at the orchestra, Bullock puts her hand on her chest, walking backward, lost in thought. After a time, she looks around, seemingly with fresh eyes. She folds her hands at her diaphragm and looks up before kneeling again at the front of the stage. From the ground, she scoops something up, an invisible ball, and lifts it up, dropping it from various heights, and eventually indicating its liquid state as she drinks it from her palms. She follows the path of this imaginary liquid down her throat and chest. Afterwards, she lifts a fist in the air, but the camera cuts to the orchestra just before her arm is fully extended. When we see her again, she is lowering her arm, which now has an open hand. From this position, Bullock steps backward, toward the light box, and finally stretches her arms out to her sides as though she were Christ on the cross.

Social contexts

In a short essay from 1963, Susan Sontag notes the perpetual interest in Simone Weil, suggesting that fascination with Weil comes from a brush with sickness and extremity that her writings allow. Sontag suggests that Weil and other figures Sontag calls "the bigots, the hysterics, the destroyers of the self" provide much needed feedback on the "fearful polite time in which we live."[145] In our current moment, she writes, there is a belief in the "reality of sickness" despite the fact that we are a society consumed with mental and physical health.[146] "It is hardly possible," she writes, "to give credence to ideas uttered in the impersonal tones of sanity," the realm of "compromise, evasion, [lies]."[147] The "sickness" that Weil, in particular, represents through her life and writings provides readers with a "deepening of the sense of reality, a widening of the imagination."[148]

Both Sellars and Sontag seem to reach a similar conclusion about the power of Weil to offer a productive sense of difficulty. Whereas for Sontag it is that we need "unwell" aesthetics to feel alive, for Sellars, contemplation of Weil can be transformative for audiences. At Sellars' initiation, in formal and informal preconcert lectures, one of which is documented on Facebook, audience members were primed to view this performance as tied to the Black Lives Matter

---

[145] Susan Sontag, "Simone Weil," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Laurel, 1966), 58.

[146] Sontag, "Simone Weil," 58.

[147] Sontag, "Simone Weil," 58.

[148] Sontag, "Simone Weil," 59.

movement.[149] At these promotional events, Sellars also spoke to audience members about Bullock's performance in the Saariaho with the reimagining of Josephine Baker songs that Bullock performed later in the festival in which Bullock brought attention to the simultaneous triumphs and struggles facing Baker, civil rights activist and entertainer.

Putting Weil at the heart of a narrative which features human struggle is in line with Peter Sellars' fascination with the oratorio genre as a tool for speaking to a contemporary audience.[150] In a promotional video for the American premiere of *La Passion de Simone* at the Ojai Music Festival on June 9, 2016, Sellars recounts the ability of this oratorio and those by Bach to speak

___

[149] Peter Sellars, "Peter Sellars and La Passion de Simone by Kaija Saariaho," YouTube video, 2:25, March 10, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=To4Ent0XBOA&t=45s.

[150] See McClary, *The Passions of Peter Sellars* for more on Peter Sellars' staging of passions. It has been a pattern for Sellars to choose works he feels proffer didacticism through engagement. Notably, he has recently directed the Johann Sebastian Bach *St. Matthew Passion* with the Berlin Philharmonic, a work Sellars compared to the Saariaho in its ability to speak to "spiritual crisis" by helping a community through it. In staging these and other (Haydn as well as Bach) religious works, Sellars keeps with the idea that these pieces are didactic and transformative. As in *La Passion de Simone,* his productions often employ sparse staging, creating a quality of unencumbered intimacy with the performer by foregrounding human interaction and intimacy through physical interaction and movement.

to a "spiritual crisis," and to help a community to move through it.[151] Without specifically explaining this "spiritual crisis," he alludes in various interviews to the importance of this piece to speak to the current political moment—including Black Lives Matter Movement and the tumultuous state of politics at that time (June 2016).[152] In another promotional video on Facebook, again, Sellars alludes to crisis as he talks about the "stupidity" of "what is going on in the world." At the time when this video was created, widespread attention to racial violence by the police against Black people was again made visible because of the Black Lives Matter movement (then three years strong).

In this Facebook video, Sellars introduces the "young, African American soprano, Julia Bullock, who is the new star of classical music." According to Sellars, when this "young African American woman takes on the life of Simone Weil, you have the Black Lives Matter movement meeting the school of ethical culture and a Jewish culture in the beginning of the century in France and in New York and you have this astonishing 'where are we now.'" Sellars spends the rest of the video remarking about the ability of this performance to bring the performance into the contemporary moment, noting the "content rich" quality of the performance which will "shock" people. He also mentions that the performance is an "astonishing vision of a universe of light and of seeking light in a dark time," pinpointing the ability of Bullock's performance to offer a means of understanding how to move forward in times of crisis.

---

[151] Peter Sellars, "Peter Sellars On La Passion de Simone," YouTube video, June 14, 2016, 0:57, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FT5cmIsb24Y.

[152] Sellars, "Peter Sellars and La Passion de Simone by Kaija Saariaho."

This is a concept that Bullock references in her recent video for the Ojai Music Festival from May 12, 2020. Speaking about the piece relative to the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, Julia Bullock, addressing the Ojai Music Festival's Facebook audience, places importance on the piece due to its ability to invite its audiences to reflect on our "responsibilities toward each other," in times of "turmoil," and as well to consider how these moments "help us or encourage us to transform."[153]

Transcendence and race

So what does it mean for Bullock to "take on" Simone Weil, as Sellars puts it? This phrasing belies the duality that Bullock navigates as she puts herself in Weil's shoes, trying out Weil's actions for herself. Throughout the oratorio, Bullock calls out to Weil, younger/older sister, questioning the cost of her decisions on those around her, "taking on" Weil as she puts herself in Weil's shoes, weighing her decisions. This affect is heightened in choreography as Bullock reads sections from Weil's *Gravity and Grace,* enacts Weil's work at the factory, and even more so as she lies on the ground, enacting Weil's death. The fact that these moments aren't explicitly written into the libretto marks Weil's otherworldly presence, and simultaneous physical absence.

Weil seems almost to be present in these moments, but as I have shown, in the eighth station, Weil recedes, and Bullock remains. I argue that in this station, Bullock is able to

---

[153] Julia Bullock, "Julia Bullock Introduces Us to *La Passion de Simone*…," Facebook video, 1:48, March 12, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/ojaifestival/videos/julia-bullock-introduces-us-to-kaija-saariahos-la-passion-de-simone-a-work-that-/240774880669749/.

resonate, through Weil's transcendent theory of absence, her own presence as a mixed soprano (a rare experience in the Western classical music tradition). So, in what ways does Bullock's performance challenge broadly, this "transcendence" that frames, in one way or another, the performance and reception of Western classical music? To understand Bullock's transgressions as a woman of color performing in Western classical music, it is necessary to focus on the structures of the spectacle economy reproduced on the operatic stage. Film theorist Richard Dyer, a key figure in the study of celebrity, has argued that "stars articulate what it is to be human in society: that is, they express the particular notion that we hold of the "individual."[154] As such, a study of the production of the diva figure is necessary to understand modes of identification in operatic performance – both of spectators to performers, and performers to their roles. Most notably, the figure of the diva is useful in understanding the complex web of racial formation that helps to structure the meanings of female operatic performance.

When race is not written into the score, divas of color are meant to transcend it; the notion of "the music itself" reigns above performance as race is meant to be absent from the audience's view of the performance. The complications that arise from colorblind casting play out in the career of diva Jessye Norman. In a 1983 interview Norman gave just prior to making her debut at the Metropolitan, Norman reflected on those African American sopranos who came before her: "…I'm grateful to Marian Anderson, Dorothy Maynor, Leontyne Price and all the rest for having paved the way. They have made it possible for me to say, 'I will sing French Opera' or 'I will sing German opera,' instead of being told 'You will sing "Porgy and Bess."'" The separation between voice and other bodily markers mean that performers of any race are supposed to be

---

[154] Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, (London: Routledge, 2004) 7.

able to perform any role. And yet, the classical voice is racialized, just as the popular voice is. Nina Eidsheim writes about this phenomenon in her book, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. In an anecdote that opens the chapter, "Phantom Genealogy: Sonic Blackness and the American Operatic Timbre," a diva reflects on a performance by Marian Anderson (who had made history in 1955 as the first African American singer to perform at the Metropolitan Opera). This unnamed diva praises Anderson's voice, but remarks that she is singing the wrong kinds of roles…that Anderson should play Bess, "just Bess."[155]

Whether this was based on Anderson's skin color or voice or a combination of both isn't clear. To be a Black or mixed person on stage is to represent ideas of what Blackness represents to society at a given time. Bodies on stage signify within the larger realm in which the performance takes shape.[156] As Naomi André writes, "the history behind black-white racial relationships continues to inform how blackness and whiteness are read and interpreted by

---

[155] Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 61.

[156] Eidsheim explores how ideas about the voice are tied to larger ideas about the Black body – ideas of strength, durability, richness, etc. When listening to the Black soprano, Blackness may register to an audience through her voice (or it might be imagined). It might not be registered at all. Eidsheim notes that Simon Estes mentions that Black spirituals influenced his approach to his classical singing voice, for instance.

audiences."[157] This reality is echoed in Norman's comments, in which she appreciates her skin color: "I do not consider my blackness a problem. I think it looks rather nice."[158] In the same interview, she remarks on critics' comments that her stature is too large to be believable in her various roles. In response to these comments, Norman remarks that "I think there are little gnomes out there who decide what singers should look like! In this country people have an image of what is beautiful - and beautiful hardly ever goes above a size 9. Well, I've been with me all my life, and I like me! If anybody has a problem with that, I say it's their problem. Look, I've always been big, and the best antidote is to have a good self-image - which I have. Of course, I'm dieting all the time, just like everyone else with a weight problem."[159] In her New York Times obituary, her stature was referenced again, "At her best Ms. Norman commanded the stage with her formidable presence and glorious singing, though she particularly favored mythic roles that lent themselves to her earth-goddess look, like Alceste, Medea, Phaedra, Cassandra and Dido (both in Purcell's "Dido and Aeneas" and Berlioz's "Les Troyens")."

Such remarks point to the ways in which Norman's body was racialized, disrupting or distracting some viewers from the transcendence of embodiment they expected in specific, white roles. These racially inflected comments about Norman emphasize her size—the ideal white

---

[157] Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 14-15.

[158] John Gruen, "An American Soprano Adds the Met to Her Roster," *New York Times,* September 18, 1983, herhttps://www.nytimes.com/1983/09/18/arts/an-american-soprano-adds-the-met-to-her-roster.html.

[159] Gruen, "An American Soprano Adds the Met to Her Roster."

body is slight and fragile— as opposed to overt references to her skin color, as impediments to the believability of her roles. The reviewer's reference to her "earth-goddess look" reminds the reader that Norman didn't transcend embodiment—that her body demanded focus –drawing attention away from the role. As such, the combination of her size and race (and her defiance of and laughter in the face of such comments) mark Norman with the necessary mark of the diva's "fatal flaw."

The diva is so made because of her story, which is scripted by the drama of her relative inability to adhere to conceptions of what Alexander calls the "good girl," which can be tied to white, demure, chaste femininity—Bizet's Micaela instead of Carmen, the *femme fatale*. With this struggle, the diva challenges her public, who eagerly observe her, disparaging her or celebrating her triumphs:

> With predictable hypocrisy, dominant cultures and narratives are thrilled by the diva's difference while frequently maligning or punishing her for not being a conforming good girl. Along the road to perdition, however, the diva makes herself a force to be reckoned with, so that even in defeat there is something gloriously iconoclastic about the "bitch."[160]

For the diva's transgressions of the feminine norm, she is either loved or hated, and her struggles present not only an opportunity for her to be vilified, but an opportunity for her to overcome them and shine. As Alexander Doty notes, "the diva won't ever be the unalloyed gold standard for feminism…divas offer the world a compelling brass standard that has plenty to say

---

[160] Alexander Doty, "Introduction: There's Something about Mary," *Camera Obscura* 65, Vol. 22, Number 2 (2007): 2-3.

to women, queer men, blacks, Latinos, and other marginalized groups about the costs and the rewards that can come when you decide both to live a conspicuous public life within white patriarchy and to try and live that life on your own terms."[161] This is the case with Norman; as a racialized subject, she was marked as "earthly," read: too embodied. These racist attitudes stem, in part, from continuing to center the performance of operatic works that villainize non-white subjectivities. As such, within the opera house, vocalists of color are read as outsiders while their performances serve as reminders that they are simultaneously living life "on their own terms."[162]

In an operatic world still dominated by white women, Bullock's performance, as a mixed soprano, joins her in a lineage of African American sopranos. Bullock's performance follows a long history of Black divas on the operatic stage such as Jessye Norman, whose commanding diva presence is cultivated intertextually (as with all performances of divas). Performances such as Norman's circulate outside of the operatic sphere, due to her intertextuality, creating a celebrity body that registers outside of or next to the opera house. This circulation then accompanies her upon the stage, too. She is *Jessye Norman,* diva, at the same time that she is the white woman she portrays on stage. Such diva readings of Norman are rooted in a fascination with Norman based on her persona, which, for opera divas, is tied up with vocal cords, which signal "inner truth" about the singer's life.[163]

---

[161] Doty, "Introduction," 2-3.

[162] Doty, "Introduction," 2-3.

[163] Bullock is in the beginning of her career, which she is developing through the deconstruction of the racialized divide between jazz and classical music. She blended these two genres at the Ojai Music Festival in 2016. In addition to her performance of *La Passion de*

Dusky Diva

As Wayne Koestenbaum points out in *The Queen's Throat: Opera*, *Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*, the diva draws on race in her construction, regularly employing themes of racial otherness to both "[express] opera culture's insistence on the dark nature of the diva, as well as [underscore], in a problematic masquerade, the white diva's separation from the women of color she portrays."[164] So what happens when a woman of color steps into the diva role? Writing about the "dusky" mulata diva, cousin to the figure of the classic (white) operatic diva, Hiram Perez draws on the feminized, Spanish form of "mulatto" the catchall term used irrespective of gender in US contexts to describe the intermixing of white and Black "blood." Perez' use of the feminized, Spanish term intends to call to mind the inherently transnational, hemispheric feminization of this figure, "marking the inflections of gender and sexuality that have colored (quite literally, at times, with blackface) her representation."[165] Understanding Bullock in the role-type of the dusky diva throws into relief a second layer of the performance in

---

Simone at the Bullock performed a collection of songs based on Josephine Baker composed by Tyshawn Sorey, who blends classical and jazz traditions. Eventually I would like to explore the performance of these two works alongside one another since through her cross-cultural, cross-genre career, Bullock is constructing for herself a new kind of divadom that merits further exploration.

[164] Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 110.

[165] Hiram Perez, "Two or Three Spectacular Mulatas and the Queer Pleasures of Overidentification," *Camera Obscura* 67, Volume 23, Number 1 (2008): 117.

which Bullock is pulled to enact her mixed race – an embodiment of a white woman on the one hand, and a performance of a mixed woman expected to resonate outside of the confines of stage with a long history of whitewashing and colorblind casting on the other.

Perez calls on the dusky diva to understand the recurrent figure of the "tragic" mulatto in film and television whose doomed fortune results from "that ruinous one drop of black blood." With the figure of the dusky diva (his musical figure is Mariah Carey), Perez shows how this Black blood, which results in the dusky diva's "'unstable constitution,' may lay the trap for her demise, but it also sets the stage for her emancipation."[166] The figure of the dusky diva is likewise useful in understanding an intertextual reading of *La Passion de Simone* by Julia Bullock, a mixed soprano. The figure of the diva is born of this racially complex web: racialized valances of this performance in the context of trends in operatic performance that fetishize the voice at the expense of the body. This is the case in Bullock's performance, in which she channels Weil through the mixed soprano's own body.

Conclusion

As in all constructions of the diva, In *La Passion de Simone,* divadom is constructed through citation. In this oratorio, Bullock, a mixed diva, cites Simone Weil, who, despite her unearthly leanings, might be considered a diva in her own right. This doubling presents tensions between transcendence and racial embodiment as staged by *La Passion de Simone*. For Alexander Doty, training as a diva worshipper began in the Catholic church and what he refers to

---

[166] Hiram Perez, "Two or Three Spectacular Mulatas," 114.

as "the Cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary" (BVM).[167] The BVM, he argues, is transgressive. Though she is virginal, she is transgressive: she had a child fathered by a being who was neither human nor her husband. Celebration of her rooted in iconic representations (statues, laminated cards, rosaries, candles, etc.) and famous "comeback appearances" places her at the center of a kind of diva worship. For Doty, the BVM laid the foundation for the adoration that led him to worship certain female celebrities whose careers and public images "involved negotiations between convention and transgression."[168]

Like the Blessed Virgin Mary, Simone Weil is an unlikely candidate for divadom—her commitments to God and the unearthly (immaterial) distance her drastically from the earthy figure of the *femme fatale*. However, much like the BVM, Weil transcends the physical realm. Weil's posthumous evocation and celebrated absence (as seen in *La Passion de Simone*) further hails her as a diva. Furthermore, like the diva, Weil is known to audiences through citational performance—*La Passion de Simone* is a comeback performance. Her immaterial exploration makes for the most poignant in a long line of citations: Weil has been primarily studied retrospectively, through her notebooks, which further adds to the idea of a disembodied connection with her. Her development as a "difficult" figure who is idolized, but also critiqued, calls to mind the diva's requisite flaws. Identification with her, as we see from Sellars and Saariaho, is divergent. Whereas Saariaho focused on Weil's religious theories, Sellars was interested in her embodied approach to politics. People take from Weil what they need—a sign of the kind of synecdochic deconstruction referenced earlier.

---

[167] Doty, "Introduction: There's Something about Mary," 1.

[168] Doty, "Introduction: There's Something about Mary," 2.

However, as this chapter has shown, though Weil is hailed as a diva, her goal of transcending embodiment—shared by the musical diva—is unsuccessful; the visual/aural experience of the audience member inextricably ties the diva's "transcendent" voice to race. Given that Bullock physicalizes ideas about the white diva through her performance, she performs the challenges of colorblind casting as experienced by such divas as Jessye Norman, who because of her race, is unable to fully transcend into Weil. That Weil appears *through* Bullock also serves to deconstruct colorblind casting as the audience glimpses the seams of this ongoing practice. The focus of the oratorio on citation – of Weil, of those she loved – of Bullock as contemporary reader – casts this reference of Weil as *performance* as opposed to what Erving Goffman would term a "sincere" presentation of self.[169]

Engaging citational practice and diva performance, through her own poignant reading of decreation, Bullock presents a way of engaging with a white dominant script on her own terms. Bullock's positionality relative to Weil, the disembodied white diva, draws attention to the structures which, in other operatic contexts, represent performers of color inside the purview of whiteness. As such, Bullock's performance is visible as a *construction*, something she engages with, reflects on, and eventually steps away from. Through her performance, Bullock presents new possibilities for transcendent performance that reflect an embodied engagement with transcendence.

---

[169] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959), 18.

CHAPTER THREE

Feminist Compositional Practices in Kate Soper's *Cipher*

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the potential within composer/performer Kate Soper's *Cipher*, for

soprano and violin, to deconstruct normative, hierarchical structures of musical composition and

performance. *Cipher* is a piece in four movements that closes composer/performer Kate Soper's

Ipsa Dixit (2011)*,* an evening-length chamber music/theater work composed of six difference

pieces. Throughout the work, but particularly in *Cipher*, Soper complicates masculinist,

dogmatic, Western structures of thought, engaging aspects of performance to challenge or

otherwise intervene in selected philosophical assertions (which are spoken by the performers as

part of the piece). Throughout *Cipher*, Soper animates and critiques such statements, as "I came

to language because I wanted to be explicit about things," illustrating linguistic complexity rather

than fixity. Through humorous, histrionic "self-evident" performance, *Cipher* deconstructs

selected pillars of Western thought, even if she reinscribes that tradition in some ways by not

countering it with non-Western ideology.[170] Soper's particular engagement of performance as a

---

[170] All the writers from *Ipsa Dixit* are white and espouse Eurocentric viewpoints.

Furthermore, *Ipsa Dixit* features mostly male thinkers; Aristotle is featured in half of the

movements, and the rest of the work uses texts by Sophocles; Plato; and postwar, Black

Mountain College poet, Robert Duncan. Two of the six pieces feature women: *Only the Words*

Themselves Mean What They Say, which sets a variety of recent texts by writer Lydia Davis, and

Cipher, which sets texts by artist Jenny Holzer; twentieth-century philosopher, Ludwig

deconstructive tool results in piece that invites feminist performance, even if not readily visible upon the page. This is a suggestion that performances of the piece can make further interventions into the meaning of the work than belied by the score.

With *Cipher,* Soper shows how Western dogmatism manifests in classical music, offering an alternative to normative methods of composition that view performers as interchangeable and lacking in comparison with "the work."[171] Soper's process constructs an environment of intimacy that impacts the work from its construction to its performance. *Cipher* counters the disembodied ideal of normative approaches to performing classical music by centering the body and offering an alternative approach to composition that generates intimacy between the performers who play a significant role in creating rather than just interpreting or materializing the music. Through her collaborative, practice-led method, Soper positions composition as a dynamic form of experimentation: Rather than an imagined, interchangeable performer, Soper's collaboration with violinist Josh Modney throughout the composition illustrates that a focus on people and their bodies, rather than notes, is necessary to complete the piece.

Through an analysis of Soper's compositional methods and the score, I show how Soper's approach counters the assumed compositional methods of the solitary composer and the gendered hierarchies which have come to shape the Western canon of works and their performances. Rather than the idea of the individual genius, Soper draws on information gleaned

---

Wittgenstein; 16th-century scholar, Pietro Bembo; 17th-century poet, Michael Drayton; Sigmund Freud; and early-twentieth-century poet, Sara Teasdale.

[171] I will use the terms Western classical music and classical music interchangeably throughout.

through workshops with her colleague and collaborator, Josh Modney. Theirs is a relationship rooted in exploration, rather than mastery (the norm of collaborative endeavors in Western classical music). Soper positions composition and performance as equal partners, and as Modney describes, their intimate, collaborative methodology provides potential for performers of new music to offer an alternative to virtuosity, while maintaining a commitment to refinement through experimentation. Therefore, *Cipher* offers an alternative approach to both composition and performance that builds on principles of Western classical music while reinventing past practices.

My study of this piece unfolds in two chapters. The first concerns Soper's interventions and her own performance practice, identifying its intimate, feminist interventions into masculinist ideas that shape Western classical music and its performances. The second (and final chapter in the dissertation) demonstrates that Soper's practices in composition and performance have a ripple effect; her music has an impact on the performers and audiences who engage with her work. The goal of this first chapter is to introduce the work and the interventions it makes into performance and composition. In the last chapter, I investigate the politics of learning this piece as an outsider – taking this music outside of the community through which and for whom it was originally intended. Soper herself expressed surprise at other people learning this music. I explore the possibilities for feminist connection when venturing outside of the performer/composer paradigm. Whereas this chapter concerns interventions into the compositional practice (which relies heavily on performance), the last chapter considers the potential within *Cipher* to decenter the relative authority of the composer through its privileging of performance over the score. With this focus on performance, multiple interpretations of *Cipher* replace a singular notion of the work. This demonstrates the act of interpretation as a

powerful tool in self-actualization in a sphere which scripts musical identity through unquestioned norms. I identify how the piece helped me and my collaborator to re-compose the dominant scripts of our learning environment. The eschewal of normative modes of performance practice helped to foster a level of intimacy in our own learning experience, which allowed us to foster a friendship and challenge perceived personal limitations. The two chapters serve to reflect on the capabilities of approaches in performance to works of new music to change the world we live in through performance.

Soper's deconstruction of language

Ipsa Dixit, which was a 2017 Pulitzer Prize Finalist in Music, was written for the *Wet Ink Ensemble*, of which Soper is co-director and performer. Soper notes that each of the six pieces may be performed independently, and that it's possible to combine multiple pieces in a mix and match fashion. Soper is an award-winning composer, new music soprano and author of fiction and non-fiction "whose work explores the integration of drama and rhetoric into musical structure, the slippery continuums of expressivity, intelligibility and sense, and the wonderfully treacherous landscape of the human voice."[172] She is the Iva Dee Hiatt Professor of Music at Smith College. Soper wrote *Cipher* for herself and colleague, Josh Modney, violin.

Recent compositions such as Soper's seek to frustrate notions of endowed genius and follow a long history going back to the experimentalism of John Cage. Few composers within this tradition, however, have so keenly dissected the relationship between performer and instrument, real life and performance, humor, and seriousness, as Kate Soper. *Ipsa Dixit* features

---

[172] "Bio," Kate Soper, http://www.katesoper.com/bio.htm.

the texts of a host of Western thinkers from the ancient Greeks to Freud. As Alex Ross, writing *for The New Yorker* notes, Soper's works are generally built around her own voice and "often adopt the manner of a lecture."[173] Into this form, Soper introduces performances of deadpan humor, which she uses to challenge, animate, and deconstruct the various texts. The entire collection of pieces, which runs about 90 minutes, builds on the connection between sound and form. Soper first signals deconstruction on the level of language in her description of the feminized title of the larger work, *Ipsa Dixit* when she adapts the Latin *ipse dixit*, literally "he himself, said it" to "she herself said it." On her website, Soper references the definition of this "dogmatic statement which the speaker expects the listener to accept as valid without proof beyond the speaker's assumed expertise."[174] In a legal context, ipse dixit is used to criticize arguments that rely solely on authority and are not backed by evidence. By altering this phrase to the feminine ipsa dixit, Soper challenges the idea that language and knowledge are the purview of masculinity, along with the patriarchal notion that a man's word, by virtue of his having uttered it, is the Truth (with a capital T) and should therefore remain unquestioned and unchallenged.

Throughout *Ipsa Dixit*, Soper disrupts the idea that knowledge is a stable, unchanging entity and instead posits knowledge as *action* rooted in a dynamic, fluid exchange between people. The first piece, *Poetics*, sets texts by Aristotle (*Poetics*, abridged Soper) and Sophocles (*Oedipus Rex*). Musicians answer the opening question (posed by Soper), "what is art," by miming playing their instruments. As Ross notes, this calls to mind John Cage, who, in his piece,

---

[173] Alex Ross, "Kate Soper's Philosophy-Opera," *The New Yorker*, February 19, 2017.

[174] "*Ipsa Dixit*," Kate Soper, http://www.katesoper.com/ipsadixit.htm.

4'33,'' famously questioned what it is audiences hear in a performance of music by staging timed silence on stage. The second piece, *Only the Words themselves Mean What They Say* for flute and soprano, sets texts from Lydia Davis and features themes of romantic love. Lines between soprano and flute blur as the soprano imitates flute sounds, calling on the ability of instrumental sounds to signify anger, love, sadness. Similarly, flute music becomes infused with vocal music as the flutist breathes text into the flute, producing breathy speech sounds. This instrumental sound is juxtaposed with deliberately serious text and delivered with histrionic conviction. The resulting incongruity between emotive sounds and deadpan text produces an affect that is intentionally humorous. The third piece, *Rhetoric*, sets text from Aristotle, which has been abridged and adapted by Soper. Written for voice, flute, violin and percussion, this piece focuses on various means of persuasion from constructing logical arguments to their delivery. It also takes on a didactic quality with an incessant, metronomic pulse created percussively by various musicians throughout the piece. Next comes *The Crito*, for voice and percussion, which sets texts by Robert Duncan, associated with the Black Mountain poets, from *Achilles' Song* and Plato (abridged/adapted by Soper). This piece (the fourth) is focused on interaction between the vocalist and percussionist and features a conversation between the soprano (Socrates) and percussionist (*Crito*) in which they reason through justice and injustice. The fifth piece, *Metaphysics*, for voice, flute, violin, and percussion sets text by Aristotle abridged/adapted by Soper, which questions existence and the human relationship to the material world. The piece plays with ensemble speaking, passing text back and forth between performers to illustrate a cast of thinkers.

Cipher, the sixth and final piece, offers a conclusion of the larger work, which explores the relationship between saying, doing, and meaning. As in the other pieces of *Ipsa Dixit*, *Cipher*

features personification of instrumental sounds to blur the lines between human and instrument—the instrumentalist speaks, and the singer makes instrumental sounds to inflect the text with meaning. This marks a departure from the trend of a metonymic relationship between performer and instrument. In *Cipher,* the soprano and violinist are very much equal collaborators. As such, the instrumentalist can step out of the common, subservient role of accompanist to the soprano, who historically provides all theatrical interest, and calls attention to the fact of the individualized soprano and instrumentalist who are illuminated as a person in addition to their instrument/vocal type.

Focusing on the performance of musical and textual language, *Cipher* spotlights expectations and practices of the process of wresting meaning from music by audience members and performers alike, reminding audiences that to say something is not necessarily to communicate clearly. Titling the final piece, "*Cipher,"* seems like one final way to remind the audience that a tool that they might use to figure out the meaning of this piece is impossible. A "cipher," a "symbol or character (0) of no value by itself," is a "disguised manner of writing."[175] Applied variously in mathematical, military and espionage operations, and children's toys, cracking a cipher reveals discrete, actionable information. In the case of mathematics, the cipher "increases or decreases the value of other figures according to its position."[176] In conflict-based settings, a cipher encrypts information relative to enemy positions or plans, and in the 1960s, using a decoder ring, children encoded messages to friends or deciphered codes printed on children's cereal boxes. When applied to musical interpretation and performance, this process

---

[175] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "cipher."

[176] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "cipher."

hints at a deeper meaning that the performers and audience might have "deciphered" by the end of the piece. However, in *Cipher,* the process of interpretation doesn't necessarily point to the discovery of a deeper meaning, illuminating a straightforward approach to Soper's chosen texts.

Through humorous, histrionic dogmatism performed with a great deal of pomp and circumstance, *Cipher* demonstrates the ridiculousness of simple answers to complex questions. Throughout *Cipher*, Soper engages wit and irony, presenting scenarios that may leave the audience befuddled, rather than informed. For example, to open the piece, the soprano sings the phrase, "I came to language because I wanted to be explicit about things," by text artist Jenny Holzer while employing extended vocal techniques that deliberately obscure clear transmission of the words. For example, at times, Soper instructs the soprano to place the tongue on the roof of the mouth while singing with a breathy tone. This has the double effect of rendering the text largely unintelligible and creating what Soper describes as a "cartoony" sound.[177] This pattern of playful deconstruction wherein Soper engages elements of performances to critique the text is elaborated throughout the work.

Cipher: Thick Description

The four movements of *Cipher* are performed attacca, meaning there is no break for applause in-between them: I. Jenny Holzer feat. Ludwig Wittgenstein; II. Pietro Bembo feat. Michael Drayton; III. Introducing Sigmund Freud; IV. Guido d'Arezzo presents Sarah Teasdale (feat. Jenny Holzer). In the first movement, which features texts by Jenny Holzer and Ludwig

---

[177] Kate Soper, "*Cipher* Performance Notes," in *Cipher*, (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011), 2.

Wittgenstein, Soper brings two apparently disparate thinkers into conversation: Holzer is a

feminist artist known for projecting political word art in public spaces using an array of media

from LED signs to street posters and tee shirts. Wittgenstein is known for arguing for an

understanding of language rooted in its use in specific cultural contexts. To bring these two

thinkers into conversation, the performers play with timbre, volume, and ensemble to challenge

assumptions about the relationships between language and meaning. Rhythms are written to

mirror the speech pattern of the text and Soper notes that "[s]peech is indicated by X noteheads

on a one-line staff. Speech rhythms should always sound as natural as possible even when

written out."[178] Throughout the majority of the movement, the two parts share identical or nearly

identical rhythms, but a time signature and thus, a beat hierarchy, both of which aid in measuring

time, aren't introduced until the final measure of the movement (figure 3.1 shows the absence of

a time signature).

Figure 3.1 Image: Kate Soper, "I. Jenny Holzer (feat. Ludwig Wittgenstein)," in *Cipher* (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011), measures 1-4.

---

[178] Soper, "*Cipher* Performance Notes," 2.

In this movement, the soprano moves between two main kinds of vocal production: intelligible singing, what Soper calls "normal singing," indicated in the score by an open circle above the notes and what she describes as a "breathy and closed-off vocal sound," indicated by a colored in circle above the notes, seen in the fourth measure (above).[179] As Soper notes, alternating between these two techniques should give the impression of "words emerging with sudden clarity from an incomprehensible stream of word-like vocalizing—or, conversely, of clear words filtered into obscurity."[180] The violin technique in this movement is meant to enhance the un/intelligibility of the text: The violinist moves between three main textures produced by playing with the bow at various points of contact on the violin: normal sound, extreme sul tasto (violinist plays over the finger board, which produces fewer overtones for a less concentrated sound; extreme sul ponticello (violinist plays on or behind the bridge to create an exciting and unpredictable blend of harmonics).

---

[179] Soper, "*Cipher* Performance Notes," 2. Note that the sound indicated by the colored circle is made by "[pressing] the middle of the tongue against the roof of the mouth while singing with a breathy tone. The tongue placement will filter the sound of the voice) rending it nasal and pinched, quasi "cartoony") and will drastically reduce the intelligibility of the text. The breathiness will help to blend with the violin texture. The desired effect is one in which it is clear, due to timbral variations produced by lip/mouth movement, that words are being pronounced, but these words should be unintelligible. Lip/mouth movements may be exaggerated to aid both the aural and the visual impression of words being sung." Soper, "*Cipher* Performance Notes," 2.

[180] Soper, "*Cipher* Performance Notes," 2.

Throughout the movement, the violinist mimes the soprano's text, seeming to *speak* along with her, and emphasizing the importance of spoken language. And yet, the movement's text and meaning is deliberately obfuscated. Soper inverts sections of the phrases, "I came to language because I wanted to be explicit about things…and it became clear that the only way for me to do it was to use language…people can understand you when you say something."[181] Soper tests this notion by obscuring this text throughout, stretching words, inverting them, "I came because be wanted to came to I came language because explicit things about…"[182] What guides the text is a sense of endurance. The pair labors at the act of communication, exploring various ways to get the message across, but their efforts are continually (and deliberately) thwarted.

In a total juxtaposition, three quarters through this first movement, time, which had seemed to march on at a frenetic, labored clip is now suspended as the pair plays with the tension and release produced by adding partials to a series of fundamentals (figure 3.2).[183] As the pair explores these harmonies, there is a literal breakdown of the fundamentals of music as a dissonance is created between the soprano and the violin's purposefully-out-of-tune e string. This dissonance propels the final section of the movement, where words break down into syllables, marked with different performance notes printed above the music: bright/vibrated, nasal/pinched, breathy to warm. This musical layering introduces a level of theoretical

---

[181] Kate Soper, "I. Jenny Holzer (feat. Ludwig Wittgenstein)," in *Cipher*, (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011), 1.

[182] Soper, "Jenny Holzer (feat. Ludwig Wittgenstein)," 2.

[183] In music, a fundamental is the first "partial" in a series that make up one pitch. The fundamental is heard most prominently over the other partials.

didacticism into a "musical" context. Combined with the text in this section from Ludwig Wittgenstein, "one and the same sign can be common to two different symbols," seems to speak back to Holzer, illustrating, using harmony, that language isn't always explicit, and that communication can literally break down (into partials) when a word has multiple meanings.[184]
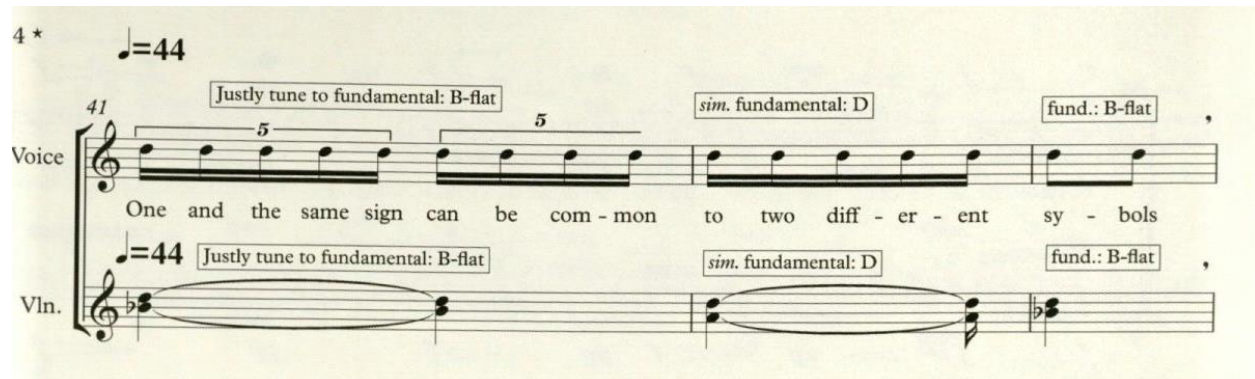

Figure 3.2 Image: Soper, "I. Jenny Holzer (feat. Ludwig Wittgenstein)," measures 41-43.

In the second movement, "Pietro Bembo (feat. Michael Drayton)," this personification of vowels is taken further. A "full, bright, flamboyantly expressive" marking sets the tone for the personification of the letter "A."[185] Whereas the previous movement focused on the ability of words to be strung together to communicate meaning, this movement extracts vowels and genders and personifies them. Between vowels it features sections of nonsense sounds strung together to create momentum that ends each vowel section. The "U" section is marked "extremely nasal, pinched, scrunched and ugly."[186] Bembo argued in *Prose della volgar lingua* (*The Prose of the Vernacular Tongue*, 1525) that musical attention to vowels and

---

[184] Soper, "Jenny Holzer (feat. Ludwig Wittgenstein)," 4.

[185] Kate Soper, "II. Pietro Bembo (feat. Michael Drayton)" in *Cipher*, (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011), 6.

[186] Kate Soper, "II. Pietro Bembo (feat. Michael Drayton)," 6.

consonants could be used to produce the desired effect in the listener/reader. These techniques influenced the 16th century Italian madrigal, which is connected to the development of opera.[187] As McClary notes in *Modal Subjectivities: Self-Fashioning in the Italian Madrigal,* madrigals were central to the development of a style of musical representation, including gender norms. The second movement ends with a section from 17th century English poet Michael Drayton's "An Ode Written in the Peak," draws heavily on the use of the indicated, personified vowel sounds. This section is set to an ostinato base line, which generates momentum. The vocal line soars across the soprano's range, jumping from high to low as it weaves along a folk-like melody. This section is led into by a repetition of vowels ah oo ee oh ee oo, which the soprano repeats, gradually transitioning from syllables to the words "while we," which gather further momentum as they roll off the tongue and into the section from Drayton, which builds on the Bembo through its use of assonance in its rhyme scheme (figures 3.3 and 3.4).

---

[187] Kurt von Fischer, Gianluca D'Agostino, James Haar, Anthony Newcomb, Massimo Ossi, Nigel Fortune, Joseph Kerman and Jerome Roche, "Madrigal," in *Grove Music Online*, 2001, https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000040075.

Figure 3.3 Image: Kate Soper, "II. Pietro Bembo (feat. Michael Drayton)," in *Cipher* (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011), measures 95-98.

Figure 3.4 Image: Soper, "II. Pietro Bembo (feat. Michael Drayton)," measures 99-108.

Whereas the first movement explores intonation and color in the relationship between the violin and soprano and the second movement features virtuosic, romantic playing meant to reflect the various affective vowel personifications, the third movement, "Introducing Sigmund Freud," creates a virtuosic new extended technique that blurs the boundaries between soprano and violin. As Josh Modney, the violinist to whom the piece was dedicated notes, "the roles of voice and instrument, which up to this point have been vying for primacy, have become equal and intertwined."[188]

The beginning of the movement is signaled by the soprano placing a mute on the violinist's bridge, beginning the physical collaboration that is central to this movement. With the mute on, the tremolo that ends the previous movement is transformed into a more covered,

---

[188] Josh Modney, "Collaboration as Performance," *New Music Box,* August 6, 2018, https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/collaboration-as-performance-practice/.

ethereal color fitting for a movement on dreams. Over this sonic texture, the soprano reads a line of text from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "The dream is not [comparable] to the irregular sounds of a musical instrument, which, instead of being played by the hand of a musician, is struck by some external force."[189] In this early work of Freud's, he argued that dreams meaningfully condense information and should be understood as wish fulfillment. His approach to dream analysis was based on disentangling this dream "condensation" to reveal some truth about the dreamer's unconscious desires.

The text in this section correlates with the movement of the soprano's hand on the violin: the soprano begins to move her hand in an upward glissando (slide) over the text "which, instead of being played by the hand of a musician," and descends in a glissando over the word "struck" in "struck by some external force."[190] Thus, the violinist seems to be demonstrating as they explain, adding to the didactic quality of the movement. Furthermore, the performance marking here is "measured, reasonable, which, in Soper's recording of the piece on YouTube, translates into the professorial delivery noted by Ross as a stylistic tendency of hers. Engaging Freud, Soper enters into conversation with another tenet of Western thought: the unconscious mind. Whereas her use of performance in other movements serves to complicate some aspect of the writings, in this movement, Soper's engagement with Freud seems to challenge the audience's expectations of what a violinist does (plays) and doesn't do (speak).

---

[189] Kate Soper, "III. Introducing Sigmund Freud" in *Cipher*, (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011), 11.

[190] Soper, "III. Introducing Sigmund Freud," 11.

Figure 3.5 Image: Kate Soper, "III. Introducing Sigmund Freud," in *Cipher* (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011), measures 143-149.

Just as the soprano reads "struck," the violinist adds spoken text, also from *The Interpretation of Dreams*: "If, in the evening, I eat anchovies, olives, or other strongly salted foods, I am thirsty at night, and therefore, I wake" (figure 3.5).[191] This is the first time that the violinist has spoken in the piece, and it is a maneuver not often seen. This comes as a surprise to the audience, especially since the violinist begins to speak while they are playing, forgoing any

---

[191] Soper, "Introducing Sigmund Freud," 11.

signaling of an impending change by lowering the violin and bow. Since the text is not a direct extension of the soprano's line of thought, it gives the impression of dream content, an affect emphasized by the surprise of the speaking violinist. As the movement continues, it's clear that the soprano and violinist are delivering adjacent texts, each on its own trajectory. Soper scripts meaningful nodes of overlap on certain words, such as "dream" in measure 152, "psychic" in measure 159, and a line of spoken unison in measure 166 (figures 3.6 and 3.7). These moments are also markers for collaborative moves on the violin, with the soprano and violinist working together to advance the violin texture and shift the mood of the movement. The third movement ends with a cacophony of sound: the violinist bows with "extreme bow pressure," creating a harsh, pressed sound, while the soprano "rapidly [slides] fingers on strings."[192]

Figure 3.6 Image: Soper, "III. Introducing Sigmund Freud," measures 150-152.

[192] Soper, "Introducing Sigmund Freud," 13.

158 It may be enrolled in the ↓
continuity of the intelligible **psychic** activites of the waking state.

Voice

("Psychic" in unison with vn.)

Even if we conclude that ↓
every dream has a meaning and **psychic** value, We

Vln.

("Psychic" in unison with sop.)

Figure 3.7 Image: Soper, "III. Introducing Sigmund Freud," measures 158-159.

The intensity of the third movement leads into the fourth, "Guido d'Arezzo presents Sarah Teasdale (feat. Jenny Holzer)," which opens with a furiously delivered text from d'Arezzo's *Micrologus*, a treatise on Medieval music. The ostinato on open fifths (minus the out of tune E string, which has been tuned down to form a "just" Major third with F# on the second string) creates momentum for the soprano line, which slides upward, always landing a fifth above the starting pitch.[193] This decision seems notable, since in his treatise, d'Arezzo advised against the use of the fifth, which contrapuntally compromises the independence of individual voices. In this instance, the fifths create simultaneous stability (the 5th is a stable interval) and unpredictability, since there is no harmonic pull toward resolution. Adding to this instability, the violin's scordatura I string (a process whereby a string is de-tuned to produce a desired effect)

---

[193] For more on "just" tuning, see Ross W. Duffin, *How Equal Temperament Ruined Harmony (and Why You Should Care)* (New York: Norton, 2007).

suggests d'Arezzo's favored interval of the fourth, but it is tuned high, which creates further tension with the same pitch in the violin.

These interventions into d'Arezzo are set against the text (in Latin): "all that can be said, can be written…all that can [be] written, can be sung…therefore all that can be sung, can be spoken," suggesting, like the first movement, the untruth of plain statements about meaning.[194] This deconstruction is further underscored when, at the conclusion of this text, the soprano revisits the Holzer text: "I came to language….," but before completing the phrase from the first movement, moves to the repeated syllables reminiscent of the second movement, complete with the personified vowels.

The movement then moves to a folk-like section reminiscent of themes from the second movement, but with text from *Moods* by poet Sara Teasdale, winner of the 1918 Columbia Poetry Price (later the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry): "I am the still rain falling…I am the brown bird pining…"[195] Soper's use of d'Arezzo, with whom staff notation and solfège are linked, calls to mind Western music's relationship to the written score. In solfège and staff notation, notes are ordered into a kind of written language that enables musicians to more efficiently read and perform music. This commitment to language in music is underlined by the particular d'Arezzo text, which suggest a straightforward relationship between written, sung, and spoken language, and the idea that meaning is stable in each context. Soper juxtaposes this text with text painting from Teasdale, in which the words, "falling" and "pining," are musically represented through

---

[194] Kate Soper, "IV. Guido d'Arezzo presents [Sara] Teasdale (feat. Jenny Holzer)" in *Cipher*, (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011), 14.

[195] Kate Soper, "IV. Guido d'Arezzo presents [Sara] Teasdale (feat. Jenny Holzer)," 15-16.

falling intervals, resulting in a lilting, though unsettled and unresolved melody that leads into more syllables which build to a climax. On the one hand, this realization of Teasdale seems to illustrate d'Arezzo's claim that meaning is stable between spoken, sung, and written text, but the musical tension in this movement suggests otherwise. Finally, over an ostinato violin line which fluctuates in volume from very loud to very soft, Soper ends with lines from the Holzer, which are punctuated by a wide vibrato that serves to distort the pitch center, further increasing musical tension and bringing the piece to an exciting conclusion. Bringing together this pastiche of texts and techniques from throughout the piece, Soper concludes the work the way she began it—by reflecting on the initial statement by Holzer: "People can understand you when you say something." Hearing this statement again at the conclusion of the work—in addition to punctuations from Holzer throughout the movement—now has a different impact, however. With the benefit of the deconstruction of this statement throughout the other three movements, Holzer's text now rings as a conclusion. Soper has taught the audience that just the opposite is true: If anything is clear the audience at this point, it's that "saying something" often does not necessarily yield understanding. Throughout the work, Soper's use of performance has challenged normative associations between language and meaning.

Maps vs. Scores

As opposed to models of composition in which ideas are brought forth from the mind of the individual, Soper approaches composition like a map. This has implications for her compositional practice, as well as for performances of the work, both of which suggest principles of intimacy put forth by Sara Ahmed. Recounting a meeting of the UN conference for women, Ahmed recounts how, often "the very creation of a public space for international feminism

emerges through fantasies of 'intimacy; *fantasies of how we belong within this space*, of how we occupy an intimate relationship to it."[196] Ahmed identifies a trend to attempt to create intimacy solely through spatial proximity. Building on Julia Kristeva's theory of touch in relation to otherness, Ahmed theorizes a philosophy of intimacy, wherein touch is engaged as a transient action that invites connection at the same time that space is held for each individual involved: "touching, as a temporary encounter with an other, involves a movement closer to another, which does not grasp that other, rendering its otherness as an object. The movement towards, in touch, is always already *a movement away.*"[197]

In *Cipher,* touch is a visceral part of the piece—the violinist and soprano converge on the violin, intertwining their bodies to make music together on one instrument—but this physical proximity is given meaning through the construction of the piece. For Soper, composition is rooted in exploration and the excitement of engaging in dialog with texts, often challenging the author as she musically sets the text. Lifelong fascination with the interpretation of existing texts, which she sees as related to the excitement of uncovering meaning through the practice of making associations and connections leads her to describe her compositional practice as an "invisible map," in which she musically realizes texture, mood, or rhythm.[198] Explaining this concept further, Soper explains, "For me now, I get really excited about something I'm reading,

---

[196] Sara Ahmed, "Intimate Touches: Proximity and Distance in International Feminist Dialogues," *Oxford Literary Review* 19, no. 1 (1997): 21.

[197] Ahmed, "Intimate Touches," 28.

[198] Andrew Leland, "An Interview with Kate Soper," *The Believer*, August 1, 2018, https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-kate-soper/.

and then I feel really lucky that I can turn that excitement into a long experience of uncovering

deeper meanings and contributing to meaning or making my own meaning. It's some kind of

profound experience of reading."[199] This practice of reading is reminiscent of Ahmed's theory of

intimacy as touch. Soper orchestrates a conversation among contemporaries, inviting the

complexities that come about as a result. Rather than pinning down particular meanings, through

Soper's composition, inconsistencies are revealed in a way that produces new thought – creates a

connection between thinkers as they encounter each other through her music. This conversational

element is heightened in the titling of *Cipher's* movements, ("Jenny Holzer (feat. Ludwig

Wittgenstein);" "Pietro Bembo (feat. Michael Drayton); "Introducing Sigmund Freud;" and

"Guido d'Arezzo presents Sarah Teasdale (feat. Jenny Holzer).It's also evident throughout *Ipsa*

Dixit, as the texts are always presented as though the author is present. The fourth piece, *The*

Crito, is even scripted as a conversation between Socrates and Crito.

Soper's commitment to "reading" extends to performers. In the score, despite a rigorous

notation, Soper intends that the performers will play together above all else, using the music as a

jumping off point, rather than something (w)ho(l)ly writ. Performers brush against the score,

referring to it as needed, and departing from it when it proves a hindrance: For example, the first

movement contains complex triplet and quintuplet rhythms without the aid of a rhythmic

hierarchy. These rhythms are difficult to play exactly together without the aid of a time

signature, which provides a rhythmic hierarchy. Without this aid, the difficulty of performing in

unison is increased. This situation gives performers a greater degree of autonomy, which is

---

[199] Leland, "An Interview with Kate Soper."

magnified through theatricality, since Soper also points in the stage directions to the importance of "histrionic conviction," in interpretations of the work.[200]

Soper's theory of "reading" has effects on performance that are made visible to the audience through Soper's employment of theatricality. In her various performances of the work on YouTube, Soper gives a tongue and cheek delivery of the piece, giving the sense that she is playing a part. Soper's deadpan delivery is subtle, however; she comes across as simultaneously sincere and wry. The pieces seem staged for the camera in terms of bodily choreography and facial expressions and punctuations of nonsense text throughout the piece render other, seemingly genuine seriousness campy and playful. This theatricality relies on performance and bodies, simultaneously emphasizing that the performers are consequential to the process of meaning making and deconstructing the idea that the composers are subservient to "the music itself." Performers are liberated from the responsibility of realizing *exactly* what is written on the page in exchange for a focus on other elements of performance. Based on my experience learning the piece (outlined in the next chapter) this results in performers leaning into the collaborative learning process and centering performance notes meant to provide the piece with dramatic contrast. This shift in Soper's compositional purview from viewing the score as marker of "the music itself" to understanding it as a tool used to guide the performers in their exploration of Soper's ideas. In an interview in *The Believer*, Soper speaks directly to the import of performers: "…you know, we're all actually humans, doing physical stuff onstage. There's a tendency to dehumanize the instrumentalist, because it's like: Well, that's the violin, and that's a

---

[200] Quoted in Leland, "An Interview with Kate Soper."

clarinet, and that's the soprano. Well, no, that's Josh and that's Alex and that's Kate."[201] This

notation invites a level of reading on behalf of the performers capable of producing nuanced

meanings. This produces a level of intimacy I explore in the last chapter of this dissertation.

Soper's commitment to composition as a map is evident in an interview in *Believer*

Magazine in which Soper and interviewer Andrew Leland parse the word, "composer."[202]

Seeming to play with Soper's text from *Cipher* ("so one and the same sign can be common to

two different symbols" by Ludwig Wittgenstein), Leland notes that the word, "composer," is

used to describe what Soper does, but it also has many other meanings from composition

notebook to composing an email. Intrigued by the word's multiple meanings, he turned to the

Oxford English Dictionary, where he found that composer is made up of "com," with; and

"ponere," to place or lay. Soper, responding to this definition, explains that, especially in her

recent work as a composer, she lays things next to one another: "I love that. Especially in the

bigger projects I've been doing lately, I definitely feel like I'm posing things together. Laying

them down and making a tableau, in a way, only it's time-based and not visual."[203] This

description, akin to the act of collage, which seeks to realize potential based on what is present,

indicates an approach to composition rooted in finding inspiration in what is found or

encountered. This kind of exploratory pastiche is at the heart of *Ipsa Dixit* and *Cipher,* in both of

which, the meaning making process revolves around the deconstruction of the relationship

---

[201] Leland, "An Interview with Kate Soper."

[202] Leland, "An Interview with Kate Soper."

[203] Leland, "An Interview with Kate Soper."

between meaning, language, sight and sound by bringing together various texts/authors in conversation.

Soper's concept of reading highlights the exhilaration of flexibility and mutability, ideas that come through in her compositional approach. Soper's piece invites people to "read" through performance, and as Lara Pellegrinelli notes, "Soper is not only hyperliterate, but her work leans towards a kind of post-modern hyperliteracy: a virtual interconnectedness of texts through webs of fluid links."[204] This approach is feminist in its deconstruction of compositional norms. Whereas traditional models focus on the written document, Soper's multidimensional approach to composition is revealed through performance *and* through its analysis on paper. The deconstruction of the texts is clear through their performance. This means that the work cannot be fully appreciated or understood by looking at the score—performance of the texts is vital to understanding the work. This reliance on performance is not a defense of Soper's lack of diversity in terms of gender in particular—as mentioned earlier, the entire *Ipsa Dixit* features women thinkers in only two of the six pieces. As the musicians engage with each text, they demonstrate its limitations. This is an indication that, for Soper, it's not the gender of the speaker that presents the masculinist "ipse dixit" mindset, but rather the logic behind the various writings. This further underscores the importance of performance in understanding the interventions of the work. The purpose of featuring men seems to be to offer deconstructions of their logic.

---

[204] Laura Pellegrinelli, "Kate Soper: *Ipsa Dixit*," Explore: Program Notes, Columbia University, October 18, 2018, https://www.millertheatre.com/explore/program-notes/kate-soper-ipsa-dixit.

This emphasis on performance means that Soper leaves open the possibility for multiple interpretations, multiple paths through her map. Whereas normative modes of composition often center the entrapment of "woman," Soper suggests that unwinding or following them is a liberatory practice rooted in exploration and self-discovery.[205] In musicology, the construction of "woman" in Western music has been the primary area of study for Susan McClary.[206] In *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form*, McClary writes about Alessandro Stradella's *La Susanna* (1681), the story of a woman ensnared in a trap set by two elders of her community who hide in her garden, spying on her as she bathes, and threaten her with blackmail (accused adultery and certain death) for refusing their sexual advances. Pushing against "the purely musical," a concept that denies hermeneutic musical analysis, favoring instead untainted ideas of what I have earlier referred to as "the music itself," McClary illuminates Stradella's

---

[205] I'm borrowing here from Teresa de Lauretis's articulation of the constructed, idealized figure of "woman" vs. flesh and blood "women" in Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, (Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1984).

[206] Since, as de Lauretis reminds the reader, "[a]s social beings, women are constructed through effects of language and representation," such narratives of "woman" (in text, in cinema, on stage) have a material effect on women's lives. Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't,* 14.

The operatic stages of Western classical music performance are dominated by this idealized figure of "woman" that functions as what de Lauretis calls an "imaginary signifier." Alongside cinema and Calvino's Zobeide, music is a kind of language, "a continuous movement of representations built from a dream of woman, built to keep woman captive." Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't,* 14.

employment of auditory voyeurism as she guides the reader through an analysis of the composition that shows the objectification of an idealized woman.[207] The listener is to join the elders in taking in the sounds of this idealized, tantalizing Susanna, but, as McClary explains, from a safe distance, "in part by projecting [sensuality] onto a woman in a context that verbally condemns her for it."[208]

Whereas in this instance—which represents idealized entrapments of "woman" in the Western classical tradition—intimacy tends toward voyeurism, in Soper's piece, the audience witnesses a collaborative relationship between the performers. Through Soper and Modney's feminist deconstruction of language and performance, the score and its scriptive reins on performance are slackened, leaving room for elaboration, exaggeration, and for a richer variety of interpretations. *Cipher* challenges language, but it also challenges the same idea in Western classical music (the idea of the lone composer), and, since there is much left out of the score, the idea that performances can be entirely scripted. The intimate connection between Soper and Modney that went into creating Soper's map also invites the audience to experience an alternative to auditory voyeurism. Instead of positioning the audience as outsiders, the audience is included in the performance process as they track alongside Soper, reading between the lines of performances of the work to glimpse the significance of her interventions. Performances of *Ipsa Dixit* and *Cipher* resonate with my concept of reading poetry: that is, they invite the reader (the performer, the audience member) to participate in the meaning-making process. Whereas

---

[207] Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[208] McClary, *Conventional Wisdom,* 20.

auditory voyeurism relies on a strict, predetermined path, which as McClary shows, often portrays women's entrapment, Soper's map provides multiple points of entry for performers to create their own meaning. Through this intimate approach to composition, new paradigms are set up in the concert space. Within this quality of engagement is the potential for social change. In terms of classical music, this kind of thinking not only affects the way music is composed, but also the way it is performed and heard. Performances that can change over time, rather than remain the same, or harken back to an imagined time past have the potential to usher classical music into a more inclusive future rooted in conversation and touch, rather than display and voyeurism. Audiences are invited into the meaning making sphere, as opposed to auditory voyeurism.

READING

> …But the text that seems to matter is the conversations that arise around the scripting of the performance….

In "Collaboration as Performance Practice" by Josh Modney, the violinist to whom the piece is dedicated, Modney describes his experiences honing, and performing *Cipher* alongside Soper. In the article, Modney discusses the "great musical and spiritual rewards" of the process of building a piece from the ground up—contributing to its composition and refinement at every level.[209] Modney was a part of the compositional process from very early on: He and Soper developed the piece in collaboration over the course of 2011 in a series of workshops that built on a mutual,

---

[209] Modney, "Collaboration as Performance."

burgeoning interest in Just Intonation (JI) and Renaissance choral tuning exercises.[210] The work

also drew on Soper's early sketches and "initial ideas about how to share roles and subvert the

traditional hierarchy of soprano accompaniment (in part, building on ideas from Kate's soprano

and flute duo with Erin Lesser, *Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say*)."[211] The work

premiered in 2011 and underwent significant revisions before extensive performance the

following year.

As Modney describes, his and Soper's method of composition, rooted in collaboration

and experimentation, deconstructs the "hierarchical paradigm of classical music, where the

composer works in isolation on a piece before handing the final product to one or more

interchangeable performers, in favor of a holistic approach that allows for creativity and learning

from both sides of the composer/performer relationship."[212] They approached their workshops,

as a series of musical puzzles, testing the limits of the violin and soprano voice. One part of this

experimentation involved testing the "psycho-acoustic difference tones between soprano and

violin," manipulating each to match as closely as possible.[213] As Modney notes, though the

violin is recognized for its voice-like qualities, the soundworld of its extended techniques, which

feature a wide range of unpredictable partials, make a major point of difference between the

two.[214] In *Cipher,* Soper and Modney play with the similarities and differences between the

---

[210] Modney, "Collaboration as Performance."

[211] Modney, "Collaboration as Performance."

[212] Modney, "Collaboration as Performance."

[213] Modney, "Collaboration as Performance."

[214] Modney, "Collaboration as Performance."

violin and soprano voice to "discover an extended soundworld with fields of sameness and difference, enabling the material in *Cipher* to morph into myriad extremes and then realign in uncanny unison."[215] The result draws together the divergences and convergences between the violin and soprano voice and liberates the practice of tuning from behind-the-scenes preparation, introducing it instead as a part of the musical drama.

These moments of convergence/divergence between the violin and soprano voice come to the fore in the third movement of *Cipher*, "Introducing Sigmund Freud," in which the violinist and soprano play the violin simultaneously.[216] This intertwinement physicalizes a level of intimacy that has run through the entire piece. Modney notes, "[a]s the musicians converge on the violin, it is apparent that open dialogue must have been integral to developing the mechanics of the playing technique, and that the process must have involved a great deal of time and trust."[217]

For Modney, *Cipher* is "…personal, [and draws] attention to the relationship between two performers and embodying the spirit of openness essential to adventurous musicmaking."[218] Modney identifies trust as a key factor in the experimentation that resulted in the foundation of the piece. Choosing the finely honed gestures, what Modney describes as "habitualizing your brain to the details of production, 'not this, or this, but THIS'" required each performer to be

---

[215] Modney, "Collaboration as Performance."

[216] Modney introduces his article with the third movement, and the featured image for the article is of three hands on a violin with head carved into its scroll

[217] Modney, "Collaboration as Performance."

[218] Modney, "Collaboration as Performance."

vulnerable, flexible, experimental, and openminded to explore those gradations.[219] The specific

kind of habituation here, the process of exploring and choosing sounds with (and to perform

with) a partner is part of the intervention into intimacy in terms of performance practice but also

more theoretically. Working closely with a partner to arrive at a decision regarding performance

is itself a process that requires vulnerability, flexibility and experimentation, thus creating an

atmosphere of intimacy. The very idea of such an environment underlines a shift at the

theoretical level—in this case at the level of composition.

As Modney explains, finely honing various levels of performance makes for a paradigm-

shifting interaction:

> A high level of trust opened up the potential for Kate and me to develop the
> technique for 'violin 4-hands,' which involves a sharing of the extremely personal
> space of the violin's physical surface and immediate aura. That trust eventually
> led to the refinement of a performance practice that is as much an integral part of
> the piece as the notes on the page, and ultimately, I think, bridges a gap that has
> been artificially opened in our musical culture. The gap between the paradigm of
> contemporary music composition and performance, which allows for
> experimentation but too often stops dead after the premiere, and of classical
> music, which demands refinement and deep engagement with individual works
> but all too easily falls into entrenched ways of thinking, at the expense of novel
> and creative approaches.[220]

Modney identifies rigor as a key part of the musical process in the Western classical tradition,

but notes that his and Soper's experimentation offers another way in:

> Classical music performance, while fraught with its own challenges, benefits from
> pre-established practices cultivated over centuries and the framework of the
> common practice period. As new music performers, we must create our own
> performance practice before we may hope to transcend technical execution and

---

[219] Modney, "Collaboration as Performance."

[220] Modney, "Collaboration as Performance."

strive toward that high country where the real, sustained ecstatic communication between performers and listeners can take place.[221]

As opposed to the model of mastery in which a lone musician spends hours alone in the practice room honing a specific ideal, his and Soper's approach is rooted in exploration. Modney views a relationship with rigor as a key part of the Western classical tradition, but explains that performers of new music need to find new pathways to move past technical demands into rarified music making. That said, Modney could explain further how the listener into his ideal performance formulation. Though Modney's and Soper's interactions on stage prevent auditory voyeurism, *Cipher* could further deconstruct normative Western classical performance traditions by pushing theatricality further, inviting the audience into a co-creative relationship with the performers.

Conclusion

As I have shown, in *Cipher*, Soper and Modney show that meaning isn't fixed, but changes over time and according to circumstance. *Ipsa Dixit* intervenes into language, deconstructing questions of dogmatic thought, and Soper's own performances with Modney aim the work in this direction by using campy theatricality. In a video interview with me, Soper expressed her feelings about how difficult it must be for others to learn the piece, given hers and Modney's intense workshopping of the piece. Soper's views make sense, given that writing the piece must have been adjusted based on their experimentations. Soper's and Modney's working method dissects the model of the singular creator; their work is a relic of their experimentation, and the written piece is merely a record of their experimentation, rather than something meant to

---

[221] Modney, "Collaboration as Performance."

be followed by the performer. This is a departure from previous models of performance, wherein the performer is a disciple of the written note.

That said, though Soper has dedicated the piece to him, Modney is not credited as co-composer/co-contributor. Given her commitment to undoing dogmatism, why would Soper not include Modney as a co-composer? This omission complicates the notion of a feminist performance practice. While *Cipher* engages in a politics of intimate touch through Soper's practice of composition and collaboration as "reading," the piece seems to remain, at least to a degree, mired in modes of production rooted in single authorship that it purports to disrupt. Furthermore, when performing this piece, one must weigh the reliance on white male thinkers to deconstruct dogmatic thought. Performance can imbue the score with unique meanings not directly printed, and as I will show in the next chapter, intervene more deeply into the meaning making process, perhaps even rewriting the score. However, although performance allows rich potential for deconstruction, whether performance can be leveraged to speak *beyond* these white male voices is up for debate.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rehearsing Feminism in Kate Soper's *Cipher*

Introduction

With *Cipher*, Kate Soper and Josh Modney have created a score that looks and operates according to the laws of notated music, but that invites behavior and interpretation that refuses the common logic of the page, placing emphasis instead on the stage and on process. What I describe in the previous chapter as Soper's investment in the concept of a map as an alternative to a lone authorship and a prescriptive relationship with the performer leans toward feminism, although one wonders whether such an approach could have been threaded through the piece's written form through co-authorship, by including more women, and by dealing with texts that specifically question masculine approaches to language. Soper's chosen texts themselves do not contest, for the most part, ideas of canonicity, which reinforce male dominance. Instead, through her musical handling of these texts—aided by the invitation for theatrical, "histrionic conviction"—Soper seems to challenge what she sees as specific male writers' dogmatic approach—that to say something, is to make it so.[222]

One argument in favor of Soper's choice to intervene in texts by men grows out of a consideration of Susan Foster's understanding of choreography as a means of constructing and reconstructing gender in "Choreographies of Gender."[223] Calling for a reappraisal of Judith

---

[222] Kate Soper quoted in Andrew Leland, "An Interview with Kate Soper," *The Believer*, August 1, 2018, https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-kate-soper/.

[223] Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Gender," *Signs* 24, no. 1 (1998): 1–33.

Butler's reliance on the linguistic act to construct gender, Foster points out that constructions of gender are rooted in the body and that a consideration of bodies is lacking from J.L. Austin's performative speech act, around which Butler forms her argument. In fact, the Austinian performative decrees that there are certain instances in which to say something is to make it so, calling to mind the masculine dogmatism that Soper intends to complicate in *Ipsa Dixit* and *Cipher*. Given this, following Teresa de Lauretis, Foster argues for a reappraisal of essentialism, asking that the reader consider "essential differences as those that result from a profound and enduring immersion in cultural and historical specificities."[224] Drawing on a semiotics of the physical body, Foster argues that gender is re/articulated through physical gestures, which are scripted through interrelation with bodies of various genders, races, sexualities, (and I add, abilities). Noting the intersectional nature of such essential differences, Foster identifies a continued reliance on language in Butler's performative gender as incapable of holding the nuance required to address the intersectional formation of identity and should be understood through its embodied gestures *in addition to* its articulations through language. Furthermore, inattention to the body's choreographic role in constructing gender aligns with a political agenda that favors "an unexamined appropriation of the physical (read feminine) by the textual (read masculine)."[225] Foster argues that "[o]nly by assessing the articulateness of bodies' motions as well as speech…can the interconnectedness of racial, gendered, and sexual differences within and among these bodies matter."[226]

---

[224] Foster, "Choreographies of Gender," 2.

[225] Foster, "Choreographies of Gender," 27.

[226] Foster, "Choreographies of Gender," 4.

In order to change these choreographies, Foster argues, one needs to enter into existing written dialog with gender (for Soper, masculine texts and their associated systems of embodied performance in classical music): "..the choreography may contribute innovations that will subtly alter the contents of its representational tradition, but these innovations can acquire their full meaning only through their situatedness within that tradition."[227] By focusing on these masculine texts, Soper is able to intervene in them directly. By making interventions into masculine texts through performance, Soper invites those who perform *Cipher* to simultaneously illuminate and critique the patriarchal ideas she hopes to dismantle, underlining the potential of *Cipher* to demonstrate the ways in which power is structured and potentially restructured through musical performance.

In this way, *Cipher* operates in the context of what James C. Scott calls the "dominant transcript," which illustrates the power within performance to offer a critique of power structures while maintaining adherence to a dominant script.[228] The "hidden" nature of this critique—its separation from the written document—resists the notion of a singular interpretation of the work, opening the door for a host of critiques. This approach, what Rebecca Schneider calls "the *againness* of (re)enactment," allows performances of *Cipher* to shape the work, inverting the preference established in the Western classical tradition for a work-first model of

---

[227] Foster, "Choreographies of Gender," 9.

[228] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

performance.[229] By emphasizing performance, performances of *Cipher* have the potential to challenge the expectations of an audience trained to understand a set of gendered, racialized, and class-related norms commonly associated with Western classical music.

By inviting performers to focus on the ways in which performance *matters*, Kate Soper uses *Cipher* to offer a model within the Western classical tradition with the potential to destabilize these norms of gender, sexuality and race by demonstrating ways that the material bodies, the matter, that perform(s) the work give(s) it shape through multiple iterations as opposed to a singular, stable referent, the score, rooted in the textual masculine, and therefore impenetrable to being shaped by gestures of the body (rooted in the feminine). This "thick" set of events in which people and the work shape each other, and eventually the "final" performance, informs my approach to this chapter, which offers my view into the creative process. By placing an emphasis on creative process, Soper's performance-first mindset offers potential for critique of dominant, score-based models of analysis, which includes not only the methods developed by the performers to learn the piece, but the effect of learning the piece within a specific societal and/or institutional structure.

Methodology

After reading Josh Modney's writing about his experience learning *Cipher*, I approached my co-adviser, Elisabeth Le Guin, about including the work in my dissertation. Upon learning the instrumentation (soprano and violin), she suggested that, for my dissertation on intimacy, I

---

[229] Rebecca Schneider, *Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, (Routledge: London, 2011), 6.

might consider learning *Cipher*, bringing to my research the perspective of having learned the piece and exploring its potential for creating intimacy firsthand. This suggestion in mind, I signed up to participate in FLUX, my school's contemporary music ensemble, where I could benefit from the structure and accountability of a classroom setting and be matched with a soprano interested in learning and performing the piece together. It was there that I met soprano, Julia Johnson, with whom I learned and performed *Cipher* throughout 2019 as graduate students at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Approaching the piece (and each other) for the first time, Julia and I quickly ascertained a need to identify and rehearse new (to us) ways of musical communication to meet the technical demands presented by the piece. As Julia and I are not the originators of the piece, but performers approaching it for the first time, we had a different point of entry to its interpretation than Soper and Modney: Not knowing the ropes, not having been involved in the selection process of the various effects, and not being collaborators previously necessitated us forging our own path through the piece. Developing an approach to performance that would be both comfortable and convincing required that we develop an embodied system of communication from scratch, building an environment through which we began to know each other and the work.

Our second-hand relationship to the piece meant that we viewed Soper and Modney's questions of experimentation and vulnerability through the lens of rehearsal. Meant to be a preview of what's to come, and a way to refine what is, rehearsals and their shaping of a final performance taught us about normative investments in that process. Our rehearsal meaningfully showed ourselves to ourselves, and resonated with what Tracy C. Davis, writing about atomic bomb drills during the Cold War, calls a "mode of doing:"

"Rehearsal is invoked neither as a metaphoric motif nor an aestheticized product, but rather a technique and mode of doing: not an omnipresent saturation resulting from modernity but something called up selectively, strategically, and purposefully. This was not the art and entertainment known as 'the theater' yet it was staged; this was not "performance" yet it was performative, both in the sense of display and something that was done subject to evaluation. It could be spectacular or not, depend upon fakery, deceit, and illusion, or not. Rehearsal was a methodology for exploration, inculcation, and discovery, referential of real-world problems involving private citizens."[230]

In the context of the Cold War, viewing drills as rehearsal shows the ways that these preparations illuminate a particular place and time in history. Davis is writing from theater and performance studies, a field that has embraced rehearsal as a heuristic. This approach contrasts with attitudes in musicology, where rehearsals are rarely viewed beyond their use value as instrumental to an end. In the context of Soper's discursive piece, with its intertwined choreography, and emphasis of event over text (described in chapter three), the rehearsal and coaching process of *Cipher* offers a laboratory to reflect on normative patterns and paths of Western classical music.

Specifically, we found that our rehearsal process introduced opposing scenarios. The first was that of the dutiful student: Conditioned by our conservatory training and underscored by learning the piece within a school of music, we felt compelled to honor the score, the composer, and our teachers.[231] The second direction grew out of opposition to the first. Emboldened by

---

[230] Tracy C. Davis, *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil War Defense*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 4.

[231] I am referring here to the relationship between the score and performer, in which the performer is the servant of the music and composer, informing approaches to pedagogy and performance, and conditioning norms with regard to gender, race, sexuality and class. For more on this phenomenon, see Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Henry Kingsbury, *Music,*

Soper to rely on each other and *not* the score, we detached from the school of music, the score, composer, and our contemporary music professor's expectations for technical perfection (as defined by strict adherence to the score) and invested instead in our shared vision for the work.

Our rehearsal process was both conditioned by and refuted modes of learning and performance that, as I have contended, are gendered masculine within the institutions where we were working. The gendered power dynamics woven into each layer of the rehearsal process drew our attention repeatedly to existing choreographies of gender that extend from internalized dialogs we brought to the rehearsal room to external, reinscribed choreographies of gender enacted by musical coaches and a male photographer whom Julia engaged for promotional purposes. Soper's own approach to critique of masculinity (which may or may not have been intentional and feminist) invited us to embrace new methods of learning and performing which felt both subversive, personal, and feminist. Like Soper, rather than choreograph a new "dance" entirely, Julia and I moved through existing modes of rehearsal, noting where they felt restrictive, and experimenting with opportunities to refigure our own relationships to choreographies of gender in Western classical Music. Collaboration, co-creation, humble learning and multiple meanings (through performance) were fostered in a feminist environment of intimacy. Julia and I forged a feminist connection built on a foundation of vulnerability and experimentation in the form of rehearsals, coachings, dinners, and concerts. I mark the friendship as specifically feminist given that our friendship was strengthened as we encountered and worked through existing choreographies of gender. Rehearsing, coaching, and performing

---

Talent & Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

Cipher, was a catalyst for undoing gendered norms of learning in the conservatory/university setting. These norms are rooted in a dogmatism that is typically associated with Western classical music, namely obedience and monitored physical and moral submission to an exterior authority represented by the score and our teachers.

Through journaling, Julia and I each reflected on the norms we encountered. As such, those journals will be threaded throughout this chapter. Julia has agreed to share our journals here, and she has used them in her own research towards the Master of Music degree at UCLA. The journals not only offer insight into our learning practice but underline the importance of a practice that is otherwise rendered invisible. Whereas performance typically *remains* in recordings, practice *disappears*, or is meant to disappear through effortless performance. Centering the rehearsal process departs from the trend in Western classical music culture to draw focus to a polished, often virtuosic finalized product, instead focusing on the iterative, deliberate roughness of practice. As such, these journals illustrate the way that dominant scripts in the pedagogy of Western classical music enforce norms within the realm of performance practice. Lastly, as we intervene into Western classical music's approach to privileging the score and, secondarily, documented performances, we further Soper's aims in *Cipher* towards a feminist methodology that reforms approach to written language. Inviting our learning experience onto the page reveals the centrality of intimacies and vulnerabilities to our approach—experiences not always invited into academic discourse—rendering their legitimacy and illustrating Soper's aim to demonstrate the mutability of language through performance.

Approaching *Cipher*

Part I: Internal dialogs, or entering the rehearsal room and unpacking the baggage

<div align="right">

What's written on the page

</div>

I continue to be nagged by what is printed on my page. On multiple occasions I have brought up to various people about whether it makes sense to fully adhere to the score. I often find myself overwhelmed by the amount of visual information. It's a lot to take in and keep track of from moment to moment.

<div align="right">

-Farrah[232]

</div>

<div align="right">

Ego, professionalism, intimacy

</div>

Farrah told me (around the second or third rehearsal) about her dissertation subject more in depth. Intimacy?? Building relationships and having a connection with the musicians that I collaborate with is LITERALLY one of my favorite parts of being a singer. I got so excited. I remember mentioning to Farrah during one of these rehearsals how much I appreciated how little ego we bring into our rehearsals. As I got to know you more, I realized that you are incredibly professional, but that you also have an incredible sense of humor. I was so grateful for this. […] I remember feeling so good that you were so trusting and so willing to try different approaches when I suggested them.

<div align="right">

-Julia[233]

</div>

Learning *Cipher,* Julia and I struggled against preconceived notions and ideas about the

"right" way to approach a piece of Western classical music. As performers approaching this

visually complicated score, we often found ourselves asking how much to rely on what was

written and wondered when and to what degree it was permissible to stray from it. There is a

kind of new music in the Western classical tradition that values process over product, as in Terry

Riley's *In C* and Pauline Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations*. Scores in this process-oriented tradition

often provide guidance for structured improvisation. *Cipher* is not part of this tradition, instead,

the score visually dictates all the sonic parameters suggesting a rigorous approach to the score,

---

[232] Farrah O'Shea and Julia Johnson, "*Cipher* Journals" (unpublished manuscript, 2019),

Google Doc.

[233] O'Shea and Johnson, "*Cipher* Journals."

both by Soper and Modney, and by the performers who approach the score as new learners (not as composer/performers). That said, Soper notes that "[t]he most important performance element of *Cipher* is total synchronicity between the performers. This is especially true in movement I, where performer synchronicity is much more important than fidelity to the written rhythms, and in movement II, where character and tone must also be matched, but is a general and crucial principle of every moment of the piece."[234]

As such, the detailed information on the page contrasts with Soper's instructions to follow a performance-first mindset, underlined in her own distance from exactitude to the score in various YouTube performances, causing tension in our approach to the piece. Furthermore, on a practical level, it was difficult to realize exactingly what was written on the page: Conventionally, musicians coordinate via time and key signatures, a clear sense of equal temperament, just harmony, or an otherwise consistent approach to tuning dictated by performance using a specific, historical keyboard. *Cipher*, on the other hand eschews time and key signatures, employs altered tuning on the violin meant to produce tension in pitched unison sections, and employs shifting approaches to intonation throughout. With the lack of a time signature and beat hierarchy, it was often difficult to tell when we were, in fact, completely in sync with what was printed on the page.

One guide for us in approaching the score was that Soper seemed to follow her own advice: In at least a few videos of the duo, Soper and Modney play without any music present,

---

[234] Kate Soper, "Performance Notes" in *Cipher* (New York: Schott, 2011), 1.

having incorporated it into their bodies.[235] As such, there are inconsistencies between the performance they present, and the guide suggested in the score. This is true between their performances, too, as each one is slightly different in terms of its adherence to or departure from what is written down in the score.

Given the difficulty of judging the role of the score in our performance and Soper's instructions and performances, we decided that perfect adherence to the score was both an unattainable and unworthy goal. We couldn't depart from the score altogether, but neither did it contain all the information we needed to body it forth. Buoyed by Soper's approach to performance, we felt inspired to follow our instincts (and Soper's advice) to view the score as a map, viewing the document as a tool that enabled our journey, rather than a blueprint to be realized with exactitude. That is, instead of burying our noses in the score to achieve rhythmical exactitude, we preferred to favor our embodied communication, honed through hours in the practice room. Ultimately, we found that we did our best when not trying to be "accurate," but trying to be together.

---

[235] Kate Soper and Josh Modney, "Kate Soper – Cipher," Vimeo Video, 13:05, 2015, https://vimeo.com/96043620?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=6122648; Kate Soper and Josh Modney, "Kate Soper - Cipher (2012)," YouTube Video, 13:25, Feb. 12, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWcUgdFMdUE; Kate Soper and Josh Modney, "Cipher, from IPSA DIXIT, by Kate Soper, The Wet Ink Ensemble," YouTube, 6:10, Oct. 5, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=966yECWxy50.

To perform in unison, we relied on haptic and visual cues from each other, conditioned through time spent together coordinating our bodies. For example, we needed to play complex rhythms in unison without a grounding beat. We also needed to coordinate tandem performance on a single violin while both of us were simultaneously singing/speaking/vocalizing. This approach allowed for a flexible relationship to the score reliant on in-the-moment adjustments to keep us together. While some of our methods drew on existing collaborative skills, we found that the importance of non-verbal communication was magnified in the absence of other markers of time printed within the score.

Our mode of being "together" destabilized the score as the nucleus of the work, which created cognitive dissonance for us at every level of learning the work, the first of which we encountered in the practice room. As we began to develop our approach to *Cipher,* we immediately encountered norms within the conservatory training and performance traditions that we had both studied, specifically regarding the practice of interpreting and adhering to the musical score. As such, each of us came to the partnership with the expectations for ourselves and the rehearsal process formed from training for life as a professional musician. We wanted to handle ourselves as professionals, which meant respecting each other's time by coming to the rehearsal prepared to put the piece together. However, we found that this was impossible, given that the piece needed to be learned by us as a unit. Given the fact that we were largely unable to prepare in advance, thereby allowing us to satisfy an engrained sense of professionalism, we found it was difficult to trust ourselves as we entered this new musical collaboration.

As demonstrated in the journal that follows, which outlines our initial meeting at the start of the course, both Julia and I had a desire to impress the other and to be as professional as possible, attesting to the ways in which we struggled against our ideas of what learning a new

piece entails, including expectations of ourselves and what we felt was expected of us by

collaborators:

First meeting: Formality

FARRAH: We were figuring out how to address each other. We were definitely trying to be as professional as possible. You mentioned to me something in the FLUX room that I'm still not completely sure of. Was it that you were worried about sight reading? That makes me laugh because there is NO WAY to sight read this piece. You later sent me a text about this, but I was really just worried about myself and my ability to pass muster on the violin, which is not my instrument. I was also sort of relieved that you weren't worrying about me! Now that I'm not playing 6-8 hours/day, I can feel pretty self-conscious about my playing. I confess that I was really worried about the rhythms in the piece and thinking about having to digest them myself and then teach them to another person. I confess that I am ingrained with certain biases toward singers not being the best counters. Maybe I'm wrong about this! Well, clearly, in this instance, my main lifeline of grasping the piece wasn't going to hold up, and you basically taught me to play the piece by rote. It has been an amazing experience!

Something about this experience, the fact that many of the skills/tools are so outside of both of our comfort zones (is that true for you?), makes me feel really at ease, and really keeps my ego down. I don't feel protective of myself and I feel very open to the experience of learning. It's really pretty amazing to feel so comfortable and vulnerable with someone who you haven't known that long. I guess super new experiences can do that. It's just amazing to me that things have continued to feel open for me. I hope I can maintain this as we move towards something more "performance ready." I'm curious to check in on what that phrase means in this case, since mastery isn't really attainable….[236]

JULIA: (week 1) I feel as though I just happened to be in the right place at the right time for that first day of FLUX. [Our coach, and Director/Professor of the uclaFLUX ensemble] Gloria Cheng asked Farrah about the Soprano that might be collaborating on the piece. When Farrah mentioned that she was still waiting to hear back from the soprano, Gloria asked the room if there was a Soprano and I found my hand raising. It was my second day of grad school, and I felt like a wide-eyed, slightly panicked newbie. Gloria gives off a very powerful energy and anyone who didn't come with an idea of the piece that they would perform, Gloria firmly told them to go look in the library after giving suggestions. So, I breathed a sigh of relief to have an assignment. My first impression of Farrah was that she was dressed impeccably, she was wearing these INCREDIBLE turquoise earrings. She gave off an air of professionalism and seemed slightly more introverted. I sat down and because I knew Farrah was apparently waiting on another soprano, I was afraid that maybe Gloria had assigned me into the piece but Farrah might have wanted to perform with the other soprano. I tip-toed around a

---

[236] O'Shea and Johnson, "*Cipher* Journals."

conversation with her, giving her a little background about me, and she said that she wasn't waiting, and that she would definitely be interested in performing with me. I then felt as though I put my foot in my mouth when I said, "Just to let you know, I don't read music very well." WHAT. Who says that on their first day to the partner that they are going to study a piece with? More panic followed. I don't sightread well at all, and I have to work a little differently to make sure I walk into every professional situation well-prepared. Farrah received my comment well, and I scrambled to recover. When I first listened to the piece, I thought it was so unique and I was really excited to start on it, but it was also clearly going to be a very challenging work. Farrah and I talked a little about it, but that was a busy first day. We agreed to exchange phone numbers and coordinate a rehearsal time. I went home still feeling so anxious that because I said that I don't read music well, that Farrah, being the more professional, mature, educated musician, would text me and say, "thank you, but actually the other soprano might be a better fit." To do some damage control, I sent a text explaining that it was only when under pressure that I struggle with sight reading. I remember being so relieved when she sent a very empathetic response and then suggested that we meet the following week for a rehearsal. Cue the SIGH OF RELIEF. Now, how the hell am I going to learn this music?[237]

This commitment to professionalism, not wasting each other's time, providing a policing function and was a hindrance to our initial progress, and presented a great deal of consternation when we couldn't live up to our expectations for ourselves. As students, training for a professional world, this kind of thinking is useful to ensure that each person is coming prepared to an ensemble ready to explore their part in the larger context. When serving as part of a larger musical goal, you risk holding the group back by not having adequately prepared your part. But *Cipher* is different: there is really no way to approach the piece as a solo learner. Its highly collaborative nature means that the kind of messy learning typically reserved for the practice room must take place in the company of one's collaborator, making the private shared and creating an intimate bond developed through personal vulnerability and tandem problem solving.

---

[237] O'Shea and Johnson, "*Cipher* Journals."

Part II: Developing a Choreography & Modes of Identification

<div align="right">

Learning by rote
</div>

I realized during the first week that listening to Kate Soper's YouTube video was going to be one of the best ways to learn the piece. It's such a resource when the composer actually performs their own piece. I usually learn music by listening to recordings anyway, but I recognized immediately that with the complex notation, learning this piece by rote was going to be the most effective for me. I was a little afraid of the vocal demands, since some of Soper's notes require a level of tension in the sound that I am not at all experienced with. I have become very fond of it since then.

<div align="right">

-Julia[238]
</div>

<div align="right">

Speaking the part together
</div>

The connection between speech and rhythm in the first movement is super fascinating. I have also, on various occasions been frustrated by it. I feel like we use it to check back in on our ears and I'm good with that approach! However, sometimes I get frustrated by the specificity of [the score], and the responsibility that I feel to be "truthful" to [it]. As much as I can treat it like a cipher for a greater meaning, the better.

<div align="right">

-Farrah[239]
</div>

<div align="right">

In this together
</div>

After the first few rehearsals, it became very clear that my learning by rote and by feeling was actually a huge benefit to both of us. Farrah has been very vocal since the beginning how much she appreciates my learning process (and my ability to teach well) and how I have helped us in this piece. She is a more classically trained musician, and I see that sometimes she feels a little frustrated with parts of this piece because they are totally unconventional and require her to actively resist EVERYTHING she has learned. When Farrah also told me that she is actually a Violist who also plays violin, I couldn't believe it. After a few rehearsals and once we got more comfortable with each other, Farrah expressed that she sometimes feels like she is holding us back. I quickly reassured her that I have never once had that thought. I can't imagine having to process everything that Farrah has to pay attention to… from watching me and my every move as a cue, fingering and bowing, resisting more traditional habits to create new ones, teaching me how to finger the violin, speaking AND playing AND bowing at the same time...I feel like I have it easy compared to her. Farrah, if you are reading this now, we are in this together and I am so grateful to have you as my teammate and support system as we tackle this piece that is pushing us both out of our comfort zone. <3

---

[238] O'Shea and Johnson, "*Cipher* Journals."

[239] O'Shea and Johnson, "*Cipher* Journals."

Moving out of our professionalized thinking involved rolling up our sleeves in a new way. The highly collaborative nature of the movements which we have performed, (1 & 3) meant that we needed to cultivate a means of communication that extended beyond reading and counting the notes and rhythms on the page. After all, it can be inferred from Soper's notes in the score that it was the text that was meant to script the rhythm.[241] To play with the level of synchronicity clearly demanded by the complex rhythms, we needed to get the piece into our bones, so to speak, and to do so required communication on a variety of levels. For my part, I felt my diligent training of practicing traditional notes and rhythms was more of a foe than a friend, and Julia's process of rote learning was challenged by how difficult the piece *appeared*. Even if each of us relied on our own methods of learning, we needed to figure out a way to learn the piece together. More than any other piece I have learned, this one required the development of a new skill set. Building up a system of communication from scratch made us feel like beginners – a sensation not typically brought to experiences of graduate-level/professional musicians. The level of experimentation required to begin to approach the piece demanded a level of vulnerability that was not easily available. Frustratingly, we found that work with a metronome only got us so far. We needed to internalize the rhythms to be together and found that it was hard to get any kind of a speech-like flow while attending to the rhythmic exactitude that the page seemed to suggest.

---

[240] O'Shea and Johnson, "*Cipher* Journals."

[241] Kate Soper, "Program Note," in *Cipher* (New York: Schott, 2011), 1.

We hit a turning point when we started to play by ear as we listened to recordings of Soper and Modney before developing a tandem choreography for each movement. We used the score as a guide, and worked out, through repetition, how to sing each phrase. We began by learning the first movement, which turned out to be a beneficial primer of sorts, since it required that we watch and listen to each other closely to produce the same exact rhythms was a good place to start and developed a good framework for working together. Although my part in the first movement isn't vocal, I needed to speak/sing to internalize the rhythms according to the speech that accompanied them, which was difficult, since the text was difficult doesn't follow a linear path and is deliberately deconstructed.

Next, we learned the third movement, which required that we develop an embodied, interstitial choreography. Because we figured it would be challenging to learn to play one violin together, we gave ourselves the task of starting this movement next. Julia, comfortable with learning by rote would teach us how to get it in our bodies, and I would follow up with the score, nudging us as close to possible to what was written on the page. We arrived at this system of learning after having tried to learn the piece the opposite way, of attempting to analyze the written rhythms and then get them into our bones. This proved to be a tiresome task, and one that increased an unrealistic reliance on the score. The first movement, where we started the piece, required that we be exactly together. However, in the third movement, the combination of complex rhythms, various strings/timbres and dynamics made it impossible to replicate *exactly* what was on the page while watching Julia so that we *could* be exactly together.

The first thing we learned about the third movement was that Julia would have to cut her very long natural nails, which she always kept flawlessly painted. The long length at which she typically wears her nails didn't allow her to properly angle her finger on the violin fingerboard to

accurately play her part. I had grown up not being able to have long and colorful nails, so this was something that felt familiar to me.[242] It was fun for me to teach Julia to play the violin, especially since learning the first movement was very much in her wheelhouse. But beyond me explaining where to put her finger, and at which angle, how to slide up the string to produce a glissando and marking a place on the finger board for her to land on, we discovered the need to produce an embodied system of communication. I had two staves of music to watch—one for my own notes, and those that I needed to bow for Julia's fingers to sound. We created another instrument from our collaboration. In order to make this instrument sound, "buttons"—taps by Julia on my body—needed to be depressed. These were little reminders that I needed in order to keep track of the multiple lines of music happening simultaneously. This wasn't ventriloquism, however, or activation of something otherwise inert, or depersonalized/dehumanized, though at times it was frustrating not to be able to act independently; I'll get into this a little later in the chapter. The taps were behind- the-scenes operations of our method of approaching the piece. They were reminders that it was my time to be theatrical.[243]

---

[242] As I am no longer solely focusing on music performance, I often do paint my nails, though I still need to wear them short. We decided that our painted nails would feature in our promotional image for the performance. Our painted nails would announce our approach to the work, which was different from Soper and Modney's, whose performance approach did not engage the sartorial, and featured natural, unpainted nails.

[243] We learned the second and fourth movements in the following academic quarter, after performing the first and third. Our plan was to perform them during the winter quarter FLUX showcase, but the COVID-19 lockdown prevented our concert from taking place. In general,

Identifying as what one of my viola teachers called a "native violist," (meaning I'd never studied the violin and then switched to viola to attempt to secure a more certain career path—a commonly practiced maneuver), I found our rehearsal approach to be both exciting and daunting. After Julia and I had memorized the text and practice speaking and singing it together, I moved back to the violin, and would dutifully watch Julia's delivery of the text, recalling my own speaking and singing with her through my violin. This style of learning, which involves listening and internalizing the music in one's own body (instrument), is common for vocalists, and less so for string players. Breaking down the component physical gestures required to produce a musical phrase and then moving toward refinement requires listening first and, perhaps more importantly, invites the singer to take ownership over the chosen interpretation. By contrast, in learning orchestral instruments, there is a strong focus on fitting in, accuracy, and precision. This contrast comes from a difference in how the mechanisms work, or how the sound or music is produced, and the pedagogy for each is quite different, and of course varies from teacher to teacher.

The difference in our approach to learning notes meant that we had to come up with a new way to play together. Our style of rote learning and score follow up was familiar for Julia, and is more comfortable, in general, for singers. An emphasis of my training has been orchestral performance, which demands rhythmic exactitude—and for good reason. In coordinating upwards of one hundred individuals, all playing different, but interlocking parts, precision is paramount. However, in this duo context, such a commitment is considerably less urgent.

---

however, the second and fourth movements were more straight forward in terms of the approach to collaboration and drew on the methods of rehearsal we had previously developed.

Furthermore, the unfamiliarity of the learning style required by *Cipher* was magnified by my lack of identification with the violin. With my viola background, I was a reluctant violinist. The viola is often the bridesmaid, never the bride, and the violin is constantly in the spotlight, singing above the rest. Viola repertoire is less flamboyant, less technically showy than violin repertoire, and it has historically been an instrument played by "failed violinists." The viola is lower in pitch than the violin, and unlike the violin, it is acoustically imperfect. As such, it requires extra attention from the player to produce full sound. The way that the viola is played requires that the player relax their weight into the string and pull. While the violin has a vast solo repertoire and pedagogy developed for hundreds of years, the viola has long been thought of as an ensemble instrument, with an instrument-specific pedagogy and solo repertoire developing only in the latter half of the twentieth century.

From a very young age, it is common for instrumentalists to identify with their instrument, especially since learning to play often happens during childhood. For me, playing the instrument went hand in hand with engaging with my peers, and my friend groups were tied to musical activities. This identification is further tied to physical location in the orchestra- violists sit together. At the university level, this identification takes on another level, as different tutelages are tied to specific lines of thought and self-identification.[244] For this reason, combined with those already mentioned, there is a split in self-identification between violists and violinists, and there is typically a feeling of frustration among violists toward violinists who casually play the viola.

---

[244] See Kingsbury, *Music, Talent & Performance.*

Added to this is the fact that throughout my doctorate, I have found that my identity as a violist has been challenged. The level of professionalization required to play and perform a piece at the level of *Cipher* requires a level of commitment that I had previously given the instrument and viola. No longer approaching the viola in this way (I practice only when I have an upcoming engagement), I felt like an imposter approaching the piece not only as a violist, but a lapsed one who is no longer able to give her instrument the eight hours per day she had previously devoted to it. I'm sure this also has something to do with the fact that I was no longer a student *in* a music building. My life was no longer organized around practicing and performing, but around reading, writing and teaching. The sphere of my life devoted to performance became much smaller in scope as a result, and it's something I still haven't come to terms with. For all these reasons, my relationship to the violin felt uncertain and fraught.

Moving through these various levels of uncertainty with a new colleague was impactful, and more so in the physical proximity demanded by the work's interstitial choreography of the work's third movement. In their process, Soper and Modney formed experimental ways of working built on a foundation of trust. Modney discusses working on the piece from the "ground up" with Soper and describes the destabilization of hierarchies that result from this process. His description of their working relationship indicates a level of intimacy magnified by shared physical space, as much of the third movement requires that Modney and Soper develop an interstitial choreography to play one violin together. This physical closeness is further underlined through the vulnerability required by letting someone not otherwise trained to do so, touch your instrument. A professional-level violin-family instrument typically costs into the five and six figures and is often viewed by the musician as a fragile extension of themselves. The performer's relationship to the instrument is priceless, as technique is honed around the strengths and

weaknesses of a particular instrument. There is also the time and money spent finding the instrument, which often involves air travel and hotel fees. Many people spend years searching for the right instrument capable of matching their ideal sense of sound production and musical character, while also presenting new possibilities for extending their musical palette. Opening all of this to another person is a humbling experience, and one that requires comfort with the person entering not only your physical space, but the psychic space of care and love built around the relationship between the performer and their instrument.

Part III: External Dialogs

Prelude: Continuing the chapter's dance analogy, I'm reminded of Marta Savigliano's book, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*. In this book, Savigliano reminds the reader that it takes *three*, not two to tango—two to dance, and one to watch.[245] Savigliano's pithy play on this saying underlines a larger point in this chapter. The dance, or in this case, the performance of *Cipher*, is always shaped by the audience for which it is being performed.

Similarly, a intrusion of a phantom authorial figure in our practice room was a third partner. While this specter seems to have been a hindrance to our intimacy, in fact, it proved to be a catalyst for the development of our strength as a unit. Encounters with outsiders continued to shape our intimacy in the form of in-person interactions with two teachers and a male photographer (a flesh-and-blood version of the phantom masculine authority), which will be the focus of the rest of this section. Not only was our motion against this specter instrumental to our

---

[245] Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 73-74.

developing friendship, but it also shaped our aesthetic approach to our performance of *Cipher*, which will be outlined at the conclusion of this chapter.

To provide context for these triangulated encounters, I will now provide a sketch of the development of my relationship with Julia. As you can see from the first journal, Julia and I met in the classroom, and overcame the initial obstacle posed by preconceived ideas relative to professionalism related to time. From there, we met many times to rehearse in the Schoenberg Music Building in the Herb Alpert School of Music at UCLA. About halfway through our first academic quarter learning the piece, we began to meet in one of our homes to rehearse, usually accompanied by sharing a meal before or after. Approaching the end of the quarter, when we would perform two of the four movements, we planned to have another of these rehearsals, but would also have a photo shoot with one of Julia's visiting friends. After we ate at a local restaurant, we met a friend of hers--a man--at her apartment, who took pictures of us as we rehearsed.

I bring this instance up as it is a clear illustration of the ways in which Julia and I brought *Cipher* into being through negotiations with a third party. Being photographed by this man (whom I had never met) in the context of my friend's bedroom/bathroom basement suite, I was very aware of the dynamics around intimacy. As we rehearsed, the friend milled about the small space, attending to his own business, but I was aware of the private space of our rehearsal being observed and listened to. To clarify, this friend is a musician, though even if he weren't, there would still be a sense that suddenly, our rehearsal was a performance. From what I can remember, this rehearsal wasn't terribly productive, as I felt as though we were being observed. This was the only time Julia and I had ever rehearsed with someone else in the room, and the second time we played for a peer of ours—a soprano who had learned the piece the previous year

in the same school ensemble. I will note that playing the piece in the presence of Julia's

photographer friend, I felt watched and self-conscious, which different from the proud and

carefree feeling I had during a performance we gave to a woman colleague.

After rehearsing, we moved on to our photo shoot, explaining to Julia's friend that we

liked the black and white photo of Modney's and Soper's hands, intertwined (as in figure 4.1,

below). We explained to him that we felt this image told a story and were motivated to create our

own version of this photo. We made clear to him that our intention, however, was to feature our

femininity, with painted nails. In the picture he took below, he added another layer to our

photograph by including his own vision into our duo, looking over our shoulders and framing the

shot with our faces as well as our hands.

Figure 4.15 Image: Kate Soper's and Josh Modney's hands intertwine on Modney's violin for
Cipher. Image Credit: Alexander Perrelli & Emma van Deun

Figure 4.16 Image: photograph of Julia Johnson (left) and Farrah O'Shea (right) performing *Cipher.*

In this image (figure 4.2), we are captured in our process, caught between a staged "theatrical" photograph and a staged portrait. This is a different approach to photography than staged by the Soper/Modney promotional image (figure 4.1), wherein the focus is on the choreography of the intertwined hands, with Soper's open chest and suspended arms calling to mind a ballerina. Even the way her right hand forefinger extends outward while the others gently on the instrument call to mind the extended first finger of a dancer.

Looking at the still from a YouTube performance of *Cipher* (figure 4.3)*,* it's clear that Soper and Modney's is a staged, live shot. Their image calls to mind intimacy required or initiated by the piece, though not necessarily between the two of them as individuals. Crossing

her arms allows her to suspend the weight of her hands from her elbows, calling to mind the finesse of a ballerina. The added cross of her arms underlines the intertwinement with Modney indicates the dance between them.

Figure 4.17 Image: Still from YouTube video. Kate Soper and Josh Modney, "Kate Soper - Cipher (2012)," YouTube Video, 13:25, Feb. 12, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWcUgdFMdUE.

That said, while Julia and I had the intention of featuring ourselves and our relationship as a part of the image, there are physical gaps between us and in our relationship to the violin. I suspect this is a result of being seen through the male gaze. Through we did give direction to the photography, with the introduction of another artistic perspective, it felt like we were ceding some artistic control. I remember feeling conscious of being photographed by our male photographer and was unsure about inviting someone else's vision about what we were doing through our performance. Furthermore, I wasn't sure how I felt about the male gaze framing us in the homoeroticism I felt was implicit in our interpretation, but that I wasn't conformable discussing that with Julia. In the Western classical sphere, homoerotic connection between performers can be sublimated, read as an uncanny but "strictly musical" connection between

performers. While I don't think that Soper intended an erotic exchange, the piece does set the stage for such considerations.

Section I: Coachings

Introduction:

Part of Soper's vision in this piece is to loosen the bonds among composer, performer, and instrument. This work deconstructs the idea that instrumental music is superior to any music that relies on words or visible actions by bodies, and thus enforces the idea that the composer exerts total control. Whereas the "instruments" stay the same time after time, Soper has written this piece for her friends, and in most cases, in collaboration with them. Writing for people, as opposed to instruments, deconstructs the idea that composers are in control.

For example, in *Cipher*, Soper reminds us that it's not the "violinist" and the "soprano" on stage, but rather, Josh and Kate.[246] Furthermore, in a virtual meeting Julia and I had with Soper, she remarked at her continual surprise that new people learn the piece, noting how it seemed like such a personal and arduous endeavor, and one that she finds difficult to imagine a duo picking up and learning. Furthermore, this formation lacks a substantial repertory, so it's not as if there are formed professional duos looking for such works. She did share that another violinist-soprano duo has formed out of learning the piece, and Julia and I shared that we hoped to stay together and learn more repertoire for our "instrumentation."

The metonymic slip between person and instrument manifests differently in our experience with two faculty advisers (coaches, as they are called in music performance

---

[246] Soper, quoted in Leland, "An Interview with Kate Soper."

departments). In Opera Workshop, a course required by all voice majors, we were encouraged to get away from the score as much as possible.[247] Our opera coach found that when we were relying on the score, we were less together, and not at all confident in each other or what we were putting out musically. In contrast, when we attended coachings with the instrumental faculty, we found that there was doubt in our approach to the score. Was it close enough to what was written? Was this *Cipher*? Or something else entirely? Julia and I felt as though we were being pulled in two different directions as we learned the piece, so we scheduled a virtual meeting with Kate Soper. She confirmed what she writes in her notes that accompany the score—that being together matters above all else—but I didn't feel that this matter, at least for me, had been completely resolved.

Without valuing one approach over the other, the combination of the two makes for an interesting reflection on the act of learning and performing music. Each approach reveals a set of values. The opera coach was interested in performance as a theatrical gesture, in the story we were telling—though with different effects for me and Julia; whereas she was to develop a persona, I was, in many cases, still *just* a violinist. The instrumental coach, on the other hand, was interested in our performance as an extension of the musical score; a representation of the musical work through faithful performance, and not at all in our theatrical performance. As this chapter has outlined so far, we routinely returned to the following question: "What was more important—our approach to the music, or the music itself?" Our experiences with our instrumental coach seemed to bear out a dutiful approach to the music. On the other hand,

---

[247] This course carried considerable weight for Julia, since opera is considered to be the peak ambition of anyone studying voice in a school of music.

coachings with the opera coach bore out a more theatrical approach, but while reinscribing

notions of the "transparent performer" applied to me in my role as an accompanimental

"violinist" rather than a character.

Coachings:

<div align="right">

First coaching

I was super nervous for the first coaching, mainly because I didn't have ALL the information, and was going for the big picture. Julia sounded great, but I was concerned that I didn't have it all together. Still kind of am….

-Farrah[248]

</div>

The mentality reflected in the above journal was conditioned by years of learning in the

conservatory setting but was re-rehearsed in the form of coachings with our contemporary music

professor, a woman and a pianist with whom we routinely returned to modes of rehearsal meant

to exactingly reproduce pitches and rhythms. [249] Even though Soper and Modney themselves

departed from what was written on the score, this coach instructed us that we should be able to

send a recording to the composer, and for that reason, it should be as close to technically perfect

as possible. Toward this level of score fidelity, in one coaching, we spent the entire time going

---

[248] O'Shea and Johnson, "*Cipher* Journals."

[249] For those who aren't familiar with ensemble coachings in the music school context, individual ensembles rehearse together outside of the classroom, usually 2-3 times per week for 1-2 hours each rehearsal. Students meet with the ensemble coach for one hour weekly for ten to twelve weeks (depending on the length of the academic term). This is considered a baseline commitment. Students may rehearse much more than this if the ensemble has ambitions to compete in competitions, usually with the long-term goal of becoming a professional ensemble.

over the complex rhythm of one measure, which she replicated on the piano, and then proceeded to teach us by rote. She put the metronome on and instructed us to record her playing—we were to use this as a practice aid.

Interestingly, the method described in this anecdote is not so different from our own method of rote learning. Where this practice departs from our method, is in terms of power: If we didn't satisfy the terms set out by the coach/class, we would be waylaid in our journey forward with the piece. This created a power shift toward satisfying requirements set by the coach (as per the agreements of the course) and away from our own method of rote learning, with Soper and our own evolving instinct for effective performance as our guide. These familiar teacher/student power dynamics invalidated our approach to learning the piece, and as such, we often felt we took one step forward and two steps back.

This professor recognized the limited time available to students on the ten-week quarter system and needed to run her classroom efficiently, guiding students in their successful performance of difficult and unfamiliar works in a relatively short window of time. The model she has successfully employed is a common one across Western classical performance: rhythmic accuracy is champion to all, bringing musicians together to achieve the goal of the semblance of accurately realizing the piece. This goal comes from rigidly confoming to certain standards of beginning and ending together each of those sounds that are prescribed in the score. It has nothing whatever to do with communication to anyone. Thus, in a field that relies on making the most of scheduled time rehearsing together, these skills of timeliness, decisiveness, and preparedness are vital for students to learn. However, while overcoming technical challenges and musical goals go hand in hand, putting the score at the center of our learning was antithetical to our method.

We found support in our vision of the piece when we visited Opera Workshop, where

Julia seemed to be given the opportunity to appear as a person on stage. I, however, was still

relegated to the rank of "her violinist." The following anecdote illustrates the ways in which

Soper's wish for the appearance of "people" onstage, instead of the "soprano" and "violinist,"

continued to be challenged, even as Julia was addressed as a person:

> As soon as I arrived, I saw that there was a table with two chairs in the middle of the
> Ostin rehearsal room. There were chairs on either side of this table that formed an arc.
> Surmising that the table was for the professor, I came behind it as I prepared to leave the
> music on the table for the professor. At this point, a woman, who I knew not to be the
> professor, announced that I was in *her* seat. I was taken aback—it was clear she didn't
> understand that I was arranging the music for the professor.
>
> My positionality in this particular circumstance was further negotiated. Leaving my
> music, I preceded to prepare my instrument to perform with Julia. This involved getting
> my instrument out of the case, checking the tuning, and then moving to the center of the
> semicircle of chairs. The other singers were getting settled, taking their seats.
>
> At this point, I think I must have introduced myself, or maybe Julia had introduced me.
> But in any case, either the professor, or the woman I mentioned earlier---who I learned
> was the Teaching Assistant, asked Julia to "introduce her violinist."
>
> I discussed it later with Julia, and it didn't escape her notice. At some point, this
> resonated with our sense of Kate Soper's idea that this piece should be about the
> individuals performing the piece, and not the instruments. This was a great example of
> the latter.
>
> Nothing stands out as notable that we discussed in relation to my part. The coach
> remarked that I should have smoother bow changes in my "violin-like" part. This was
> very much true, and something that since there were so many other more collaborative-
> seeming things to work on I had neglected to refine.[250]

In this instance, I was cast in the role of the "invisible instrumentalist," a formulation

which has its apotheosis in the accompanist. This scenario played out for a second time at the

---

[250] Farrah O'Shea, "Personal Reflections on learning *Cipher*" (unpublished manuscript,

2019), Google Doc.

opera coach's house. After Julia and I had discussed this encounter, Julia tried to curb this behavior in the next meeting with our coach, directly referencing my name so that I wouldn't be referred to as "the violinist" or "your violinist." While the coach did refer to me by name, the meeting seemed very much about Julia, with much of the coaching focusing on the delivery of her part. For instance, when we arrived at her home, the coach didn't look at me—she was busy with some task on the phone and really only greeted Julia, with whom the coach had a previously established teacher/student relationship. It was strange not to be greeted, but then I felt like this wasn't totally unusual, as she has a teacher/student relationship with Julia. However, as a result, I got the feeling that I was not an equal artist seeking her input or advice, even though Julia and I sought out her expertise together.

That said, this lack of personal address came as a surprise, as it departed from how I had seen my professors greet a guest in our studio. The visiting person would be made to feel as though they are every bit as valued as the main student, and I think this has a direct correlation to the dynamic of the musical parts. I'm not an orchestral musician in a pit to Julia's diva onstage. For this piece, the two of us are very much equal collaborators. This connects to ideas about what Bruce Haynes calls the "transparent performer" wherein the performer is subservient to the music, and the latter shines through the former, rendering the musician an interchangeable vessel.[251] This model, which sets the norm of contemporary ideas about instrumentalists, is born out of the concept of absolute music, in which certain Romantic-era works are thought of as

---

[251] Bruce Haynes, "The Transparent Performer" in *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 86-101.

"non-referential." As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, this mentality pervades attitudes toward instrumentalists in the Western classical tradition. It makes sense, then, that performers themselves would disappear, supposedly foregrounding the music, rather than any kind of subjectivity (in the music and through their personhood).

Later in our meeting, the coach also asked Julia what she would wear, and not what I would wear. This caused me to think directly about what I would wear. What did it mean that the coach did not consider what I would wear? The fact that I wasn't included in this conversation meant something in the larger context of things. It made me feel as though I wasn't feminine enough, or wasn't able to perform femininity on stage, or that it wasn't worth thinking about because of my positionality as an instrumentalist. This is likely due to the fact that due to the idea of the "transparent" performer, instrumentalists normally wear black on stage to self-efface so that "the music" may emerge through them (not *of* them). Because they are ostensibly transparent, their gender (or performance thereof) is ostensibly irrelevant to the music.

On the other hand, though Western classical music doesn't invite engagement with the subjectivity of its instrumentalists, it remains mired in a limited range of sight and sound, as expectations of gender, race, sexuality, and class intersect to form expectations for visual and aural experiences of Western classical music performance. Furthermore, audiences of Western classical music are often white and middle-to-upper class, and as evidenced in the tradition of heterosexual operatic roles and in dress codes within opera and in symphony orchestras, the genre often reperforms whiteness, the gender binary, and investments in heterosexuality.

Part IV: Rehearsing (owning the inconsistencies)

Since I have speaking lines in the third movement, I was instructed by our opera coach (she/her) to participate in the development of various characters throughout the movement,

inviting theatrical interaction between me and Julia. Treating myself as a theatrical entity marked a turning point for me and impacted my approach to the first movement (in which I play and do not speak). From then on, rehearsals, subsequent coachings, and performances became a way to critique normative relationships between the vocalist and performer.

The text of the third movement is drawn from a section of Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. However, the delivery of this text, like the physical choreography it demands, requires an interconnected and highly collaborative approach. Freud's text, which I have copied below, is deconstructed and reorganized in the score, creating a dream-like, stream of conscious effect for the listener.

iii. Introducing Sigmund Freud

[Spoken by soprano, simultaneously with violinist]:

The dream is not comparable to the irregular sounds of a musical instrument, which, instead of being played by the hand of a musician, is struck by some external force; the dream is not meaningless, not absurd, does not presuppose that one part of our store of ideas is dormant while another part begins to awake. It is a perfectly valid psychic phenomenon, actually a wish-fulfillment. It may be enrolled in the continuity of the intelligible psychic activities of the waking state....It is built up by a highly complicated intellectual activity. The first dream which we have considered was the fulfillment of a wish; another may turn out to be the realization of an apprehension; a third may have a reflection as its content....Are there, then, dreams other than wish- dreams; or are there none but wish- dreams?

[Spoken by violinist, simultaneously with soprano]:

If, in the evening, I eat anchovies, olives, or other strongly salted foods, I am thirsty at night, and therefore I wake. The waking, however, is preceded by a dream...namely, that I am drinking....And then I wake, and find that I have an actual desire to drink. Even if we conclude that every dream has a meaning and psychic value, we must nevertheless allow for the possibility that this meaning may not be the same in every dream. The first dream which we have considered was the fulfillment of a wish. If the dream, as this theory defines it, represents a fulfilled wish, what is the cause of the striking and unfamiliar manner in which this fulfillment is expressed?

Figure 18.4 Image: Kate Soper, "III. Introducing Sigmund Freud," in *Cipher* (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011), measures 143-149.

As indicated at the top of the page of figure 4.4, note values do not indicate rhythm. The timing of this movement is dependent on speech pattern, and the delivery of these speech patterns is dictated by their connection to physical choreography. The previous movement ends

---

[252] As printed in Kate Soper, "III. Introducing Sigmund Freud" in *Cipher*, (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011), 11.

in a tremolo (rapid bow movements) on D5, which is held over into the beginning of the third. Julia affixes the mute to the violin as I tremolo, changing the timbre of the string as she reads the text, "The dream is not [comparable] to the irregular sounds…" Roughly at the point where she reads "hand of a musician," Julia glissandos a finger up the fourth string, and upon reading "struck," she begins a glissando down to A-flat 4. For Julia's sliding to sound, I play her string (IV) as well as the third string, where I am holding the D5. As soon as she reads, "struck," I begin my text, "If in the evening,,," while simultaneously playing a glissando up to A5 on the third string, continuing to play the A-flat 4 being held by Julia on the fourth string. The rest of the movement continues in this lockstep choreography.

With the coach, we came up with three main vocal registers for this movement which roughly trace Freud's id, ego and superego. The id, reflective of instinctual desires, was voiced by me through the description of dreams and desires. On the other end of this spectrum, the moralistic super-ego came through in our portrayal of text like, "the first dream we have considered was the fulfillment of a wish," which Julia and I read together. Since there was no exactly moralistic text in the movement, we imagined a cartoon "good fairy" or a fairy godmother granting wishes. For these moments and others that mentioned the word "wish," we engaged a style of speaking that was deliberately campy, as if we were adults dressed in fairy godmother costumes. Finally, between these two poles was the moderating ego, which we expressed through a prim, professorial "lecturing" voice.

Our theatrical representation of id, ego, and super-ego enabled our performance of gender to take place against a backdrop of Freud's subconscious. Both the ego and super-ego were imbued with symbols of prim femininity—the do-gooder godmother on one hand, and the librarian-esque professor on the other hand. The id, on the other hand, presented a lusty figure

greatly contrasting the normative femininity represented by the ego and super-ego. Voicing the id, the coach came up with the idea to give me a deep, sultry, sexually suggestive voice. This contrasted with Julia's prim vocal delivery of the ego and super-ego, both of which were pitched deliberately higher, underlining her femininity. My voice is naturally lower than Julia's, but for the id, I pitched it even lower, suggestively scooping out its bottom registers and reveling in a gravelly tone. In performance, this caught the audience by surprise, and for the first time that long night, they laughed as I read my first text, "If, in the evening, I eat anchovies, olives, or other strongly salted foods, I am *thirsty* at night, and therefore I *wake*," marking this moment as unusual through their laughter.[253]

By virtue of my reading these lines, I was beginning to tug at gender representation on stage in classical settings. First, as a speaking instrumentalist, and second as a woman using a low, sexually suggestive voice. As a duo, this deconstructive effect was amplified by the creation of a sonic dream world through a shifting pastiche of vocal identities: Julia's lines mostly fit into the domain of the ego, with occasional ventures into the super-ego and mine move between id, ego, and super-ego. The pastiche of characters was also mirrored in the gestures suggested to Julia by the opera coach, which were religious, sexually suggestive, and professorial. These gestures pertained to the physical body, directly engaging character, and thus gender. I, on the other hand, was not given physical gestures. Since I was playing the violin, all my instruction was to be delivered vocally, though it's possible that I *could* have engaged in physical gesture, even if I were given instructions to underline sexual innuendo (clearly suggested by the vocal delivery of the text) with a wink. Julia opted not to feature these gestures, but the suggestion was

---

[253] Italics mine. I drew out these words to suggest sexual longing.

formative for me, as I felt that the suggestion was that Julia was feminine, and that, through my vocal delivery and *lack* of gestures, I was being read as more masculine than feminine: Unlike Julia, I was not touching my body, my voice was pitched lower to deliver a lustful text, and my gestures were normatively related to the performance of my instrument, which could be read as phallic.

This was a strange moment for me, since I use she/her pronouns, and am feminine presenting. That said, my femininity felt less expressive than the operatic femininity with which I viewed Julia (on and offstage). Gender identity is theatricalized for singers (and heteronormatively codified), and many divas are known for carrying the feminized persona off the stage. By contrast, since there are no characters, as such, in orchestral and chamber music instrumental playing (usually), the performance of gender, or "spectacular gender" isn't figured into interpretive decisions. Solo instrumental playing provides a notable exception to this, as in the performances of Cameron Carpenter, Nicola Benedetti and Vanessa Mae, to name a few.

That said, there are norms of gender performance, with women wearing long black in orchestras or dress clothes that cover exposed skin in chamber music settings, and men in tuxedos in orchestras (white and black tie, depending on the ensemble), or suits for chamber music. Outrage over transgressions of these gendered norms illustrate the presence of these norms, which suggests that the lack of spectacular gender isn't indicative of a larger meaning associated with gender performance. For instance, outrage over transgressions in dress by Yuja Wang, known for wearing short, brightly colored dresses as she plays the piano illustrate the ways in which Western classical music is tied to performances of gender that prefer to remain sexless, that is, without reference to the act of sex, and continues to codify a heteronormative ideal with the staging of two distinct genders.

To refuse gendered norms typically ascribed to me in the Western classical sphere, I decided that for this performance, I would dress androgynously. I hoped that by refusing the normative femininity familiar to me through my performances in this tradition, in combination with my theatrical/musical performance, I might highlight the tacit role gender plays in collaborative instrumental performance, thus skewing the sense of gender associated with normative modes of Western classical music performance. I wore an olive blazer and blouse with a thin, satin black tie and cigarette pants. Julia wore a deep blue satin halter dress with a plunging neckline (see figures 4.5 and 4.6).

Interestingly, with its refusal of overt masculinity and femininity, this sartorial decision might pose a way to give visibility to the supposedly transcendent, subjectivity-less instrumental performer. I arrived at this decision based on my experiences with the opera coach, in which I was pigeonholed as masculine, and in terms of my own identity with femininity. This also has to do with my relationship with the viola, lower in range than the violin, and not typically a solo instrument. The viola is the stepsister to the violin, and as I have explained, the viola is not a solo instrument. Its performers are not divas. Furthermore, when performing, instrumentalists are not theatricalized. As a result, any diva-dom is tied to self-identification outside of the concert space.

Furthermore, as Julia has described in her journal, I am "reserved," "professional" both of which may read as more masculine than feminine. My age and positionality as a "scholar" also factored into my general view of myself and were noticed by Julia as different from her own identity, but not as tied to my gender presentation. When assumed as such by the coach, I decided that I would lean into it, as these masculine airs underlined the feelings I had about the differences in femininity as described above.

Figure 4.19 Image: Farrah O'Shea (left) and Julia Johnson (right) perform *Cipher* (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011).

Figure 4.20 Farrah O'Shea (left) and Julia Johnson (right) perform *Cipher* (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011).

Intimacy Issues

Cueing and a desire for independence

In this process of communicating, you've been conducting quite a bit and giving me physical cues, too—touching my shoulder in the third movement. I think this is effective, but sometimes I get frustrated that the music doesn't seem to allow us to meet and share musically. Does that make sense? Usually, in chamber music, there is a feeling of exchange when you cue someone. I don't feel that, possibly because there isn't much of a sense of shared music, despite the fact that things are so collaborative. Instead of feeling that I show up and support you, I feel bad; like I can't quite seem to get with the program despite my best efforts. I'm not sure if it's me, or the music, or both. Something to keep thinking about for me….

- Farrah[254]

A continuing journey

I thought I understood, but it seems I am still disentangling the conversation around collaboration in *Cipher*.

-Me (Farrah) to the reader, now

i. Jenny Holzer feat. Ludwig Wittgenstein

"I came to language because I wanted to be explicit about things...and it became clear that the only way to do it was to use language. People can understand you when you say...something."

---

[254] O'Shea and Johnson, "*Cipher* Journals."

186

— Jenny Holzer, interview in The Progressive (Apr. 1993: 30)[255]

Once I had a taste for the theatrical possibilities that could be enacted through my performance, I decided to apply them to the first movement, in which I had no speaking lines. As I have mentioned, the first movement features complete synchronicity, and our experience learning the movement involved co-learning Julia's text, including practicing its verbal delivery before I reproduced the spoken rhythm on the violin. What was difficult for me about this movement was feeling as though the words led everything, and though I spoke them with Julia as we were learning the piece, in performance I produced notes on the violin. I wanted to feel as though there was some deconstruction of the stereotypically subservient, invisible instrumental accompanist which I had experienced with the opera coach. After our theatrical breakthroughs in the third movement, I decided that I would "perform" our togetherness by mouthing along with her for theatrical flourish to critique the accompanimental norm.

This decision came after the opera coach suggested that we memorize the score and play the first movement (and as much of the piece as possible) without it. This was, of course, exactly opposed to the rhythmic exactitude proposed by our instrumental coach. To enact such fine levels of performance, one would need to be playing from the score, rather than learning them by ear and then being together. But that is exactly what we did, and thus, the piece became about our performance as a unit. Since I already had been watching Julia closely—and given the nature of our vexed relationship to the score—this seemed an even more powerful way to perform being

---

[255] As printed in Kate Soper, "I. Jenny Holzer (feat. Ludwig Wittgenstein)," in *Cipher*, (New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011), 1.

together. As such, the first movement enacted the role of the subservient, accompanimental violinist, but one who valued allegiance to my collaborator rather than the score.

Whereas in the first movement I decided to perform ultimate allegiance to Julia, overperforming the quality of subservience suggested in the term "your violinist," in the third movement, I wanted our collaborative relationship to exhibit individual personhood to contrast the performance of subservience I felt was underlined in the first movement. Where I was a willing participant in my accompaniment in the first movement, in the third movement, even though I wanted to feel less reliant, in fact, that was a necessary aspect of bringing the piece to life.

As I described earlier in the chapter, our parts intertwined verbally and physically. We completed each other's sentences and alighted on the same words together. All the while, we were coordinating physical gestures on the instrument to make music together. As I have mentioned in journals and throughout this chapter, this was enacted through rote learning, which was challenging for me on a variety of levels: it was difficult to separate from my comfortable methods of learning, with feelings of discomfort that extended to my identity as a professional musician and tangentially, as a violist. As a result, my excitement about developing a character was influenced, in part, by a desire to be leading our duo a bit more. I was to teach Julia to play the violin, just as she taught me to learn by rote.

That said, I still felt like I needed a lot of help from her to play the piece. We really were one instrument and needed to develop a system of cues so that we could move through the piece. As it turns out, my ambitions of being a leader were thwarted. The third movement may have initially felt like it allowed me more of an opportunity to be independently collaborating with

Julia, but in fact, it just pointed up the ways in which we were inextricably linked. What changed was the conversation around or spotlight on group performance.

Reflections

As is, perhaps, apparent, my theatrical gestures in dress and voice were subtle. This is because I felt compelled to participate in the social mores and traditions of Western classical music while also deconstructing them. Furthermore, I was a student performing for a grade, in addition to being an outsider to this community of performance degree-seeking students. I felt conscious of not wanting to overstep or offend. This meant keeping intact the general divide between performer and audience, while also deciding with my co-performer how to approach unscripted elements of the piece that seemed to demand theatrical interpretation, thus pushing at the boundaries of what audience members expect to be topics of performance (i.e. "the music itself," rather than expressions of gender, sexuality, race, and class). This resulted in subtle shifts in performance that allowed me to participate in the performance as dictated by the norms at hand, while also toying with my involvement with those norms. Rather than rupture the event, I wanted to create a ripple that made the audience (or maybe just myself) contemplate what about subjectivity is taken for granted in such events.

In rehearsal, in coachings, and in performance I wondered if we successfully communicated our critique of gendered performance roles. I found myself wishing that more theatrical direction could be given to my part, and this was something that I was enjoying participating in through Julia's part, but I did (and do) feel as though theatricality were something that could be more of a direct part of my experience. It's not something that I'm accustomed to working on, and it's not something that I have felt comfortable directing decisions

about, given my experiences as an instrumentalist. Furthermore, I found that theatricality was hindered by the need to meet the technical demands set by the piece. For instance, there are many unique things about the violin part that I fear still look like "playing the violin" and don't register as somehow transgressive. While sometimes I desired for the music to *look* hard, unorganized or chaotic, in order to do a particular passage with accuracy or aplomb, it was necessary to play in a very organized fashion. There were specific moments where I was able to depart from this mindset, as experimented with performing difficulty in the performance we gave, but it was actually something that I used to amp myself up. Something about riding the edge of performance was thrilling and motivated and enlivened my performance. In this case, it would have been *ok* if things went off the rails. I like to think that the audience *did* recognize our deconstructive attempts, since during the third movement of our performance, the audience, for the only time that whole long night, laughed softly.

In any case, creating our own map through the score, the identities of the performers on stage come into conversation with the ideas explored in the piece. Soper's composition inspired us to bring a level of campy playfulness to the Western classical music stage, thereby inviting performers and audience members to begin to chip away at ossified notions of identity that continue to govern and shape performances of Western classical music. Furthermore, studying this work through the act of performance underlines the slippery and changeable meanings particular bodies bring to performance. There is a shift that occurs, when you think about bodies on stage as creating meaning, as opposed to meaning being inherent in the work that is being reperformed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbate, Carolyn and Roger Parker. *A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years.* New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2021.

Ahmed, Sarah. "Intimate Touches: Proximity and Distance in International Feminist Dialogues." *Oxford Literary Review* 19 no. 1/2 (1997): 19-46. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44122457.

Anderson, Joceline. "Now You've Got the Shiveries: Affect, Intimacy, and the ASMR Whisper Community." *Television & New Media* 2015 Vol 26 (8): 683-700. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414556184.

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

Barlow, John Perry. "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." Electronic Frontier Foundation*,* February 8, 1996. Accessed January 11, 2021. https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008.

Berlant, Lauren. "Intimacy: A Special Issue." *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 281-288. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344169.

Besharse, Kari E. "The Role of Texture in French Spectral Music." DMA diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009.

Bonds, Mark Evan. *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Bullock, Julia. "Julia Bullock Introduces Us to La Passion de Simone…" Facebook Video, 1:48. March 12, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/ojaifestival/videos/julia-bullock-introduces-us-to-kaija-saariahos-la-passion-de-simone-a-work-that-/240774880669749/.

Bullock, Julia, Thomas Hampson, Anthony McGill. "Thursdays with Thomas: Soprano Julia Bullock and Clarinetist Anthony McGill." IDAGIO Music Streaming, Powered by Zoom. Streamed live on Jun 4, 2020. YouTube video, 1:25. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUEbOR9LpU4.

Cameron, Sharon. "The Practice of Attention: Simone Weil's Performance of Impersonality." *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 216-252. https://doi.org/10.1086/374026.

Chion, Michel. *The Voice in Cinema*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Cusick, Suzanne. "Gender and the Cultural Work of a Classical Music Performance." *Repercussions* 3, no. 1 (1994): 77-110.

Davis, Tracy C. *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil War Defense*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle.* Detroit, MI: Black & Red, 1977.

de Lauretis, Teresa. *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1984.

Doty, Alexander. "Introduction: There's Something about Mary." *Camera Obscura* 65, Vol. 22, Number 2 (2007): 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2007-001.

Doyle, Jennifer. *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

Duffin, Ross W. *How Equal Temperament Ruined Harmony (and Why You Should Care).* New York: Norton, 2007.

Dyer, Richard. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

El Sistema Sweden, English. "El Sistema Sweden." Accessed January 15th, 2021. http://www.elsistema.se/om-el-sistema/in-english/.

Ewell, Philip. "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame." *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (September 2020). 10.30535/mto.26.2.4.

Fineberg, Joshua. "Spectral Music." *Contemporary Music Review* 19, part 2, (2000): 1-5. https://doi.org/10.1080/07494460000640221.

Flaherty, Colleen. "Whose Music Theory." *Inside Higher Ed.*, August 7, 2020. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/07/music-theory-journal-criticized-symposium-supposed-white-supremacist-theorist.

Foster, Susan Leigh. "Choreographies of Gender." *Signs* 24, no. 1 (1998): 1–33. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175670.

Goehr, Lydia. *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959.

Google. "Autocomplete policies." Google Search Help: Help Center. Accessed January 15, 2021, https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/7368877.

___. "How Google Autocomplete Works in Search." The Keyword: Product Updates. Accessed January 15, 2021. https://blog.google/products/search/how-google-autocomplete-works-search/.

Gruen, John. "An American Soprano Adds the Met to Her Roster." *New York Times,* September 18, 1983. https://www.nytimes.com/1983/09/18/arts/an-american-soprano-adds-the-met-to-her- roster.html.

Haneke, Michael, director. *The Piano Teacher*. 2001; France: MK2.

Haynes, Bruce. *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Hirsch, Jeremy. "David Lang's The Whisper Opera Has Intimacy Issues." *Schmopera*, February 25, 2018. https://www.schmopera.com/david-langs-the-whisper-opera-has-intimacy-issues/.

Hoffmann, E. T. A. and Arthur Ware Locke. "Beethoven's Instrumental Music: Translated from E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Kreisleriana* with an Introductory Note by Arthur Ware Locke." *The Musical Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (January 1917): 123-133. https://www.jstor.org/stable/738009.

Holzman, Marin Sander, Jim Findlay, Claire Chase, Joshua Rubin and Tony Arnold. "David Lang's The Whisper Opera." Filmed in 2016 for Mount Tremper Arts. Accessed June 12, 2017. https://vimeo.com/136341963.

Johnson, Ben. "Music: David Lang composed The Whisper Opera for small, in-person audiences: Bold Opera Unplugs your Ears." *Post City Toronto,* February 25, 2015. http://www.postcity.com/Eat-Shop-Do/Do/February-2015/Music-Whisper-to-a-scream/.

Kerman, Joseph. "A Few Canonical Variations." *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (Sept. 1983): 107-126. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343408.

Kingsbury, Henry. *Music, Talent, Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

Koestenbaum, Wayne. *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire.* New York: Vintage, 1993.

Le Guin, Elisabeth. *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology*. Berkeley: University of

California Press, 2006.

___. "One Bar in Eight: Debussy and the Death of Description." In *Beyond Structural Listening: Postmodern Modes of Hearing*, edited by Andrew Dell'Antonio, 233-251. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Lang, David. *the whisper opera (for soprano and four musicians).* New York: Ricordi, 2013.

Lang, David, Ethan Philbrick. "Office Hours with David Lang and Ethan Philbrick." Filmed on January 23, 2018 for NYU Skirball. Facebook live. https://www.facebook.com/nyuskirball/videos/office-hours-with-david-lang-and-ethan-philbrick/10155379554527725/.

Leland, Andrew. "An Interview with Kate Soper." *The Believer*, August 1, 2018. https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-kate-soper/.

Li, Xinghua. "Whispering: the murmur of power in a lo-fi world." *Media, Culture, & Society* 33(1): 19-34. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0163443710385498.

Libbey Bowl. "Home." Venue Information. Accessed May 27, 2021. https://libbeybowl.org/.

Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. "Ancient Spanish Ballads." In *Outre-Mer: A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea, Volume II.* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1835.

Madrid, Alejandro. "Why Music and Performance Studies? Why Now?: An Introduction to the Special Issue." *Trans-Transcultural Music Review* 13 (2009). https://www.sibetrans.com/trans/article/1/why-music-and-performance-studies-why-now-an-introduction-to-the-special-issue.

Marrs, Megan. "Predictive Search: Is This the Future or the End of Search?." The WordStream Blog, WordStream: Online Advertising Made Easy. Last updated April 3, 2015. https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2013/06/24/predictive-search.

McClary, Susan. *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

___. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

___. *Georges Bizet: Carmen.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

___. "The Lure of the Sublime: Revisiting the Modernist Project." In *Transformations of Musical Modernism*, edited by Erling E. Guldbrandsen and Julian Johnson, 21–35. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

___. *The Passions of Peter Sellars: Staging the Music.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019.

McGee, Matt. "Google Instant Search: The Complete User's Guide." *Search Engine Land*, September 8, 2010. https://searchengineland.com/google-instant-complete-users-guide-50136.

Midgette, Anne. "Music Review: 'La Passion De Simone' An Earnest Meditation on a Life Devoted to Human Suffering." *New York Times,* November 29, 2006. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/29/arts/music/29simo.html.

Modney, Josh. "Collaboration as Performance." *New Music Box,* August 6, 2018. https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/collaboration-as-performance-practice/.

Nettl, Bruno. *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.

O'Shea, Farrah. "Personal Reflections on learning *Cipher.*" Unpublished manuscript, last modified 2019. Google Doc.

O'Shea, Farrah and Julia Johnson. "*Cipher* Journals." Unpublished manuscript, last modified 2019. Google Doc.

Parkhurst, Bryan J. "Making a Virtue of Necessity: Schenker and Kantian Teleology." *Journal of Music Theory* 61:1 (April 2017): 59-109. https://doi.org/10.1215/00222909-3855722.

Pellegrinelli, Laura. "Kate Soper: *Ipsa Dixit,*" Explore: Program Notes, Columbia University, October 18, 2018. https://www.millertheatre.com/explore/program-notes/kate-soper-ipsa-dixit.

Perez, Hiram. "Two or Three Spectacular Mulatas and the Queer Pleasures of Overidentification." *Camera Obscura* 67, Volume 23, Number 1 (2008): 113-143. https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2007-026.

Robin, William. "Secrets Found Online, Shared Softly." *The New York Times*, August 2, 2013. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/04/arts/music/david-langs-whisper-opera-mines-truths-from-the-web.html.

Rofe, Michael. "Capturing Time and Giving it Form: *Nymphéa."* In *Kaija Saariaho: Visions, Narratives, Dialogues,* edited by Tim Howell, Jon Hargreaves, Michael Rofe, 81-105. Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011.

Rose, François. "Introduction to the Pitch Organization of French Spectral Music." *Perspectives*

of New Music 34, no. 2 (1996): 6-39. http://www.jstor.org/stable/833469?origin=JSTOR-pdf.

Ross, Alex. "Kate Soper's Philosophy-Opera." *The New Yorker*, February 19, 2017.

Savigliano, Marta E. *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995.

Saariaho, Kaija. *La Passion de Simone: For Soprano Solo, Chorus and Chamber Orchestra,* libretto by Amin Maalouf. London: Chester, 2006-2013.

___. "Programme Note: *La Passion de Simone* (2006)." Accessed May 27, 2021. https://saariaho.org/works/la-passion-de-simone/.

___. "Radio Interview with Saariaho." Interview by Olli Koskelin. YLE Radio 1, September 7, 2002. Quoted in Oskala, Anni. "Dreams about Music, Music About Dreams." In *Kaija Saariaho: Visions, Narratives, Dialogues,* edited by Tim Howell, Jon Hargreaves, Michael Rofe, 41-60. Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011.

___. "Timbre and Harmony: Interpolations of Timbral Structures." *Contemporary Music Review* 2, no. 1 (1987): 93-133. https://doi.org/10.1080/07494466708567055.

Sandvig, Christian, Kevin Hamilton, Karrie Karahalios, Cedric Langbort. "When the Algorithm Itself is a Racist: Ethical Harm in the Basic Components of Software." *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 4972-4990. http://social.cs.uiuc.edu/papers/pdfs/Sandvig-IJoC.pdf.

Savigliano, Marta E. *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995.

Schneider, Rebecca. *Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. Routledge: London, 2011.

Sellars, Peter. "Peter Sellars and La Passion de Simone by Kaija Saariaho." YouTube Video, 2:25. March 10, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=To4Ent0XBOA&t=14s.

___. "Peter Sellars on La Passion de Simone" YouTube video, 0:57. June 14, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FT5cmIsb24Y.

Service, Tom. "A Guide to Kaija Saariaho's Music." *The Guardian,* July 9, 2012. https://www.theguardian.com/music/tomserviceblog/2012/jul/09/kaija-saariaho-contemporary-music-guide.

Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Small, Christopher. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Middletown: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2010.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays.* New York: Laurel, 1966.

Soper, Kate. "Bio." http://www.katesoper.com/bio.htm.

___. "*Cipher* Performance Notes." In *Cipher*. New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011.

___. "*Ipsa Dixit*." http://www.katesoper.com/ipsadixit.htm.

___. "I. Jenny Holzer (feat. Ludwig Wittgenstein)." In *Cipher*. New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011.

___. "II. Pietro Bembo (feat. Michael Drayton)." In *Cipher*. New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011.

___. "III. Introducing Sigmund Freud." In *Cipher*. New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011.

___. "IV. Guido d'Arezzo presents [Sara] Teasdale (feat. Jenny Holzer)." In *Cipher*. New York: Project Schott New York Composer Edition, 2011.

___. "Performance Notes." In *Cipher.* New York: Schott, 2011.

___. "Program Note." In *Cipher.* New York: Schott, 2011.

Soper, Kate and Josh Modney. "Cipher, from IPSA DIXIT, by Kate Soper, The Wet Ink Ensemble." YouTube, 6:10. Oct. 5, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=966yECWxy50.

___. "Kate Soper – Cipher." Vimeo Video, 13:05. 2015. https://vimeo.com/96043620?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=6122648.

___. "Kate Soper - Cipher (2012)." YouTube Video, 13:25. Feb. 12, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWcUgdFMdUE.

Stracey, Frances. *Constructed Situations: A New History of the Situationist International.* London: Pluto Press, 2014.

Sullivan, Danny. "Google.com Finally Gets Google Suggest Feature." *Search Engine Land*, August 25, 2008. https://searchengineland.com/googlecom-finally-gets-google-suggest-feature-14626.

___. "How Google Autocomplete Works in Search." Google, last modified April 20, 2018. Accessed January 11, 2021. https://blog.google/products/search/how-google-autocomplete- works-search/.

___. "How Google Instant's Autocomplete Suggestions Work." *Search Engine Land,* April 6, 2011. https://searchengineland.com/how-google-instant-autocomplete-suggestions-work-62592.

T, Peter. "How to Turn Off Predictive Search/Suggestion on Google.com site? I am Not Asking Regarding Chrome," Community: Google Search Help. February 20, 2020. https://support.google.com/websearch/thread/29274711?hl=en.

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Telecommunications Act of 1996, Public Law 104-104, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 110 (1996). https://www.congress.gov/104/plaws/publ104/PLAW-104publ104.pdf.

The Center for Deep Listening. "Deep Listening." Accessed January 14, 2021. https://www.deeplistening.rpi.edu/deep-listening/.

Thoreau, Henry David. "What Music Shall We Have." In *The Service*, ed. F. B. Sanborn, Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1902.

Turner, Victor. "Liminality and Communitas." In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 94-130. New York: Routledge, 1969; repr. 2017.

Vitiello, Chris. "104 Ears at the Time, David Lang's The Whisper Opera Recalibrates Attention," *Indyweek*, January 14, 2015, http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/104-ears-at-the-time-david-langs-the-whisper-opera-recalibrates-attention/Content?oid=4318492, accessed June 12, 2017.

Weil, Simone. "Letter IV: Spiritual Autobiography." In *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Craufurd, 61-83. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951.