



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Leith, O. (2024). Musicalising the Everyday or Making the Everyday Operatic. (Unpublished Doctoral thesis, Guildhall School of Music & Drama)

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/36724/>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

Musicalising the Everyday or Making the Everyday Operatic

Oliver Leith

DMus

Guildhall School of Music & Drama Research Department

2024

Abstract

This is a practice-based research project about an operatic adaptation of Gus Van Sant's film *Last Days* (2005). The opera was written in collaboration with Librettist and Director, Matt Copson and was the culmination of a three year Doctoral Composer-in-Residence scheme between the Guildhall School of music & Drama and the Royal Opera House. It was premiered in October 2022 in the ROH Linbury Theatre.

The film is a fictionalised account of the final days of Kurt Cobain. *Last Days* follows Blake, a successful musician, returning from rehab to his home, facing a series of interruptions before his suicide. The research — presented here as a commentary, score and supplementary materials — explores my fascination with the everyday, a fixation of most of my recent previous work- and exploring how we might approach the everyday to make compelling theatre or art. This also involves discussion of wide ranging contexts from Musique Concrète to Film adaptation.

The research explores four main and interlinked strands: How can an interest in 'the everyday' and mundanity (sonically and thematically) make compelling art, how might we make something 'dramatic' from something intrinsically anti-dramatic? How might a sustained focus on the permeable boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic music yield innovative expressive possibilities in contemporary opera? Can we create analogues for the camera's gaze in an adaptation of film to opera? How can we smuggle the non-lexical sounds of the everyday - the grunts and bumps, into opera?

These experiments involve extensive use of electronic sampling and real-world sounds. I explain, warts and all, key moments in the opera in relation to the research areas and seek to give an honest and holistic account of the creation of the opera. The opera poses a thought experiment: what if every possible quotidian moment, down to boiling a kettle, was music?

Permissions

I grant powers of discretion to the School Librarian to allow the thesis to be copied in whole or in part without further reference to the author.

List of figures	3
Project Overview	5
Research Explorations	6
Contexts	7
I. The Everyday and Me	7
II. The Everyday in Opera and Film	14
III. The Diegetic and Non-diegetic Problem (and Non-problem)	17
IV. Trans-diegetic sound	18
V. Musicalised Environmental Sounds and Alternative Sound Sources in Opera	20
VI. Film to Opera/Musical Adaptation	21
VII. Music Concrète: real sound	24
VIII. Manipulation, Fidelity and Capture	24
Last Days	26
I. Introduction	26
II. Adaptation	27
III. Sources and Equipment	29
IV. Cutting my World into Pieces; Sampling	31
V. Setting Up the Universe	32
VI. Thickening the Air; Tuning	36
VII. Diegetic slippage in Non Voglio Mai Vedere Il Sole Tramonto	37
i. First time, Blake listens (Act I, Scene 3)	37
ii. Second Time, Blake Plays and Sings, Superfan Sings (Act II, Scene 4)	40
VIII. Metamorphosis, Suggestive Sound, Letting the Outside in	41
i. Wolves and Sirens	41
ii. Sirens and Telephones (beginning of Acts I, II and III)	43
iii. Aeroplane and Television Accidents	44
iv. Vinyl Crackle to Fire (Act I, Scenes 3-4).	45
v. Cereal to rain (Act I, Scenes 7-8).	46
IX. Non-lexical Sounds	47
i. Blake: The Mumbler	47
ii. He Said: Lexical to Non-lexical (Act I, Scene 6)	48
iii. Party Chat: ha, yeah, nah (Act II, Scene 3).	51
iv. Snoring: zzz? (Act I, Scenes 4 and 7).	53
v. Cattle Auctioneer: Non-lexical to 'Lexical' (Act I, Scene 1; Act II, Scene 1; Act III, Scene 2)	55
X. Taking Out the Bins (Act II, Scene 5).	57
XI. Concrete Music: Washing Bricks for Experimental Music (Act I, Scene 8).	59
Last Thoughts	61
Bibliography	67
Secondary Literature	67
Scores	70
Audiovisual Media	70
Appendices	72
Timeline	72
Production Team	74
Supplementary materials (catalogue)	75

List of figures

- Figure 1 - early map of piece made with Matt, unfortunately, some of squiggles are not discernible to me anymore
- Figure 2 - Timings and structure of *Last Days* plotted - drawn up in February 2021
- Figure 3 - My studio mid-opera, train whistle and bird whistle that did not make it into the score, surprisingly clean. Blake's chorus and distortion pedals also visible. SM58 microphone on a tripod ready for my own mutterings
- Figure 4 - The instruments of *Last Days*, full list in SM.10, dazzling colour codes by Sound Intermedia
- Figure 5 - The bird cloud being constructed in Logic Pro, you can make out some details - Welgate, Strada della Scarpellinata and Lundy - all named by where my iPhone thought I was at the time.
- Figure 6 - Lawrence Dunn spots the 'secret birdsong music' from above the pit (Twitter screenshot)
- Figure 7 - The universe and stage set-up - photographed by Eloisa-Fleur Thom
- Figure 8 - A diagram from Robert Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmic Historia* entitled "The tuning of the world"
- Figure 9 - Violin parts from bar 114 of Act 1 *Last Days*
- Figure 10 - It would eventually be notated as above, Act II bar 222
- Figure 11 - Cover for the single, design by Collin Fletcher, image by Nedda Afsari (7 inch single)
- Figure 12 - Tarik (the wolf), Charlie Fox and I on a recent research trip to visit some rescued wolves.
- Figure 13 - Recording the cereal with Peter and Veronica Lofthouse's granola and many many bowls on residency in Brel. Recording with my trusty H4N, making do with that because that's all I brought.
- Figure 14 - bar 51 Prologue, semi-phonetic mumbling written out, eventually, these were mostly ignored as we moved towards realism.
- Figure 15 - A screenshot of the many voices available to you in 'Virtual Singer' - alongside the rather charming grainy concert hall that they sing from
- Figure 16 - A screenshot of the logic file showing the micro variations in stems to try to achieve something more 'real' from something so fake. You can notice in the waveforms different starts and different shapes, from vowels and voice type.
- Figure 17 - A rousing "he said" from all - (Act 1, bar 297) *Last Days*
- Figure 18 - Different but similar 'ha's' in Britten's Peter Grimes fig 41 of Vocal score
- Figure 19 - from *Last Days* bar 142 act II, orchestra chatter against Housemate's yeah yeah yeahs and ha's
- Figure 20 - A hum of polite chatter from the directing team. Photograph by Eloisa-Fleur Thom
- Figure 21 - The original vocal workshop material
- Figure 22 - bar 366 of final score of *Last Days*
- Figure 23 - The housemates falling asleep
- Figure 24 - Blake on the phone to Trip, the auctioneering is translated in the surtitles
- Figure 25 - George Barton adjusting George's bottles, photographed by Eloisa-Fleur Thom
- Figure 26 - First attempt at purchasing bullet rounds resulted in humorously light and small package, shells designed for miniatures, maybe fit for my miniature village (we'll get onto that) see 6mm staff for scale
- Figure 27 - Bullets, bricks, tripod and horrible floor

Figure 28 - Image of Le Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, not the image I refer to below but another in my possession (it scans better)

Figure 29 - Butte-Chaumont in construction, a lump, like the beginning of a piece.

Figure 30 - A glimpse at Matt's own version of nature's artifice, this is an earlier version of the backdrop of the opera seen without the house in foreground, something that looks like the outside but that clearly isn't. Matt Copson *Image courtesy the artist*

Figure 31 - Final night wave, sent to me by my mum

Figure 32 - An overwhelmed road sign shows all of its faces at once

Figure 33: (from left to right) Agathe Rousselle, Matt Copson, Gus Van Sant, myself, Anna Morrissey and Jack Sheen.

Figure 34: (from left to right) Kate Howden, Seumas Begg, Mimi Doulton, Matt Copson, Michelle Santiago, Sion Goronwy, Jack Sheen, Naomi Woo, Anna Morrissey, myself and Edmund Danon. Appearing on phone screens as absent from rehearsal (from left to right) Patricia Auchterlonie, Agathe Rousselle and Henry Jenkinson. They're all glorious.

Acknowledgements

Biggest thanks to all of these people, friends and colleagues, without whom nothing would have happened. No matter how small or gigantic the contribution, it takes a world.

Emma Abbate, Thomas Adès, Nedda Afsari, Patricia Auchterlonie, Sophie Bailey, Balenciaga, Richard Baker, George Barton, Seumus Begg, Sarah Bell, Andre Birck, Melanie Bouvet, Rachel Caccia, Oliver Cave, Seàn Clancy, Philippa Chamberlayne, Natasha Chubbuck, Ellie Consta, Grace Cook, Matt Copson, Robert Coupe, Sarah Crabtree, Evangeline Cullingworth, Dominic Cummings, Edmund Danon, Ian Dearden, Mimi Doulton, Faber Music, Chris Fisher, Freesound, Collin Fletcher, Katie Ferguson, Sion Goronwy, George Haggett, Daniel Harle, Jacob Harrison, Jimmy Holliday, Kate Howden, Toby Hughes, Henry Jenkinson, Kurtis Jeremiah, Helen Lovett Johnson, Heba Kadry, Tom Kelly, Matthew Kettle, Veronica Lofthouse, Peter Lofthouse, Katie Macdonald, Hamish Mackay, Nick Manning, Nell Maudslay, Mark McNeill, Oliver Mears, Prema Mehta, Alex Mermikides, Cole Morrison, Anna Morrissey, Music, Theano Papadaki, Richard Paine, Emma Peace, Julian Philips, Noam Pnini, Caroline Polachek, Lucas Rajpaul, Siwan Rhys, Agathe Rousselle, Dave Rowell, Max Ruisi, Alessandro Ruisi, Emma Ryan, Michelle Santiago, Will Searle, Sergio Serra, Jack Sheen, David Sheppard, Mookie Singerman, Grace Smart, Ian Smith, Robert Summers, Eloisa-Fleur Thom, Thomas Thompson, Luba Tunnicliffe, Jonathan Vaughan, Gus Van Sant, Thomas Wasley, Patrick Welde, Chloe Westwood, Sam Wigglesworth, Naomi Woo, Kate Wyatt, Aidan Zamiri & Armin Zanner.

Project Overview

This research project was conducted in a joint partnership between the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the Royal Opera House, where I was Composer-in-Residence from 2019-2022. However, owing to the Covid-19 pandemic I was mainly Composer-in-Residence in my basement flat. This project's initial research proposal was to find a way to create an opera where the usual hierarchy and order of creation was disrupted towards a more multilayered and less narrative-driven work. Rather than a single author writing a score for performers to realise, a team would make something with fluctuating authorship throughout. This project might have resulted in something resembling 'devised' theatre. I could claim that the Covid-19 pandemic frustrated this aim, stopping me from collaborating and meeting lots of like-minded people. But that would be disingenuous. In truth, limitations to my intentions revealed themselves at the conclusion of the project. I will return to these limitations in the 'Final thoughts' of this thesis, but for now suffice to say that I was trying to avoid a certain kind of contemporary opera that I do not feel my music suits or that I can contribute much to. I discuss this further under the heading 'Contexts'.

To create such an opera, I needed to find someone I could trust; someone who would wince or smile at the same things. Someone with whom I could envisage how the opera would look, sound and read simultaneously. The main collaborator on this project is Matt Copson, who had no background in opera but with whom I share a love for the banal and magical. He is primarily a visual artist, but often works with narrative forms. We produced the libretto in collaboration and then he co-directed with Anna Morrissey.

One of my intentions in interrogating the fixed roles of opera-making was to create a theatre piece that reflected my own compositional voice as it has been expressed in recent concert music, particularly an interest in the 'everyday' and an appropriation of 'real-world' sounds as musical material. Copson and I stumbled across a film that had the potential to do just that. Consequently, this project is centred on the making of an operatic adaptation of Gus Van Sant's film *Last Days* (2005), with a research focus on the 'everyday', the slippage between diegetic and non-diegetic musics, non-lexical sounds and transmedial adaptation. *Last Days* is a fictional account of the final days of Kurt Cobain before his suicide.

My supervisors, to whom I am extremely grateful, were Richard Baker, Alex Mermikides, Julian Philips and Kate Wyatt.

Research Explorations

- I. How can an interest in ‘the everyday’ and mundanity (sonically and thematically) make compelling art? How might we make something ‘dramatic’ from something intrinsically anti-dramatic?
- II. How might a sustained focus on the permeable boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic music yield innovative expressive possibilities in contemporary opera?
- III. Can we create analogues for the camera’s gaze in an adaptation of film to opera?
- IV. How can we smuggle the non-lexical sounds of the everyday - the grunts and bumps, into opera?

Contexts

I hope the following commentary reflects how these research explorations are constantly in flux and use. I will try to signpost the most relevant areas of exploration in each section but hope that it is clear that there are capillaries between them all. Exploration area (I) will not be signposted, as it relates to every part of the opera, almost everything in which is built from everyday sounds and everyday settings. The commentary is more of a soup than a compartmentalised TV dinner plate: all of these things bleed into each other and are interrelated. I have tried to follow a logical path as much as possible, without it reading like a scientific experiment or without artificially isolating mutually dependent aspects of a more complex whole. I am going to bare all of my bad habits and accidents too. I apologise if it is, at times, tedious—sometimes I am. My argument may seem too open at points, but anything I have included here is, I feel, important for understanding the piece and any intentions around it. The impulse to make music in the way that I do, and the way I present things, is linked with the art itself. Some of the more laborious parts of the research are hidden in the supplemental materials. I will first lay out some wider contexts that are relevant to the final opera and my practice. Some will be whistle stop tours of well documented subjects which are important to acknowledge but do not form the basis of originality in this research. Elements more central to the research areas will be expanded upon more fully.

These areas will include The Everyday, The Everyday in Opera and Film, Opera adaptations, Film adaptations, Film Soundtracks and Sound Effects, Musique Concrète, The New Discipline, Theories of Adaptation and Sampling. The following eight subsections expand upon the motivations and backgrounds of my research.

I. The Everyday and Me

I started my musical life playing in bands, and began writing notated music for others towards the end of secondary school.¹ I was not writing for orchestras (there were no string players at the school); I was writing for the percussion instruments in the store cupboards. This make-do approach to composing left me with a less reverent or purist view about where and what orchestral instruments should play. I attended the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and had principal studies teachers for writing in different musical traditions (Richard Baker, Paul Newland and Julian Philips). The music I write has ended up straddling two worlds: mainstream classical contemporary music and experimental music. My pieces are performed by figures of both camps: my work has been performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Apartment House, played in Queen Elizabeth Hall and Cafe OTO, and broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and NTS. This flux is an important part of my work, embodying a purposeful disregard for boundaries or definitions.

¹ A school called Enfield Grammar School—not a grammar by any stretch, but a great music department; very grateful to them.

Over the last year, receiving some insightful critical responses to my music has forced me to consider more rigorously what it is that my music does, particularly on an aesthetic and affective level. I have always thought of my practice as a visceral, felt and intuitive thing, but it is important to acknowledge that even conceptualising it in this way might relate it to wider artistic movements. In a recent interview on BBC Radio 3 to introduce the broadcast of *Me Hollywood* (a study in everyday sound made for *Last Days*)² Kate Molleson observed:

[...] clearly masses of creative potential for a composer like you, who goes in for wonderful, incongruous collage and that sort of wit that is, I guess, part tongue in cheek but also very heartfelt. So, let's talk about sincerity.³

Molleson was identifying yet another blurred boundary—between irony and sincerity. I gave an incoherent response, something to do with ‘that’s just life’. It now seems a slightly throwaway retort to what was a very perceptive observation, but it *is* how I have mostly thought about it. Recently, writers on contemporary visual art have made similar observations. Here is Jerry Saltz, writing in the *New Yorker* in 2010:

I’m noticing a new approach to artmaking in recent museum and gallery shows [...]. It’s an attitude that says, I know that the art I’m creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn’t mean this isn’t serious. At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind.⁴

This tendency was identified in the same year by Dutch cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker under the label metamodernism.⁵

Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance,

² See SM.3 video essay with recording in the background.

³ Kate Molleson, *New Music Show*, BBC Radio 3, 20 November 2020.

⁴ Jerry Saltz, ‘Sincerity and Irony Hug it Out’, *New Yorker Magazine*, 27 May 2010.

⁵ Metamodernism theory has also been absorbed as practice by art collective. As Luke Turner writes, ‘we propose a pragmatic romanticism unhindered by ideological anchorage. Thus, *metamodernism* shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons. We must go forth and oscillate!’. Luke Turner, ‘The Metamodernist Manifesto’, 2011, <http://www.metamodernism.org/> (accessed 8 August 2023). Italics in original.

however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm.⁶

I think of metamodern as being built from the rubble of postmodernism and modernism. ‘Oscillation’, an unwillingness to pursue a single focus, is a description that resonates with my work. Although rather than a swinging pendulum, I more think of it as oscillating at such a high frequency that the poles are imperceptible. Truly, I think that is, in fact, just life - I do not necessarily place myself within that frame and I am certainly not conscious of it whilst making things, but it feels appropriate to acknowledge it in this context. To be extremely candid: I am not doing this ironically for the most part. I think I just have a very teenage temperament: over-emotional with a dusting of humour.⁷ There are infinite examples of critics and theorists being flummoxed by this sincerity/irony boundary, particularly from the early days of collectives such as PC Music.⁸ Even yesterday (April 13 2023 as I write this part), Caroline Polachek was interviewed about her new album and asked in various permutations if musical decisions were jokes or completely sincere:

Robert Moran: Is that how you’re using these references, with the idea they can be embraced with both irony and affection?

Caroline Polachek: Um. There’s no irony on this album.

RM: Okay.

[Long silence]

RM: None at all?

CP: No.⁹

I think that sometimes, even for me, the perception of irony may actually have to do with a nervousness or a sense of caution about sincerity — a human thing. This idea of art being in many emotional or symbolic states at once is very important to me. It does not channel just one thing. My favourite examples are things like folk music, wakes and Christmas. Simultaneous joy and melancholy - treading a cèilidh with tears in your eyes or joking about the dead right next to the casket. Sometimes there is irony and sometimes people are just enjoying things.

⁶ Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin van den Akker. ‘Notes on metamodernism’. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, p. 6.

⁷ A little hungover recently, *Zadok the Priest* played on the radio and I burst into tears. I often work hungover; it provides a boost in sensitivity, it turns up that teenage temperament. This may feel like an overshare in an academic context, but these are genuine parts of my practice and I do not want to present something more tidy and together than I actually am.

⁸ Sam Wolfson, ‘PC Music: the future of pop or ‘contemptuous parody’’, *The Guardian*, 2 May 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/may/02/pc-music-dance-music-collective> (accessed 14 August 2023).

⁹ Robert Moran, ‘There’s No Irony: Caroline Polachek Q&A Takes a Tense Turn’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 April 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/music/there-s-no-irony-caroline-polachek-q-and-a-gets-awkward-20230411-p5czn4.html> (accessed 8 August 2023).

Additionally, my work could be said to share some concerns with another tendency or, even, framework, one that composer Jennifer Walshe has labelled The New Discipline.¹⁰ While I wouldn't associate myself with it directly, there is some overlap. It is hard to codify, so in her own words:

The New Discipline is not a style, though pieces may share similar aesthetic concerns. Composers working under this stylistic umbrella draw on dance, theatre, film, video, visual art, installation, literature, and stand-up comedy. In the rehearsal room, the composer functions as a director or choreographer, perhaps most completely as an auteur. The composer does not have aspirations to start a theatre group, they simply want to bring the tools of the director or choreographer to bear on compositional problems, on problems of musical performance.¹¹

The 'discipline' part of this label is referring to rigour of research or practice in any of these unconventional extensions of what constitutes music/performance. There is something important in the actual 'work' of honing or even notating of these unconventional skills and materials. They might train and acquire completely new abilities. Extended *extended* techniques. It is often rooted in the more performative side of new music and composers frequently take part in performances themselves. I couldn't do that. For New Discipline composers, the immediacy of the DIY is central, being part of it. I share this impulse for the DIY, for being more involved than others might be, but in the background. I cannot speak for other composers, but I enjoy the tactility of this approach, something that is missing from my everyday note pushing. I write about this later in a chapter called 'Concrete Music: Washing Bricks for Experimental Music' in which I describe the satisfaction of actually using my hands for something non-musical. I guess if you were more performance minded you might enjoy being physically involved with your own music. The physicality of my work stops before the stage, I smash my glasses and sing my songs at home where no one can see me.

Most alluring to me is an idea that anything can be considered part of music and be scored as such. That you can compose with dance, visuals as if they are just other parts of music. I can consider different disciplines as material, I can make a video, I can make an instrument, I can use an everyday object to make music. It acknowledges and celebrates that a composer might want to have a say in more than just what is heard - they can have ideals on how it looks, feels and smells.

There is also a lean towards using familiar materials, including a repurposing of tonality and contemporary/popular culture - I do that too. Linked to this is the embrace of the everyday — the ultimate familiar — what 'music' can be drawn from it, from its repetitions, from its themes and from the contemporary everyday. Andy Ingamells offers further thoughts on the New Discipline:

¹⁰ Jennifer Walshe, 'The New Discipline', *MusikTexte*, vol. 149, 2016, pp.4-5. https://musiktexte.de/WebRoot/Store22/Shops/dc91cfee-4fdc-41fe-82da-0c2b88528c1e/MediaGallery/The_New_Discipline.pdf (accessed 8 August 2023).

¹¹ As Walshe writes in her *New Discipline* manifesto, maybe what is at stake for the New Discipline is the fact that these pieces, these modes of thinking about the world, these compositional techniques – they are not "music theatre", they *are* music'. Walshe 2016. Asterisks in original.

‘New’ in this context could also refer to an intense focus on an everyday activity, looking at it anew. For instance, what rhythm do you make as you type your Facebook password? Is it the same every time? Can you repeat it ten or a hundred times? Can you do it with your toes? Would you like to work with other people to take this idea and make it into an activity that holds your attention for an hour?¹²

Matthew Shlomowitz highlights the New Discipline’s embrace of the non-musical as actual material rather than simply concepts or basis of programmatic music:

There is a long history of purely musical work about the non-musical, such as instrumental pieces with titles indicating that the work represents an aspect of the world, whereas here the non-musical is embodied in the materiality of the work.¹³

As well as an open way of making, this is an ecumenical take on what constitutes material and more importantly subject, quite often moving away from what might be considered the more antecedent themes of ‘classical’ music. Arthur Danto, considering the historical signifiers of art, writes:

they had gold frames around them, or were posed on pedestals, and one was expected to look upon them as pretty significant. Everyone knew, more or less, how to tell when something was a work of art.¹⁴

Danto’s observations make sense when applied to music: a frame an orchestra; a pedestal a concert hall.

A natural direction for my work has been a focus on the ‘the everyday’, which I use for context, material, situation and inspiration. I try to illuminate corners of our everyday existence towards something that is shared. It might be mundane, beautiful or both. Lefebvre, in his *Critique of the Everyday*, summarises why it is such a rich ground for exploration:

everyday life is profoundly related to all activities, and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond, their common ground. And it is in everyday life that the sum total of relations which make the human—and every human being—a whole takes its shape and its form. In it are expressed and fulfilled those relations which bring into play the totality of the real,

¹² Andy Ingamells, ‘Stop inhaling Oxygen and exhaling Carbon Dioxide, because “we did that in the 60s”’ *MusikTexte*, vol.149, 2016, pp.22-23. <https://musiktexte.de/WebRoot/Store22/Shops/dc91cfee-4fdc-41fe-82da-0c2b88528c1e/MediaGallery/Ingamells.pdf> (accessed 17th May 2024)

¹³ Matthew Shlomowitz, ‘The Automaton Approach’. *MusikTexte*, vol.149, 2016, <https://musiktexte.de/WebRoot/Store22/Shops/dc91cfee-4fdc-41fe-82da-0c2b88528c1e/MediaGallery/Shlomowitz.pdf> (accessed May 1st 2024)

¹⁴ Arthur Danto. *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life*. Columbia University Press, 2017, p. 9.

albeit in a certain manner which is always partial and incomplete: friendship, comradeship, love, the need to communicate, play, etc.¹⁵

The everyday is different to each person, its universality is repetition, ritual and routine. Sleep, eat, clean, work, boredom. You could argue that there is an equivalence in everydayness to the life of an astronaut, a school teacher or even a famous musician. A life swap for each of the candidates would be an extremely non-everyday experience. It might even be the most exciting or the most boring day of their lives. However, the point is, that to each of them separately - everyday looks more or less the same no matter what they are doing. In this project though, when I am talking about the everyday, I am referring to the average, the domestic, repetitive home shuffling, days unrecognisable from the last; is it Tuesday or Wednesday. Days where nothing new happens, something we all recognise.

For me, the everyday is a level playing field: everyone experiences it, and it makes up the majority of life. Perhaps my interest in it as my principal subject has also been shaped by my own education, experience and ignorance. It might be a reaction or an aversion to an understanding of the world that needs more cultural context.

For the last ten years, I have been surrounded by other artists who hold forth on things like ancient myths and make art informed by things like ancient myths. “Ah, like Epimetheus” they might say.¹⁶ I did not encounter any of this at secondary school or at home, so my arrival at a conservatoire was marked by an acute sense of alienation. I thought everyone was blagging. “Surely, Aphrodite is not a poster in your halls of residence room”, I’d nudge a desk partner—for some solidarity—“we’re not actually into this, are we?”. I’d be met with daggers as if I were... Koalemos.¹⁷ I hate this ‘joke’ and I hated writing it, but it serves to show exactly the sort of thing I found alienating. I am pastiching their humour and the sort of referencing around art and opera that feels more like crossword clues than art — jokes that are a wink to simply *knowing*. It is not necessarily using the knowledge itself that I am bothered by, but a temperament that seems to revel in reference over sensation.

Previous generations of composers have felt a similar alienation on arriving at a conservatoire. Toby Young describes Nicholas Maw’s reaction upon arrival at the Royal Academy of Music:

Maw felt out of his depth. A lack of previous exposure to contemporary music led him to feel ‘uncouth, gauche and ignorant’ against talented peers such as Richard

¹⁵ Henri Lefebvre. *Critique of Everyday Life: The Three-Volume Text*. Trans. John Moore. Verso, 2014, p. 97.

¹⁶ I looked ‘Epimetheus’ up on Google; he is the god of excuses. <https://www.google.com/search?q=epimetheus> (Accessed 15 August 2023).

¹⁷ Once again, I looked up ‘Greek god of stupidity’ on Google. <https://www.google.com/search?q=greek+god+of+stupidity> (Accessed 15 August 2023).

Rodney Bennett and Cornelius Cardew; a position which caused him much distress.¹⁸

One of my early attempts to deal with this was to write a polemic essay for a Philosophy and Aesthetics class, arguing that knowing your Greeks was no more cultured than being a diehard fan of *EastEnders*. My thesis was that if you could keep up with Dirty Den's mortality, you were digesting television in as rich and nuanced a way as mythology: thousands of years/thousands of episodes; tomatoes/tomatoes. I didn't believe this though. I was simply being combative, resentful and tedious. I bored *myself*.

Later, and more productively, I learnt simply to embrace what I did know about: everyday modern life. Initially a reaction to academic insecurity, this has since become an honest direction, and one enriched by an engagement with theory. Notably, Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* describes the inescapable side of life, (day, night, seasons) as cycles and suggests that our everyday routines help us deal with that relentless and unstoppable side of nature:

in modern life, the repetitive gestures tend to mask and to crush the cycles. The everyday imposes its monotony. It is the invariable constant of the variations it envelops. The days follow one after another and resemble one another, and yet—here lies the contradiction at the heart of everydayness, everything changes.¹⁹

Gestures and rituals break these cycles up and provide a sort of infinite variation; these seemingly unimportant and overlooked actions are where life is made bearable. I imagine this idea of cycles overlaid with gestures like using the same stamp on different pages of a book. It is also how I think about some of my own pieces.

Repetition is a key feature of my music.²⁰ My recent work for percussion and piano, *good day good day bad day bad day*, takes Obsessive Compulsive Disorder as a starting point to create rituals out of repetitive cells, unfolding as a musicalised everyday. It is 'set' in a living room. The score asks that the performers should install rugs, carpets, and lamps—a very private situation made public. Tiny gestures make up the whole of the piece, just as they do in the everyday. It pushes repetition to an extreme, ranging from the hypnagogic to the infuriating. As Lefebvre and Christine Levich write:

¹⁸ Toby Young. 'The Artistic Self: Identity and Self - Representation in Nicholas Maw's *Life Studies*'. PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2015, p.14.

¹⁹ Henri Lefebvre and Christine Levich. 'The Everyday and Everydayness'. *Yale French Studies*, no. 73, 1987, p. 10.

²⁰ I used to loop my favourite parts of musical pieces endlessly, wondering why we don't always have the good part. The mystery of repetition is also included in the shoes that I am currently wearing: I thought they looked ridiculous a year ago and through exposure to others in the local area they have endeared themselves to me.

some people cry out against the acceleration of time, others cry out against stagnation. They're both right.²¹

For magic plays an immense role in everyday life, be it in emotional identification and participation with 'other people' or in the thousand little rituals and gestures used by every person, every family, every group. But in practical life as in ideology, this magic only signifies the illusions men have about themselves, and their lack of power. And everyday life is defined by contradictions: illusion and truth, power and helplessness, the intersection of the sector man controls and the sector he does not control.²²

The everyday for me is also about a repurposing of banality. *Honey Siren*, a 2019 piece for strings, makes sweeping melancholia and almost melodrama from the simplest and most boring of urban sounds: an emergency siren. It is an emotional heightening of a sound that I hear from my window around every thirty minutes, so often that I now barely notice it.

Another characteristic of my work that might be attached to an idea of everydayness is the use of non-lexical vocables. These are, of course, also informed by the popular music around me, but I situate them as everyday utterances and murmurs. A 2019 work of mine, *Uh-huh, yeah*, uses only the title's words as the basis of a whole song.

II. The Everyday in Opera and Film

When something in another medium is described as 'operatic', it is often referring to a certain melodramatic quality, a thematic grandness or an exaggerated theatrical mode. In Marcia Citron's essay on the *Godfather* trilogy, she quotes Paul Giles's observation that 'Coppola's films emphasize lavish, operatic ritual', and he goes on to detail 'the hyperbolic and operatic elements in the films—the decapitated horses, the ritual slaughters, and so on'.²³ Operatic music, whenever it appears in films, is used to navigate highly wrought moments or scenes of epic contemplation, sometimes to indicate a higher social class. As a medium, it very rarely deals with the everyday. As Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker observe, 'hardly any operatic character makes a cup of tea, or reads the newspaper, or puts on his socks; those who did so would be embedded in a comic reversal of normality or would have been deliberately trivialised'.²⁴

²¹ Lefebvre and Levich 1987, p.10.

²² Lefebvre 2014, p. 21.

²³ Marcia. J. Citron, 'Operatic Style and Structure in Coppola's *Godfather* Trilogy'. *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 3, 2004, p. 423.

²⁴ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker. *A History of Opera*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2015, p.16.

But for me, Parker's example of comic banality sounds exactly the kind of opera I'd like to make. In fact, when I began this project and was asked to describe what I was working on, I would always say that I wanted to make an opera about putting the bins out—the dullest of everyday activities. These small everyday things are *not* comic, the banality is a vital part of life. I reject completely the idea that beauty and pathos are found only in grand narratives, or that melodramatic corners are the only things worthy of heightening. With regards to *Last Days*, I do not suggest that the suicide of a famous musician is not a grand narrative nor melodramatic. Importantly, though, I would never want to show the suicide, nor for it to be a climax. There is something more compelling in its dramatic potential in how it reframes the everyday. I am interested in showing Blake's everyday which has a natural heft to it, no matter how dull. I am interested in the main focus being the crushing banality and mundanity of everyday life.

The question, then, is: how do we make compelling art from mundanity? I have tried this on a small scale in my recent concert music, but how might we present the everyday in a compelling manner for 90 minutes? For this, trends in contemporary cinema offer some possible models and ways forward.

Films that are less obviously narrative-driven frequently compel instead through their manipulation of the medium: the everyday is given life by being aestheticized. Against the slow backdrop of the mundane, we are invited to linger on different facets of the medium, from cinematography to *mise en scène*. This is a particular feature of a relatively recent movement in cinema often labelled the 'cinema of slowness', of which Brian Jarvis writes:

the 'cinema of slowness' is an umbrella term for an aesthetic sensibility evident in filmmaking in various genres ranging from neo-documentary to surrealism which are united in their implicit opposition to the global hegemony of speed and spectacle.²⁵

In slow cinema, we are shown smaller things in extreme detail. We are asked to look at things differently. Interestingly, this is not resigned to a solely experimental side of filmmaking. *Lover's Rock* (2020), a recent film by Steve McQueen, 'offers up a continuous, non-narrative stream of fascination and pleasure in the dance scenes'.²⁶ The film's defining moments use lengthy shots of no dialogue and dancing; the usual rhythms of mainstream cinema are disrupted to express something differently. It illuminates the characters' everyday existence with a detailed and hyper-vivid palette of sound, colour and frame. These long, music-focused scenes play with sources of sound. We hear the same music from different perspectives all on the same timeline: this is diegetic music as score.

²⁵ Brian Jarvis. "'You'll Never Get It If You Don't Slow Down, My Friend': Towards a Rhythmanalysis of the Everyday in the Cinema of Jim Jarmusch and Gus Van Sant". *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2019, p. 386.

²⁶ Peter Bradshaw. 'Lovers Rock Review – Steve McQueen Throws the Best Party Ever'. *The Guardian*, 17 September 2020, www.theguardian.com/film/2020/sep/17/lovers-rock-review-steve-mcqueen-small-axe (accessed 8 August 2023).

This type of manipulation, particularly appropriate (and often exploited) in opera, is a focus of my project: an exploration of the space between diegetic and non-diegetic sound as a way of creating a multilayered and intricate look at the everyday.

Other films such as Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975) explore this idea of the everyday through vast casts engaged in 'boring' conversations, seemingly inconsequential to any potential narrative.

I say 'stories' because most of what we see and hear is intentionally mundane, evocative of everyday life rather than conventionally eventful movie drama; notwithstanding a shooting that eventually brings the film to its still unusually open-ended close.²⁷

There are many versions of the everyday at play here, we see intersections of mundane parts of different character's lives. Something about leaning on this and a general lack of through narrative is suggestive that *something* will happen. A tension - not ramped up through music but through showing so much of real life. The plot does not seem to lead to the assassination attempt that takes place, and even after it has happened the event continues, the dramatic 'event' is treated as almost inconsequential - it becomes part of the everyday.

A film from the same year, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), directed by Chantal Akerman centres around the domestic life of a widow who feeds and clothes her child with money from prostitution. There is a sense of foreboding throughout, the combination of the situation and routine creates this cheerless slow grind. There are set number of film angles - the filming and the shots themselves routine and repetitive. It is crushingly repetitive and mundane, it presents a bleak life. The dramatic pull is that something *has* to happen. The boredom of routine, cooking, cleaning, working is stifling, there feels like there has to be a release - it compels. In the final moments of the film, the routine is broken, she stabs a client to death in as calm a way as she might have been cleaning. Somehow it is expected and unexpected at the same time.

I find this version of the everyday is imbued with an expectation or a hope that something might interrupt it. Something *has* to happen one day, *please*. Someone unexpected might visit, a neighbour might be arrested, a bus might drive through the wall in front of your flat. The reality is, most of time nothing happens, the more nothing happens, the more something needs to happen. There is something pivotal about a change from routine, an end or a shift, anything is monumental.

Returning to this question "how do we make compelling art from mundanity" I propose that another way of making compelling art from mundanity is this underpinning of the everyday with the knowledge that *something* is going to happen or exploring the everyday in a situation of extremity or overt bleakness. Myths,

²⁷ Geoff Andrew, 'The sprawling brilliance of Robert Altman's *Nashville*' *BFI*, 22 June 2021 <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/robert-altman-nashville-1975-sprawling-american-masterpiece> (accessed 10th May 2024)

parables and legends work, particularly in wayward adaptations, because of the established knowledge that something will happen. Events such as the Last Supper, famous assassinations, anything where the fate is known. *Last Days* contains this potential.

This premise becomes something which imbues the everydayness with sadness, without seeing the suicide, we still feel it. We can also explore the implicit heaviness of boredom and everydayness “Please, when *will* something else happen”. This is the everyday as something recognisable.

Regardless of the scenario, the hues of the everyday can change drastically through music. Bins out, kettle on, bills to pay, contracts to sign - drenched in blurry sound. Furthermore, what if the sounds of the domestic actually became music. The bottles in a bin bag clatter repetitive melodies. A kettle boiling might be boring (sincerely, not to me) but might surprise you if it sang or screamed with the ambient world around you.

III. The Diegetic and Non-diegetic Problem (and Non-problem)

Diegetic and non-diegetic are terms borrowed from film studies. As Raymond Monelle defines them:

‘diegetic music’ —for those unfamiliar with the term —is material in opera or film which is heard as music by the characters themselves. Thus, ‘Voi che sapete’ is diegetic, ‘Non più andrai’ is not (though it is when played in *Don Giovanni*, of course). In effect, this means chiefly songs that are sung on-stage or on-frame. The word is a translation of the French ‘diegetique’, derived from ‘diegese’, defined by Etienne Souriau as ‘the space within which a story unfolds’.²⁸

Non-diegetic sound, then, is sound that the characters do not hear or that does not come from the scene. In film it would be thought of as soundtrack.

However, there is much discussion both in opera and film discourse on the appropriateness of these terms because of the implications of their use in classical narratology, where their meaning is subtly but importantly different. Stefano Castelvechi has written on this very problem, and notes that ‘we should, however, be wary of the risks involved in such applications of literary terminology to music, as they are often based on what Berger would call “inexact analogues”’.²⁹ Castelvechi goes on to suggest an alternative, while in the same sentence pointing to its limitations:

²⁸ Raymond Monelle. ‘Reviews of Books’. *Music and Letters*, vol. 75, no. 2, 1994, p. 297.

²⁹Stefano Castelvechi. ‘On “Diegesis” and “Diegetic”’: Words and Concepts’. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 73, no. 1, 2020, p. 165.

I have occasionally proposed to students the phrase ‘music as “music”’, which suggests that the operatic passages thus defined are the few in which the music we hear actually represents music; I realize, however, that the phrase is rather cumbersome for regular use as standard terminology (and it lacks an obvious opposite term).³⁰

Sceptics of the terminology in film also find the term does not suffice for all situations. Ben Winters wonders: ‘does *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), for example, make sense without the shark's infamous musical motif, which frequently stands in for the presence of the animal?’³¹ His argument is that the narrative would at points not be clear without the non-diegetic music, just images of people enjoying themselves in the water. They do not always work independently of one another as the terms might suggest.

In opera of course, it is even more confusing than film: its characters are, after all, singing along to something that they cannot hear. As Abbate and Parker note: ‘in opera, the characters pacing the stage often suffer from deafness; they do not *hear* the music that is the ambient fluid of their music-drowned world’.³² Diegetic music for them means something quite different: it is when they become aware that they are singing. These moments are often used to refer to the world outside, and therefore frequently use a different mode to the music surrounding it, quite often routed in folk or popular musics. It is also why so many operas place a musician as the subject of the narrative, as a way of making sense of this conceit. As Abbate has written elsewhere, ‘the same appetite for self-referentiality, of course, inspires all those operatic plots that explore the power of music (*L’Orfeo*, *Tannhäuser*, *Die Meistersinger*, or that deal in the lives of singers or the production of opera (*Tosca*, *Der Schauspieldirektor*)’.³³ The form does not follow any normal logic and the boundaries are even more blurred than in film. Diegesis in opera is an imperfect term unless we clarify its parameters. So here, to avoid a rabbit hole, I will consider the terms in their practical musical usage: ‘diegetic’ to mean sound that the characters are aware of and ‘non-diegetic’ to mean sound that they are not aware of. I am mainly interested in the flux between them, so this application is the clearest.

IV. Trans-diegetic sound

Some of the most satisfying moments in film are slippages between diegetic and non-diegetic sound and music. In a basic example, this might mean that music that is clearly situated within the scene, say, on a radio (and therefore an identifiable source and quality of sound) and then becomes part of the soundtrack (fleshed out and full). It is like an aural zooming out—we move from what the character hears into a different

³⁰ Ibid., p.167.

³¹ Ben Winters. ‘The Non-Diegetic Fallacy: Film, Music, and Narrative Space’. *Music and Letters*, vol. 91, no. 2, 2010, p. 231.

³² Carolyn Abbate. *Unsung Voices*. Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 119.

³³ Ibid. p. 119.

narrative space. It is the aural equivalent of breaking the fourth wall, sometimes called trans-diegetic.³⁴ The medium becomes self-aware.

One of the most famous examples of this can be found in Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974): a big band plays non-diegetic music whilst a cowboy rides across a landscape, the camera pans to Count Basie's big band playing in that same environment, out-of-place; now diegetic. Often, as in this example, trans-diegesis is employed as a sort of knowing self-referential joke. Perhaps it is also a wink back to early film history, where this might have been the actual reality of making a film. The film score might be played by a pit orchestra on-set alongside the action, as in Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935), where Lysander ends up singing the non-diegetic theme that has just been played by an orchestra as if they were right beside him and he could hear the music.³⁵ They *are* in fact metres from him off camera (Act 1, Scene1). The film plays with a reality and limitation of the form.³⁶ As Abbate writes:

Filmmakers have constantly made artistic capital from playing with audience expectations and the origins of sound in film: does it spring from the world of the characters or is it a commentary on that world? Can our attitude to the narrative be made more interestingly complex if these two sources are sometimes confused? In the same way, opera composers (and not just those of the recent past) have played with the idea of a mutable musical source, of exploring and enriching the operatic experience by making us ponder that basic question: *where does the music come from?*³⁷

One particularly beautiful moment of trans-diegetic play in film is Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2012), where a caricature criminal sits down surrounded by his entourage and is prompted to play an outdoor white piano. He begins to sing a sincere but rough version of a Britney Spears song, the 'folk' music of the day, and the gang begins to sing along whilst the real non-diegetic version of the song fades in underneath until it takes over and is the only thing the audience can hear. We move from their world to our world, which juxtaposes sharply with this strange Florida scene dancing around with machine guns.³⁸ In film, music located within the scene is called a source cue. It is a common trope for a source cue to become the 'score' and pass from diegetic to non-diegetic *and* diegetic (the characters can still hear their world's version of the song).

³⁴ Henry M Taylor is most-cited on this term; he describes it as a 'variant that I first heard of in the early 90s [...] that may have been coined at Zurich University's film studies department'. Henry M. Taylor. 'The Success Story of a Misnomer'. *Offscreen*, vol. 11, nos. 8-9, 2007, https://offscreen.com/view/soundforum_2 (accessed 8 August 2023).

³⁵ For a clip of this moment, see 'A Midsummer Night's Dream (1935) - Lysander Plans to Elope Scene (1/12) | Movieclips', *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0HHhK_MrWg (accessed 8 August 2023).

³⁶ Nina Penner, 'Sonic Spectacle in Erich Wolfgang Korngold's Score to Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935)', in Christopher R. Wilson and Mervyn Cooke (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Music*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

³⁷ Abbate and Parker 2015, p.15.

³⁸ Someone I know described it as 'trash art', but what do they know?

The musical possibilities I see in exploiting trans-diegetic material are to replace what the camera can do: how when we want to focus on one character, we can essentially zoom into their ‘private world’. We might amplify some music heard on headphones to indicate that we are now in someone’s head. We can employ sound design (or mimic sound design) to signal different sound spaces and sources.

Richard Wagner’s *Das Rheingold* uses this slippage to cinematic effect: musical material is passed (like a cross fade) from the orchestra to the offstage chorus of anvils and then back to the orchestra. It tracks a descent into a world of underground dwarves and then back again, doing the musical equivalent of a camera panning or cutting between different scenes, synthesising something near-impossible on a stage. It also points to the possibility that this slippage might be pushed further. Potentially, all material objects might become part of musical textures.

V. Musicalised Environmental Sounds and Alternative Sound Sources in Opera

In their *A History of Opera*, Abbate and Parker offer an intriguing and tempting scenario:

we might make an imaginative leap and think for a moment about what it would be like to inhabit a world that is operatic; a world in which everyday life takes place and ordinary time passes, but in which everything - every action, every thought, every utterance - is geared towards never-ending music. It’s similar to the kind of thought-experiment explored in Peter Weir’s film *The Truman Show* (1998), in which Jim Carrey gradually becomes aware that his entire life is being played out for the benefit of a TV reality-show. How would we figure in another kind of man-made fantasy, one in which everything surrounding us was opera? ³⁹

What if whichever strange drug the singers have been spiked with—which means they can only communicate in song—spills onto everything else in their world? The rubbish bin I talked about taking out might be filled with music; its contents might be tuned. What if every sound in their environment is musicalised? What if the wind is a chord, blackbirds sing songs that accompany the orchestra (rather than the countless pieces that try to replicate *their* song), and the telephone ring is in a fugue with the piano? It might seem like I am imagining a nightmarish ‘Be Our Guest’ scenario—all-singing, all-dancing teapot and candelabra Disney love-in — but I see it as creating an operatic world where everything is in play.⁴⁰

Of course, there are many examples of non-instrumental sounds furnishing of the diegetic worlds of opera. Clocks (Maurice Ravel’s *L’heure Espagnole*) and bells (Modest Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*, Giuseppe Verdi’s *Falstaff*) feature heavily. And as mentioned before, anvils and other workshop items, while to some

³⁹ Abbate and Parker 2015, p.14.

⁴⁰ Song and scene of singing teacups and other household items from Disney film *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), directed by Kirk Wise and Gary Trousdale.

extent musical already, would not look out of place in *Stomp*.⁴¹ However, these are often used to create percussive rhythm, and it would not be particularly interesting to me if the cast were to tap dance, or to bash their cups on a table in some sort of rhythm. What I am searching for is a more temporally suspended world, where everything is in a composed relationship with itself. A scored, wholly musical world. A more recent example of a hyper-mundane, everyday environmental sound being exploited as musical material is Lina Lapelytė's *HAVE A GOOD DAY* (2013), where supermarket checkout clerks sing to the sounds of the bleeping checkout scans. I find it strange that she doesn't play with the pitches of these bleeps, but it still has a beautiful effect.⁴²

'Musicalising' things *could* mean mimicking environmental sounds with other instruments, but I am interested in pushing this much further. I am interested in musicalisation as a manipulation of everyday objects either through the very specific physical tuning of items (like a wine glass filled until its fundamental frequency is an A) or through electronic sampling (taking that same wine glass sound and making it into an electronic instrument capable of many pitches). There are many examples of resampled environmental sounds across the compositional sphere, even from mainstream composers (for example John Adam's *Gnarly Buttons* (1996), which uses a harmonically congruent sample of a cow).

A more obvious way toward making an entirely musical environment would be to use common household technology on stage that can be made to emit sound normally (such as radio and television). It is of course possible to manipulate exactly what comes from the radio so that it might play something accompanied by an offstage ensemble. Such a device is employed in Kurt Weill's *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* (1927), where a gramophone recording of a jazz band is played on stage.⁴³ As Alexander Rehding writes, 'the recording of the "Tango Angèle"' (as the composer dubbed the instrumental version of the piece) thus functions simultaneously as a prop on stage, as sounding music, and as partial score for the scene'.⁴⁴ The recording also opens a window to the outside world and allows a piece of music, impossible within the opera's ensemble forces, to be situated within the opera. It makes a household item function as it would in our own homes, to transport us from and elevate the everyday.

VI. Film to Opera/Musical Adaptation

⁴¹ *Stomp* is a stage show created by Steve McNicholas and Luke Cresswell in 1991 that uses dustbins as percussion in the vein of rhythmic dance music.

⁴² Lina Lapelytė, Vaiva Grainytė and Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė. *HAVE A GOOD DAY* (Opera for 10 Cashiers, Supermarket Sounds and Piano), 2013.

⁴³ This is an example of 'Zeitoper', a genre of German opera popular in the 1920s and 30s that employed the technology of the time on stage, from telephones to typewriters (employed in Hindemith's *Neues vom Tage*).

⁴⁴ Alexander Rehding. 'On the Record'. *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2006, p. 59. In the Guildhall School of Music and Drama's 2020 production of *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren*, a new 'record' was made using Weill's notes and with effects applied to make it sound 'authentic'. See 'Summer Opera: Kurt Weill & Monteverdi', <https://www.gsmd.ac.uk/whats-on/summer-opera-kurt-weill-monteverdi> (accessed 8 August 2023).

There are numerous examples of films being adapted into musicals or operas. A large proportion of them originated as films with music (e.g. *The Lion King* [1994], *The Producers* [1967]) and, since the songs already exist, they could almost be viewed as merchandise for successful franchises. This process of adaptation is perhaps not such a leap between forms, there is no need to overhaul original musical numbers and spoken dialogue in musicals, unlike opera, is an accepted part of the genre. Films that comprise only spoken dialogue present bigger problems, especially in opera. One medium cannot replicate the other's forms (why should it?), and stage works do not have the large camera crews, post-production processes and endless set possibilities available in film. Adaptation must find creativity in its flexibility or rigidity; enact a shift in perspective. It should be more than a version of its original.

In outlining her general theory of adaptation, Linda Hutcheon proposes the following as necessary for successful adaptations:

- An acknowledged transposition of a recognisable other work or works;
- A creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging;
- An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work.

Therefore, an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing.⁴⁵

Although Hutcheon is suggesting that adaptation is not (or should not be) derivative, without imaginative transcoding between forms, the two products will be measured on the same terms. 'This 'transcoding' can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation.'⁴⁶ Perhaps that is why the film-to-opera adaptation, a recent phenomenon (mainly 2000's onwards), is rarer.

A slightly earlier example of film-to-opera adaptation is Philip Glass' Cocteau trilogy (1994). Glass engages with the materiality of one film by essentially overdubbing the projection with an opera synchronised to the movements of the film. Glass writes:

my treatment of *La Belle et la Bête* was the most radical of the three works. I began by projecting the film as the visual aspect of the opera but turning off the soundtrack—music and speech—completely. I replaced the speech with singing parts, with all the other music also replaced.⁴⁷

He treats the adaptation as a creative restraint. The film itself suggests musical shapes and pace, and something new is created by exploring the relationship between the two forms.

⁴⁵ Linda Hutcheon. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, 2006, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 9.

⁴⁷ Philip Glass. *Words Without Music: A Memoir*. Liveright, 2016. pp. 760-761.

There are a few examples of more recent film-to-opera adaptations, including *Brokeback Mountain* (2005);⁴⁸ *The Fly* (1986);⁴⁹ *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972);⁵⁰ *Lost Highway* (1997)⁵¹ and *The Exterminating Angel* (1962).⁵² The shared quality of these productions is that they tend towards the epic or surreal - they have been chosen for their 'operatic' situations. There is a funny thing at play here, to do with opera's perceived alignment with extremity. A common internet meme at the time of writing is that when an extraordinary video floats to the top of the internet, it will often be captioned "this is opera".⁵³

Another phenomenon of operatic film adaptations that they seem designed for the international opera market, mining the success and recognition of their Hollywood parents. Jake Heggie's opera, *Dead Man Walking* (in this case adapted from both a film *and* book), for example, has been well-received the world over.⁵⁴ This opera is particularly problematic: the vocal lines are naturalistic and strangely upbeat. They sing of the joys of Vegas over orchestral blues riffs, all whilst a man faces death. Heggie somehow deflates this heightened situation in the pursuit of musical entertainment. Just as Hollywood so often does, it amps up trauma and exploits situations that already carry enough weight - ultimately undermining itself.

What is most interesting here is that these adaptations simply strip the narrative components of those films rather than attempting to engage with the materiality of them as films. They are not creatively transcoded. To transcode feels like a daunting proposition, however. Both opera and film weave relationships between text, sound and image; if a film was a suitable premise for an opera, what more *can* be achieved? Missy Mazzoli's recent operatic adaptation of Lars Von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996; opera version 2016) was met with the following criticism: 'Mazzoli and Vavrek adhere fairly closely to the film's structure, and this is where the problems start: what works well as narrative on screen doesn't translate so happily to the stage'.⁵⁵

Opera adaptations of the written word (novels, plays) are usually (but not always) met with more forgiveness. There can be no visual or temporal/durational comparison - the change in medium is a big enough leap between forms for it to be considered on its own terms. Perhaps one way of avoiding this criticism is to find film material that already disrupts traditional notions of pace, dialogue and narrative structure.

⁴⁸ Opera version composed by Charles Wuorinen, premiered in 2010.

⁴⁹ Opera version composed by Howard Shore, premiered in 2008.

⁵⁰ Opera version composed by Gerald Barry, premiered in 2005.

⁵¹ Opera version composed by Olga Neuwirth, premiered in 2003.

⁵² Opera version composed by Thomas Adès, premiered in 2016.

⁵³ Not dissimilar from Citron's exploration of the *Godfather* trilogy and Opera's obsession with ritual and extremity as previously mentioned.

⁵⁴ David Karlin 'Crime, punishment, forgiveness, redemption: *Dead Man Walking* finally reaches London' *Bachtrack*, 21 February 2018, <https://bachtrack.com/review-heggie-dead-man-walking-mayes-didonato-zifchak-cresswell-february-2018> (accessed 15 August 2023).

⁵⁵ Rowena Smith. 'Breaking the Waves Review – Von Trier's Bleak Drama Feels Lost in Translation'. *The Guardian*, 26 March 2020, www.theguardian.com/music/2019/aug/22/breaking-the-waves-missy-mazzoli-review-von-triers-bleak-drama-gets-lost-in-opera-translation (accessed 8 August 2023).

VII. *Music Concrète*: real sound

There is a long history of manipulating real sound recordings post-phonograph, starting with Walter Ruttmann and continuing through the pioneering work of *Musique Concrète* composers like Pierre Schaeffer, who experimented with tape techniques such as splicing, reversing, filtering and stretching.⁵⁶

All the physical techniques employed in manipulating tape can now be emulated digitally, using anything from a DAW (digital audio workstation) to a smartphone. Capturing sound is also easier than ever, which has meant that alongside *Musique Concrète*, sampling and real sound is almost its own genre on platforms such as TikTok (not to mention the vast uses of sampling employed in the production of hip-hop and pop music). The impulse behind these postmodern applications seems to be very different from their twentieth-century forbears, the intention more often seeming to be to showcase the producer's credentials. Sometimes, the impulse is just to be funny: you can make anything out of anything (like a saw wave from a vibrator, or a kick drum from a toilet brush).⁵⁷ Ultimately, these content creators are using the same techniques as Schaeffer, just to a different end. Sampling is almost ubiquitous in music now.

VIII. Manipulation, Fidelity and Capture

Composers such as Luc Ferrari would sometimes present real sounds less changed than those of composers like Schaeffer. Instead of reversing, splicing and filtering tape, they composed with captured environments, superimposing and editing recordings so as still to sound 'real', despite being assembled from non-contiguous sounds. In his sound taxonomy in *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*, Simon Emmerson describes Ferrari's seminal *Presque Rien no. I* (1970) as being 'mimetic discourse, abstracted syntax'; creating a real sounding environment through manipulated real environmental sounds.⁵⁸ Essentially, through selection, Ferrari sonically curates the best possible day at the beach. Ferrari describes this as 'anecdotal' music, which I find lovely: a real story, retold.⁵⁹

Annea Lockwood's *Tiger Balm* (1970) uses a recording of real tigers purring as stimuli for another type of mimesis: it focuses on real sounds (cats, planes, heartbeats and so on alongside some more instrumental sounds) that morph into each other via their similarities, somewhat like a dream. Composers like Matthew

⁵⁶ For a comprehensive chronology of recordings and experiments in music (starting appropriately with '1877 - Thomas Edison invents the phonograph'), see Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, eds. *Audio Culture, Revised Edition: Readings in Modern Music*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2017, p. 561.

⁵⁷ The sort of videos relatives send you alongside, 'can you believe it? Could YOU do this?'. Or '5 year old genius producer creates heartrending rendition of Amazing Grace using only sound of cat meowing.'

⁵⁸ Emmerson presents a useful table (a little too clinical for my purposes) for considering different degrees of meaning across a broad spectrum of electroacoustic music and real sound, see Simon Emmerson. *The Language Electroacoustic Music*. Springer, 1986, p. 24 ff; *ibid.* p.38.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 35

Herbert make music from a sustained focus on one source (a horse skeleton in *The Horse* [2023], for example), recording every possible sound and placing them at the centre of an album. Herbert also physically manipulates the source, creating a bone flute, for example, or a ribcage harp.

There are varying degrees to which these composers impose themselves on real-world recordings—how much of their sources they manipulate.. Chris Watson often presents extremely detailed field recordings of specific locations. Sometimes, the only ‘manipulation’ is the capture: the capture might be aggressively close, or he might use a hydrophone or similar device. The act of composition lies in the choice of how it is recorded. Watson describes his practice thus: ‘I’ve always blurred the margins between music and sound recording because to me the two are linked. I don’t disconnect myself from it. I am part of that process, really’.⁶⁰

Watson’s practice brings to mind work by artists like Crys Cole or Louis Johnstone of WANDA GROUP, whose recent works represent a more DIY approach. While Watson may capture sound on high-fidelity gear, Johnstone uses phone voice memos and a phone sampler application. Cole, in her album *Other Meetings* (2021), presents fidelity as a result of necessity, ‘working in a limited space with minimal equipment’⁶¹. Each of these artists points to some sort of domesticity, both through content *and* through sound fidelity: ‘poetically eliding the everyday domesticity of wilting flowers and a rocking coffee pot with a brukup old Korg DS8’.⁶²

These composers all include the space in the recording, like a grain on film. They show situation and location with sound. Listening to these recordings is like snooping on someone. I think of them differently from field recordings, often more like diary recordings. It is important to think of the quality of sound and recording devices being as much an artistic choice as the choice of sound. Even if is not thought about, it is still an artistic choice. Like those pedestals or frames we talked about—there is something the way we present these things we find or make. I am going to refer to making recordings as ‘capturing’ sometimes. It feels right. Like photographs, sounds are set up: the right camera, the right film, the right moment, maybe even a reassembling of the subjects.

⁶⁰ Tom Flint, ‘Chris Watson: The Art of Location Recording’, *Sound on Sound*, December 2018, <https://www.soundonsound.com/techniques/chris-watson-art-location-recording> (accessed 8 August 2023).

⁶¹ See <https://cryscole.bandcamp.com/album/other-meetings> (accessed 8 August 2023).

⁶² Product review accompanying Boomkat’s release of Cole’s *Other Meetings*, see <https://boomkat.com/products/other-meetings> (accessed 8 August 2023).

Last Days

I. Introduction

Last Days is a 2001 film by Gus Van Sant. It is a fictionalised account of the days leading up to and including Kurt Cobain's suicide. None of the characters in the film bear the names of real people: Kurt becomes Blake, and this is an important reframing of the premise. The film is not a biopic—it is less about the characters, and more about their situation. What we witness is a young man stumbling around his large house, making noodles, falling asleep and receiving unwanted guests and telephone calls. The Royal Opera House were understandably anxious that an opera based on such a film, operating so firmly within the 'everyday', might just be dull. But *Last Days* offers a situation in which every moment of everyday activity presented in the film is heightened by the knowledge that at any time (in a delineated timeframe) Blake *will* commit suicide: every bowl of cereal or cigarette could be his last. The film, for its power, relies on the modern-day mythology that surrounds Kurt Cobain; the inevitability of his suicide is the main 'dramatic' tension in the film. *Last Days* belongs to the genre of 'slow cinema' and is part of a 'death trilogy' alongside *Gerry* (2002) and *Elephant* (1996).⁶³ The latter, based on the Columbine High School massacre, relies on the same inevitability of the tragic event to shape the experience of an otherwise undramatic film. This is central to creating the dramatic from the anti-dramatic (Research exploration I).

Jarvis describes *Last Days* in terms of:

hostility to technological speed and commodity clutter; insistence on minimalism in life and art; celebration of the pleasures of slowness, stillness and solitude; meticulous observation of small details from nature; embrace of quiescence and the 'art of walking' which is the quintessential everyday activity in slow cinema.⁶⁴

The film has minimal dialogue, and what little dialogue it does have is extremely mundane. It was, therefore, a perfect vehicle for my musical language and interests. Also, in the tradition of many operas, its central character is a musician. It offered a malleable form suited to multiple explorations of everydayness and banality, and Gus green-lit any changes that Copson and I might want to make to plot or dialogue.

Suicide is, of course, a grand theme and is frequently shown as dramatic events in operas. Here, rather than show it and have it manifest as a dramatic climax, it serves to frame everything we see on stage, in the knowledge that Blake will die, it unlocks an anti-dramatic dramatic effect. We do not see it but we do know it. It makes this slow and repetitive sludge of everyday compelling, the stakes are raised. Is that the last bowl of cereal? Is that the last phone call? The everyday here is made poignant via music *and* scenario. Without having anything traditionally dramatic happen, no remarkable events, no surprises, no arc - the raised stakes compel.

⁶³ Slow Cinema is a genre of film which favours longer shots, little (if any) narrative often associated with directors such as Abbas Kiarostami and Béla Tarr.

⁶⁴ Jarvis 2020, p. 390.

II. Adaptation

I wrote in the Project Overview that I was interested in challenging hierarchies of how things were made—that we wanted to abandon the text, music and then staging in pursuit of something less reliant on plot or narrative. *Last Days* demands that anyway. I folded a few additional characters into the ‘narrative’: an apparition of the Magician, from the magician's story (the true story of Chung Ling Soo or William Robinson) that the private detective tells in the film, and a Superfan who is obsessed with Blake.

Mine and Copson's process was to sit together and talk about images. These were 'images' we both wanted to reach and illuminate—the impossibly long cereal pour, the singing firework kettle, the chiming bin bag. They were tonal, sonic and visual goals. I would ask for specific sound actions and Copson would stitch them into a scene. One key idea was that, in its mundanity and magic, the house was in a way its own character. These 'images' provided direction and focal points for a delineated narrative timeline.

Although I would highly recommend watching the film in general, it certainly does not need to be seen for the opera to be understood. They can stand alone from one another, just as I think most texts should. The opera is tonally very different from the film; some people might have expected something as somnambulistic as the original. My dreary music over a dreary landscape. It took me a while to realise that everydayness need not be aggressively mundane. My music can do that already; it is automatic. I think of potential scores like colour palettes. Had I been left to my own devices, I would have made an opera that might appear grayscale and tonally homogeneous. Copson and I had to find ways to pipette colour into my automatically bleaker landscape, to heighten unexpected corners of narrative. We encouraged that colouring in each other and had faith in what we were doing—to an annoying extent, perhaps.

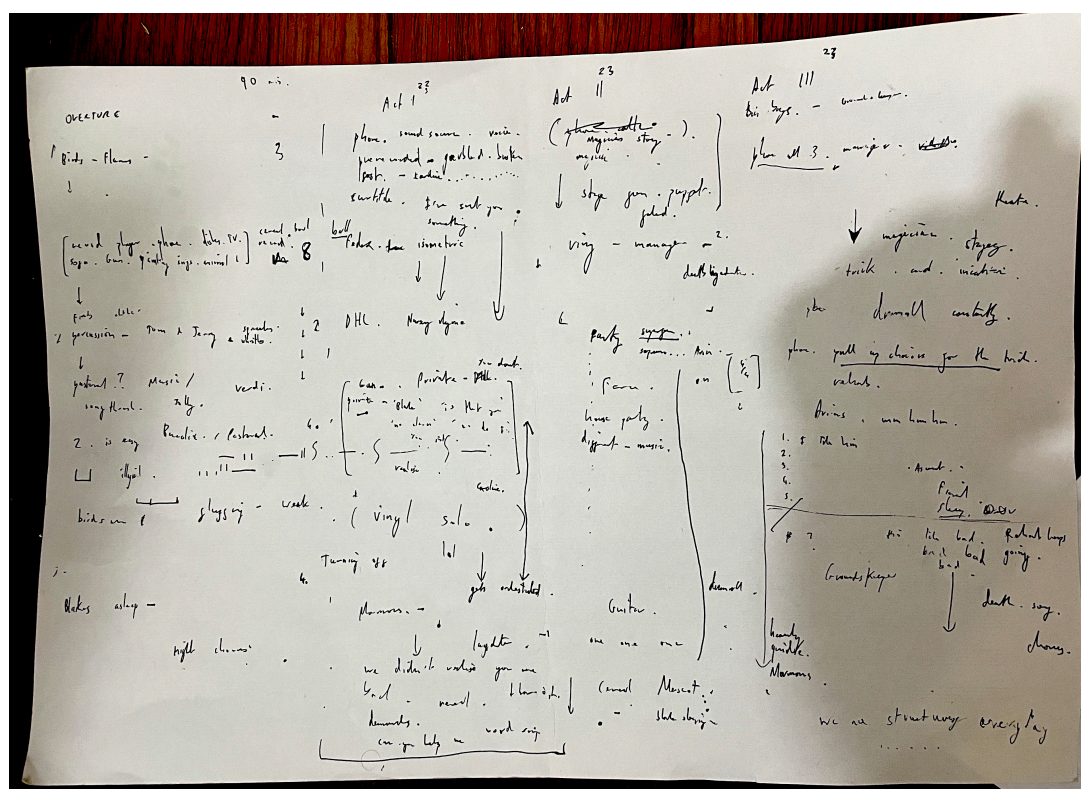


Figure 1: An early map of piece I made with Copson, unfortunately, some of squiggles are not discernible to me anymore.

Figure 1 shows a very early map that I put together with Copson. It contains scrawlings like ‘cereal mascot’—moments that sadly did not come to pass.⁶⁵ Once the cereal mascot had gone and we were secure in the order of events in the opera, we made very intuitive decisions about the length of sections, as one might arrange items on a shelf. This was done according to what we considered ‘activity’ or ‘non-activity’, which mainly meant singing scenes *versus* just music and images. The map isn’t wholly correct; we (or specifically I, in this case) drifted from the plans, but only by a minute here or there.

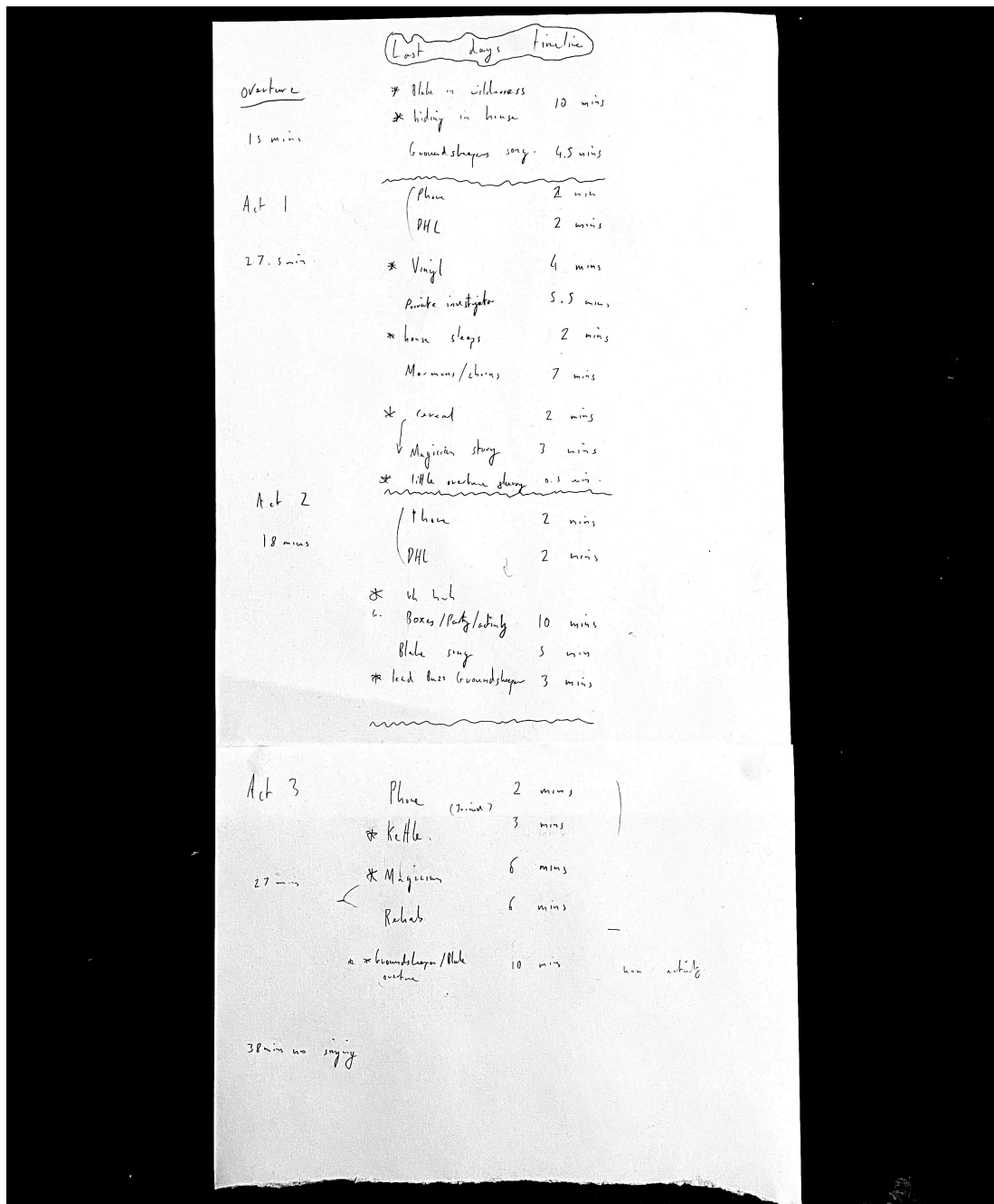


Figure 2: Timings and structure of Last Days plotted - drawn up in February 2021.

⁶⁵ See SM. 4 for a more thorough and clear ‘beat board’, made in Final Draft (software that enables the user to rearrange squares of material, much like a film storyboard).

III. Sources and Equipment

The sounds I use in *Last Days* are made, sourced and captured in disparate and somewhat ad-hoc ways. I will go into more detail for specific sounds later, but it feels important for me to document my own thoughts and distinctions regarding authorship, and to lay out the sources and means of recording that I am happy to use. These thoughts are not rules as such, but give an impression of the contours of my authorial conscience and control. I have built them intuitively and they apply to almost everything I have made.

1. Pre-recorded music must always be my own, at the very least recorded myself, but I will preferably have also written the actual music.
2. Unique real-world sounds are samples with contour or shape that themselves make music, like a rhythm or even a melodic fragment. I think of these as sounds that can be notated. They must be recorded by me because they impose themselves so much on the music; they are just as important as the notes. If I used someone else's capture, I would not feel as though I had written that music.
3. 'General' or 'homogenous sounds' I think of as sounds where if you had two people do an impression of them, you would get two similar results. They are always roughly the same sound and they can be sourced from anywhere. If I do not make these myself, I regularly use Freesound, an astoundingly good depository of sounds collected and uploaded by a community of field recordists, hobbyists and amateurs.⁶⁶ I only use samples that are under creative commons licences. I only use Freesound for sounds that I consider replaceable. A good example of the difference between unique and general sounds would be a comparison of bird calls: a simple *cheep cheep* could be considered 'general', but an elaborate long song thrush call could be considered 'unique'.
4. There are also designed or physically manipulated sounds. There are myriad reasons to work with real sound and sampler instruments, but one strong one for me is that they enable me to assign fixed behaviours to samples. Much like you might ask an instrument to tremolo, you can record (or collect) a behaviour in sound that will always behave in that way. For example, if you sample yourself blowing into a bottle with a wavering pitch, that little wobble will appear on all notes. This could be thought of like a physically implemented envelope on a sound—a little like how ANS synthesizers⁶⁷ enable you to draw the waveform. The way in which the ANS synthesizer plays these images is described as 'optical synthesis' and, I think, a very clear way of seeing or designing the behaviour of a wave. This is not how I create sounds or design them, but it is how I think of them.⁶⁸

Whilst I would have loved to make most of my own samples for *Last Days*, there were sounds that I could not capture at the time. Fireworks, for example, were not very popular during the Covid-19 pandemic, and there were also not many places where I could set them off in Clapton. Furthermore, I did not know any

⁶⁶ Frederic Font F, Gerard Roma and Xavier Serra. 'Freesound Technical Demo' in *Proceedings of the 21st ACM International Conference on Multimedia (2013)*, ACM: 2013, pp. 411-12.

⁶⁷ Stanislav Kreichi. 'The ANS Synthesizer: Composing on a Photoelectronic Instrument', *Leonardo*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1995, pp. 59–62.

⁶⁸ ANS Synthesiser scores, or coils, are strange glass plates that look like black-and-white Lino cuts.

wolves (but more on that later). I either use my phone and its voice memo function, a Zoom H4N or large professional recording rigs to capture sound. I mostly use paper, Sibelius, Logic Pro, Ableton and sometimes Audio Hijack to record audio from other programmes. I make these decisions on the basis of whatever is needed or available. I do not use external plug-ins; I like to make do.⁶⁹

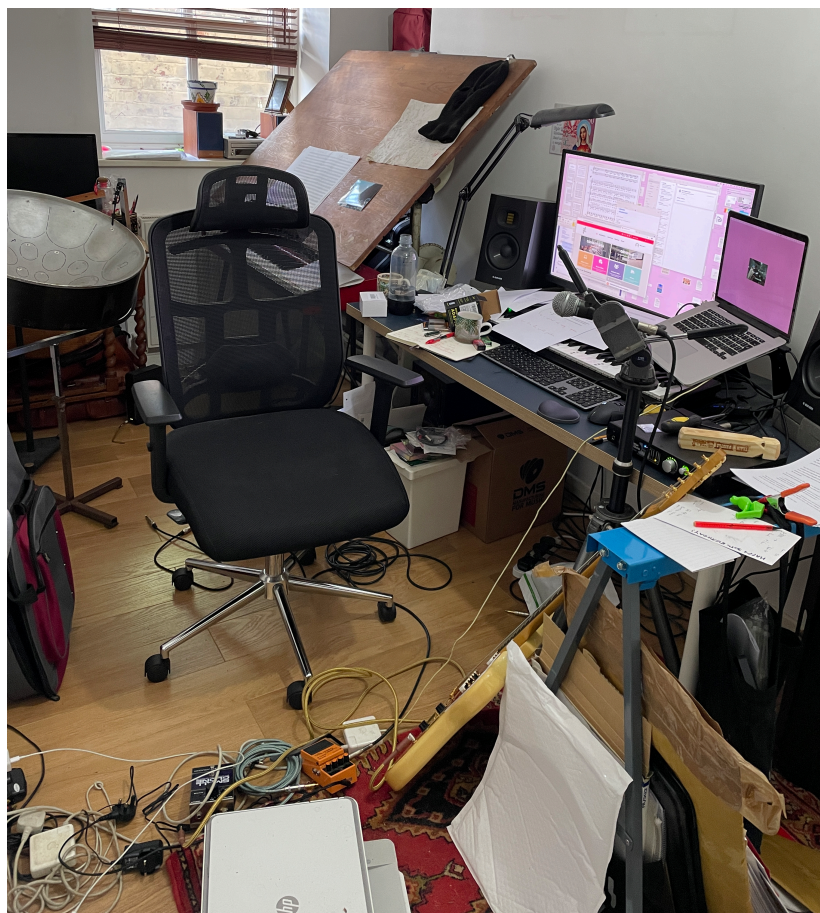


Figure 3: My studio mid-opera, including train whistle and bird whistle that did not make it into the score, looking surprisingly clean. Blake's chorus and distortion pedals also visible. An SM58 microphone on a tripod is ready for my own mutterings.

⁶⁹ See SM.10 for a thorough source-sheet of sounds and instrument sounds, and any external authors.

IV. Cutting my World into Pieces; Sampling

So far, I have mentioned sampling frequently but not discussed it in much detail. This is mainly because my technique is common, there is a wealth of guides available that describe those techniques clearly.

Nevertheless, for the sake of rigour, the following briefly outlines the process that I use for most samples or sampler instruments. I will cover any more idiosyncratic or extended techniques as they arise pertaining to specific examples.

1. I capture or source the sound however I can. I then drag it into Logic Pro or a similar DAW and cut it to whichever length I need (beginning and ends are important of course—it usually starts promptly and I usually leave a little tail of the environment that it was recorded in, a sort of environmental decay). I then use a tuner application alongside a perfectly tuned software instrument—this is usually something like a sine tone; less rich in frequencies and so less likely to bias the outcome. This process is intuitive: another person might decide on different frequency centres, or decide (if there are fluctuations) on a different prevalent note. A good example of this phenomenon is a frequency-rich sound like an orchestra tuning—presumably on an A, but quite often (because of balance and so on) the D or C can be more prominent.
2. I then load those tuned samples into Logic's multi-sampler (which has an automatic function now—this took a little longer in the EXS24 but was basically the same process) and drag the root note to the appropriate pitch. On a case-by-case basis, I either make the sound into a 'one-shot' sample (whereby the whole sample will play with one stroke of a key) or I will place an envelope on the sample so that it can either be held or mimic the attack or decay of another instrument (like a piano or harp).
3. This process can be quite quick. However, although I have become better at intuitively recognising sounds that will work as sampler instruments, there are a lot of duds. So cycling through different options is also part of the process. Generally, if I can decide the sampling size I am collecting (higher sample rates make for much more malleable sounds but the degradation of low sample rate files is an important consideration), it can provide beautiful grain. I discuss the use of grain and quality implications further in section IX and X.

This generic process will work on most DAW or software samplers. In fact, after making all of these samplers in Logic Pro, I remade them identically using a sampler in Ableton (which works across operating systems and is seemingly a lot more stable in live situations). Anyone with a computer can now play any sound that they capture or collect on a keyboard. There is no more need for Fairlight machines. Magic.

1 lastdaysbird	2 wolfcry-1	3 bottleblwolong	4 bottleblwoshor	5 Grand Piano	6 MEDUSA SWELL	7 lastdaysorch1	8 lastdaysleadbu	9 lastdaysmagici	10 lastdayswhistl
▶ ON	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF
▶ OFF	▶ ON	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF
▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ ON	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF
▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ ON	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF
▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ ON	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF
▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ ON	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF
▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ ON	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF
▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ ON	▶ OFF	▶ OFF
▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ ON	▶ OFF
▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ OFF	▶ ON

Figure 4: The instruments of Last Days (full list in SM.10, dazzling colour codes by Sound Intermedia).

V. Setting Up the Universe

Prologue

Opera has a way of existing in selective vacuums: although there is constant music and musicalised text, environmental sound has been stripped away (save all those Wagnerian anvils). *Last Days*' world is conversely one where *all* sound is scored and highlighted, as if some pipette of a drug has been dropped on this world; nothing can exist without being musical. You drop your keys and they are in some harmonic relationship with the wind. Every single sound has been tuned, manipulated and embraced. The Research Explorations I describe at the start of this thesis require a particular universe to function.

I should also add that I think that 'everydayness' is also about familiarity. There are sounds that are so common, even if extreme, that we are totally familiar with them. In any context we would recognise them—birds, wolves, kettles, fireworks, doorbells, fire, bullets, cereal and bottles—even if they were removed from visual clues. We can also use familiar sounds to imply certain surroundings, times and locations. In this way, we set up a universe with sound as much as visuals.

The 'Prologue' was initially called an overture. Not because it introduced the musical themes of the piece but because it introduces the 'rules' of the world, the physics and function of how sound works in *Last Days*. Before the audience enters, a cloud of naturalistic bird song begins. Like Luc Ferrari's early works—comprising snips of village recordings, everyday human life, made to sound realistic and linear (but heavily curated)—I collected recordings of birds and the outdoors (see SM.10 for locations and situations) from my travels outside of London. They are stacked in very large files (see figure 7) of birds that should not exist together; bird calls from Lundy Island to Lake Bolsena (a twitcher's nightmare). They begin in a seemingly natural way but become so overlaid that you sense a shift in the world—something isn't quite right. It is the first twist of the real.

Eventually a new bird emerges, playing her own music: recognisable melodies emerge from a particular bird, played freely on keyboard by Siwan Rhys (made from a very simple *cheep cheep* sound—a thrush). Amongst other things, it plays a snatch of Bach’s *Sinfonia No. 11 in G minor* (BWV 797). It plays music we know that birds do not sing (save maybe those lovely parrots). This bird flaps by and shows you that there is a little magic going on. Unlike Respighi’s nightingale recording in *Pines of Rome*, this bird can sing whatever is written on the page.⁷⁰

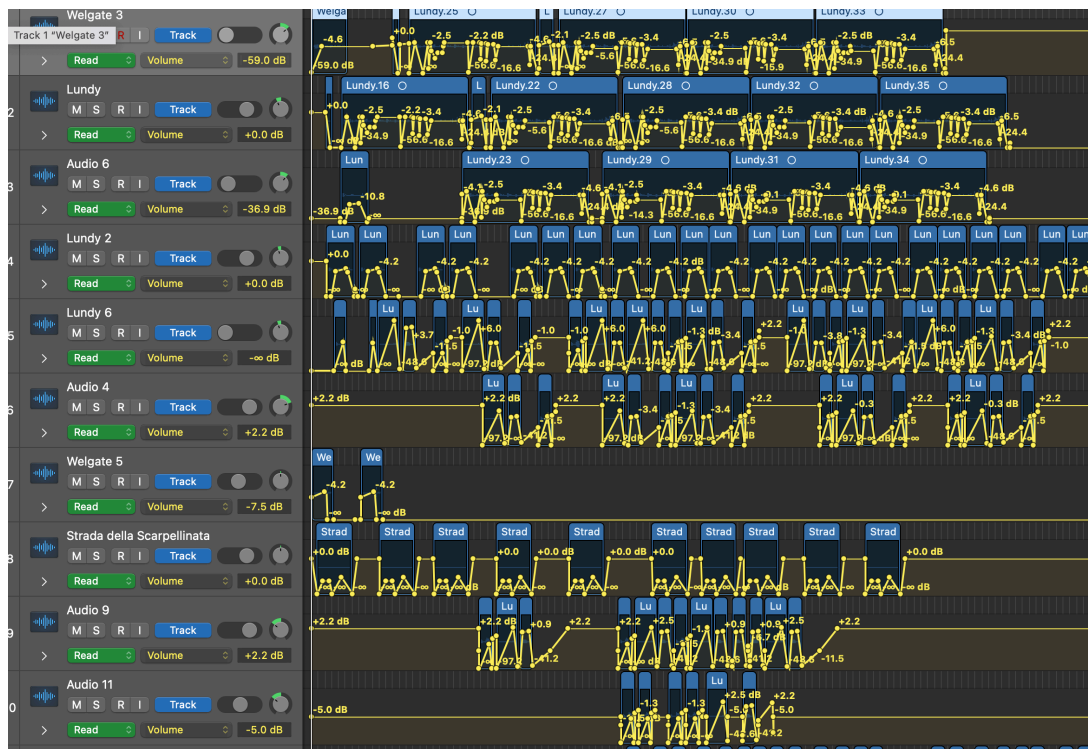


Figure 5: The bird cloud for *Last Days* being constructed in Logic Pro. You can make out some details—Welgate, Strada della Scarpellinata and Lundy, all named by where my iPhone thought I was at the time.

A poetic world like this may seem like it shouldn’t have rules, but it has to have practical ideas to function. If a sound is to appear from thin air and then become something else, it must be first played at its natural pitch. It must be recognisable before it starts singing at you and before it shape-shifts. This principle is particularly important at the start of *Last Days* because the sound is sourceless; you cannot see the birds. If we could see the bird then it may open its beak and sing like a foghorn—the sound would be linked to the image through synchronicity. But where you can’t bolster a sound visually, you first need to present it in an untouched form, so a journey can be tracked from the natural to the unnatural. This is the same as the wolf cry in the prologue, which is detailed in section X. You have to present the sound as it would be in the real world first. They are devices to introduce you to the world and from which you can track change.

⁷⁰ Ottorino Respighi, *Pines of Rome* (Ricordi, 1924). I could also point to Laurence Crane’s much more recent *Natural World* (Composers Edition, 2021).

Blake first enters through the bird cloud, seemingly returning from rehab, and only mumbles short bursts of unintelligible haze (more on Blake's mumbling later). Blake's entry was the first decision Copson and I discussed when making the opera, for many reasons. The idea of Blake as a non-singing role being hounded by singers throughout bolsters the alienation of this character from the surrounding world. Why are they singing? Why is the kettle singing? Blake is as confused as us: why is everything music?

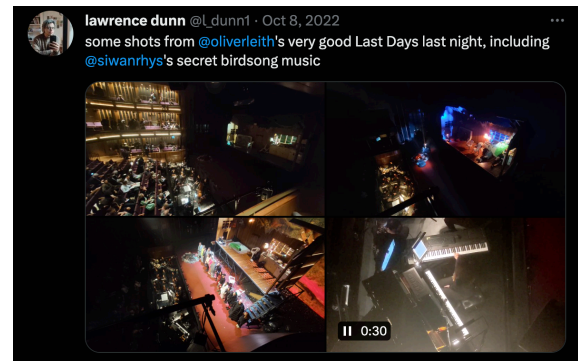


Figure 6: Lawrence Dunn spots the 'secret birdsong music' from above the pit.

Last Days' rules of sonic physics mean that sounds can waft between diegetic and non-diegetic, and be both at the same time. They slip between forms. The sounds can move on any axis, but they must start with some semblance of real-world recognition. Beyond diegetic flux, retuned sounds by their very nature have temporal and proportional implications. A low bird could make you feel like you are falling down Alice's rabbit hole or that the bird is a giant. I wanted to make a magical world where fireworks can sound like comets and wolves can be mouse- or house-sized.



Figure 7: The universe and stage set-up - (photographed by Eloisa-Fleur Thom).

VI. Thickening the Air; Tuning

All my explorations need a particular climate to exist in. A fog or something, for sound to pan, to change and to travel through. This wafting between states and metamorphosing needs a different air; a thick air, by which I mean that the air should feel like some musical soup. Just like Abbate's 'ambient fluid', it should be able to ripple. Sounds can leave trails in it, it can slosh and be elastic.⁷² Thickening can involve doubling notes and having a few versions of the same pitch buzzing against each other; complex unisons.

This thickening also involves extra close harmony; unisons that are cents apart. This happens naturally in the relationship between samples that have some sort of pitch contour (particularly tiny ones) and instrumental writing, but it is also written into the instrumental parts. The interactions between these close notes creates a sort of haze; it multiplies the sound.⁷³ It is as much timbral as it is about notes. This 'thickening' of the air I find difficult to explain because, like a lot of my compositional preoccupations, it is about a feeling.

Throughout *Last Days*, I ask the strings to play the same notes with tiny variations in cents that create complicated little blurs (see figure 11). These are most effective if they come from one instrument, say using open strings; the instrument buzzes, the sound is thick. It is like superimposing an image on the same image but one millimetre out of place. These tiny pitch variations also work across an ensemble. They are particularly effective when combined with slow and staggered glissando canons. To extend the metaphor: this is like superimposing a film onto the same film at a slightly different speed. It creates constantly varying surfaces, where the rate of the haze changes.

Part of the reason I love real sound and sampling is that it creates automatic texture, thicker sounds, slight wobbles in tuning, creating hazes when in unison with other instruments. It is a natural thickening agent. It means that very simple harmonies, often simple triadic material coloured with these timbral flutters, appear new or glow.

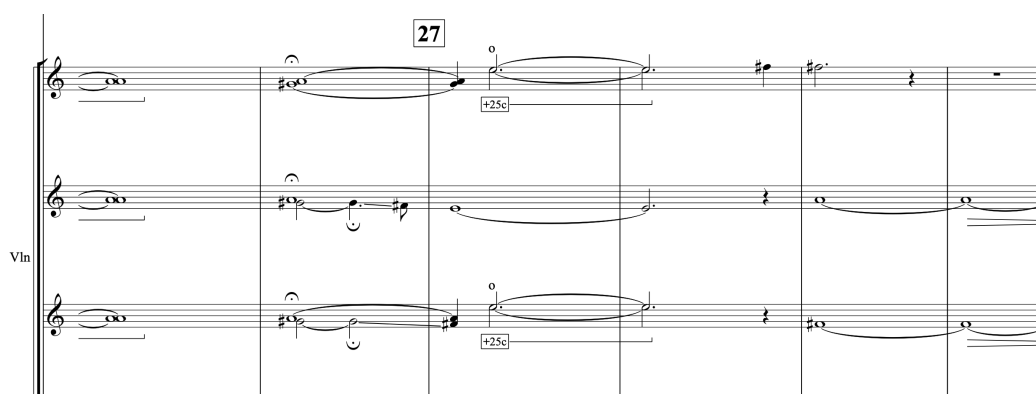


Figure 9: Violin parts from bar 114 of Act 1.

⁷² Abbate 1996, p. 119.

⁷³ This technique could be described as 'difference tones' but this is not how I think of it. It is also very similar to how a 'chorus' effect works.

VII. Diegetic slippage in *Non Voglio Mai Vedere Il Sole Tramonto*

i. First time, Blake listens (Act I, Scene 3)

This section will address Research Exploration Areas II and III, discussing musical analogues for camerawork in the film (zooming out) and how music can push and move through diegetic boundaries.

There is a poignant moment in the film where Blake is left alone: he listens to Boyz 2 Men's *On Bended Knee* and passes out. The track locates him in a certain universe and time. Act I, Scene 3 of the opera is also the first time that he is left alone in the house. When searching for an analogue for this moment, I could not imagine anything worse than me trying to genre-study a '90s hit (while it would be fun, the real truth is that I do not have the notes in me—my ears are too wonky, anytime I have tried something like this, it sounds like a version made in a tumbledrier). Instead, I wrote an extreme Italian *verismo*-style aria. I wanted to play with genre; genre itself being a result of familiar and conventional traits. This *verismo* style has such an engrained tonal or gestural quality that is recognisable even if the pastiche is a hatchet job. It is like playing with genre as a material itself: an object in the opera.⁷⁴

The idea was that in *this* universe, the aria from an imagined opera might be Blake's favourite.⁷⁵ This is a process of transcoding in adaptation. I thought of this as a cultural artefact from Blake's world, like discovering a poster for an imaginary event or being able to turn the radio on in an open-world game. I wanted the song to feel like it had been in the world for a long time. I wanted this aria to play from a record player (much like the record in Weill's *Der Zar lässt sich fotografieren*); for it to pass through that nebulous diegetic field and end up in the orchestra and the theatre speakers (and then to end up as a fire crackle in the magician's scene). In this scenario, the music moves from stage to stage *and* pit, crossing the diegetic boundary. Blake then touches the record, causing the diegetic music to slow down, which then affects the pit orchestra. It is as if Blake holds temporal control over the whole show. It feels like we have been viewing a zoomed-in image of Blake—we are focussed on him as if he is being filmed in close-up. As the music bleeds into the main theatre, it is as if we zoom out: the whole stage is the 'shot' now. As I have mentioned, this is a common film trope, hearing a song played from a diegetic source to then becoming non-diegetic (or both really as the character continues to listen). A way of enforcing this effect is by manipulating the quality, fidelity and volume of the sound. It is clear when something is diegetic, because of its location but also because it may sound like it comes from a smaller speaker. The theatre speakers then offer the high-fidelity, purer sound. Quite often in film, it seems that this effect is exaggerated though use of record players or gramophones (for example I can mainly remember images of characters using record players over

⁷⁴ Some of my colleagues were disgusted with the piece—thought that it was shameless—which I think is a misunderstanding of what it is in the piece. I described it as 'Puccini McDonalds'.

⁷⁵ During an interview with Copson and me, Alex Marshall from the *New York Times* said he had met with Charles R. Cross (one of Kurt Cobain's biographers) to ask whether Cobain had ever liked opera. Cross reportedly said, 'no, and that Kurt would have never listened to it', and that he himself [Cross] was disgusted with the project. Another complete misreading—this character *really* is not Cobain. See SM.12 for other pre-press carry-on.

someone putting on a CD), the grain and distortion of a record to a cleaner non-diegetic sound is a clearer change than it would be from a CD, not to mention the more physical ceremony of putting on a record.

Blake's control over the diegetic and non-diegetic in this moment was an early experiment in the string workshop with 12 Ensemble (for workshop material, see SM.8). I was aware that if the record was played by hand, mid-show, it would be much freer to work out how the players could follow the pitch bend rather than notate it neatly. We experimented with an exaggerated movement of the arm with which the ensemble would 'flatten' their pitch together. It would eventually be notated as instructions above the stave (see figure 12).

The musical score for Figure 10 consists of four staves. The top staff is for Sfan, with a vocal line and lyrics 'il tra-mon - to'. The second staff is for Blake, with a vocal line and lyrics 'sun set'. The third staff is for Gtr, with a rhythmic accompaniment. The bottom staff is for Vln, with a melodic line and a pitch bend instruction: 'strings: shift notes as an ensemble, like a touched vinyl record, down about -50c and then back up'. The Vln staff also includes two staves labeled '(sounds Ct)' and '(sounds Ab)'.

Figure 10: String pitch bends as Blake slows the record, Act II, Scene 3 (bar 222).

I wrote the aria itself for Caroline Polachek. As a nod to the virtuosity of opera, I asked her how high she could sing. She sent me a voice note of the high F# that she hits on the line 'di me'. Copson and I were keen to work with someone like Polachek because she has such a unique, Olympian voice; it seemed conceptually richer working with a pop star of now, a real *prima donna* on record and another deepening of the lore of Blake's universe. I imagine the aria itself as part of some other world in which whatever opera it comes from is a part of the repertoire, and that there is a parallel universe where Polachek is finishing a run singing Bozart's 'Queen of the Day' aria at Asgard Met.

Initially, I planned to have Polachek sing with a midi mock-up of an orchestration, which I would then distort and EQ until the instruments sounded like that ubiquitous, crackly sound of early gramophone recordings (the strings, brass and woodwind seem to become some pillar of sound).⁷⁶ This would work well for the

⁷⁶ See SM.13 for a first mock-up of this sound.

smaller speaker, but you never hear those tinny orchestra recordings on huge theatre speakers. Instead, we recorded a version with 12 Ensemble with Dave Rowell engineering and Danny L. Harle producing.

We had planned to release the physical vinyl on the same date as the premiere of *Last Days*. However, the pandemic seems to have inspired a renaissance in self-releasing vinyl (I am also guilty of this), so the queues for pressing were somewhat longer than usual. The record could not be made in time (it is now in the world - the first physical copies started to appear around the 13th of March) so this effect of the aria slowing down and warping had to be done digitally. I think this was reassuring to the ROH technical staff - there was a worry about the amount of analogue things that could go wrong if we used a real record, they were very into the sound desk being king (amongst other things like a real life boiling singing kettle). We released the digital recording on the first night of the opera.

In the production, the light warping of the vinyl is already baked into the record and when Blake touches the record (a visual cue), a cue in QLab emulates this sound, pitch bending the sound to a near stop. When I was working out how this bending might work, I did not have the record so had to find a way to mimic the act of slowing one down. I am sure there are better ways of emulating a record player, but within Logic the best I could find was a way to use the pitch wheel of a keyboard. This needed to be intuitive and physical, at least to experiment with, and there are CDJs that could do this with no problem. It is relatively simple: I loaded the whole aria into a DAW sampler and set its pitch bend limits to . It could slow and speed up without losing its place in the recording, just like touching a record or using the speed function of a record player.



Figure 11: Cover for the single release of *Non Voglio Mai Vedere Il Sole Tramontare*. Cover design by Collin Fletcher, image by Nedda Afsari (7 inch single).

ii. Second Time, Blake Plays and Sings, Superfan Sings (Act II, Scene 4)

Act II, Scene 4 mainly explores diegetic flux; a thorough blurring of diegesis and confusion about who can hear what. The scene also was one of the most pragmatically thought-out as Blake (played by a potentially non-musical actor) was required to play the guitar in a very exposed moment. These considerations apply to Research Exploration II.

The aria occurs twice in the opera: the slowed-down vinyl recording first, and a transposed version that the Superfan sings while Blake plays a guitar and sings to himself. The is a scene in the film, a glacially slow zoom-out while Blake improvises a noisy set. Like its counterpart in this scene the opera, it is the only point in the film when he appears as a musician. My and Copson's analogue for the slow zoom-out, takes the form of a slow and small crescendo in the pit's rendition of the music. The music does not move between diegetic boundaries here; it is always both non-diegetic and diegetic. The characters hear their own pared-back version of the song—the 'pop version'—while the orchestra plays an accompanying version. Both could exist on their own. The diegesis is further confused because Blake is singing to himself and we are unsure if he can hear the Superfan's version (perhaps her voice is in his head). They are essentially duetting but he is unaware, as if there are two diegetic situations on stage.

It was always possible that the role of Blake would be played by a non-musician. We were lucky that Agathe had played the guitar a little before and learnt to play and sing the song beautifully. In case we ended up with someone less proficient or less dedicated, the guitar part is deliberately rhythmically simple, featuring an extremely limited palette of chords (four) and a suggestion to embrace the sloppiness. The main adjustment was a *scordatura* on the guitar, which meant that all the chords would be playable with one finger. It also meant that if anything went properly wrong during a performance, strumming just the open strings would not be so harmonically offensive. The usual EADGBE guitar tuning is replaced with DAADAD (all alterations are tuned down), meaning that with one finger, you can play that big power chord of fifths. Almost anyone could have a go.⁷⁷ This scene ends with the guitar being unplugged and crying out with that familiar static buzz. In turn, that sound becomes an instrument through sampling, in a metamorphosis from a diegetic sound to a non-diegetic instrument. The buzz becomes the sound of the keyboard. I will discuss Act II, Scene 4 in more detail later (in the section 'Taking out the bins'). For now, suffice to say that metamorphosis is fundamental to how *Last Days* works.

⁷⁷ If these guitar alterations had not worked, I could have created a tape track instead.

VIII. Metamorphosis, Suggestive Sound, Letting the Outside in

Research Exploration area II relies on particular modes of listening and openness to where ‘inspiration’ comes from. Part of this pushing of diegetic flux through the thick air or ‘ambient fluid’ I discuss in section VIII is that sounds not only move freely through boundaries, but also metamorphose. So far, I have discussed sounds that move from one source to another. But there is another way of thickening that musical area; sounds becoming or suggesting other sounds. In this section, I discuss sounds that move from one source *into* another—how sometimes that movement might be intuitive, botched, planned or accidental. This change of sound-source is also a structural driving tool. It is often how *Last Days* moves from one scene to another: a sound that was diegetic becomes part of the next musical texture, and non-diegetic.

i. Wolves and Sirens

In section V of this thesis, I describe how I think of general sounds as sounds you can do impressions of—that different people would imagine in roughly the same way. And yet, the wolf sound somehow did not fit with my sampling ‘rules of engagement’. It is such a special sound that I felt I could not use someone else’s recording. It is also much rarer than the other general sounds I imagine (like the *cheep cheep* bird call), particularly a single wolf howl. Wolves often howl in packs. I could not collect a lone wolf howl, in isolation, in London.

Wolf howls are also not as general as one might think (I have now spent a whole day with wolves and can attest to this). That generic, almost cartoonish, wolf sound that is filed in your head (*awooooooooo ra ra raoo*) is probably based on a sample made for Disney in the 1940s (supposedly made by Jimmy Macdonald). It is likely the most common wolf cry sample in use.⁷⁸ Similar to the ‘Wilhelm scream’ - the most used library scream of all, and perhaps the most ridiculous, so legendary that sound designers try and sneak it into films to this day.^{79 80}

Although wolves always sound like wolves, they do not always have that very specific contour or melodic shape heard in the Disney sample. The reality of the sound is that it is not as stylised as I had thought. Unfortunately for me, that famous contour was very much in my head, but being filtered through my slightly muddled head; I had remembered it wrong (the wrong interval). The Disney wolf was not going to work. I had started to write the music with this sound in mind, hoping that I could collect it later. It was a misremembered but extremely specific sound I was after, and it did not exist. I would need to find a wolf that could read music, that was tame enough for my flat and happy to travel alone. So, in a return to the idea of

⁷⁸ see https://soundeffects.fandom.com/wiki/Hollywoodedge_-_Single_Classic_Wolf_CRT012501 for usages of this sample.

⁷⁹ For an article on the *Star Wars* film franchise stopping their traditional use of the scream for *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016), see Josh Kurp ‘A *Star Wars* Tradition Dating Back to the Original Movie Has Been Retired’, *UPROXX*, 21 February 2018, <https://uproxx.com/hitfix/star-wars-wilhelm-scream/> (Accessed 14 August 2023).

⁸⁰ Nicolas Rapold et al. ‘Opening Shots’. *Film Comment*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2016, pp. 6–12.

sounds you can do impressions of, I spent a day at my desk with a microphone, recording as many *awoos* as possible. The confession is that I am the wolf.



Figure 12: Tarik (the wolf), Charlie Fox and I on a recent research trip to visit some rescued wolves.

I remember playing someone the initial wolf sample and transposing it high and low, and they said, ‘oh, it sounds like the BBC singers’. This was not quite what I wanted, but they were onto something; something about the cleanness and clarity of the sound. It sounded purely vocal; there was no grain. Of course, we are so used to this particular wolf sound that we forget there is something in the fidelity—part of our recognition of this sound is also its fidelity (no one is Britney mic’ing a wolf). It always sounds like the wolf is recorded from faraway *and* like it is clipping the mic. So, I played with distortion, pushed mid-range frequencies heavily and adding a slight reverb. I made a passable wolf sample that I have faked to sound like a lower-quality field recording, somehow making it feel a little more real.⁸¹ It is a little like crumpling and tea staining your homework for the patina on your scroll.

⁸¹ For future reference, I have found that using phone microphones up close almost did this automatically. Wired headphone microphones for phones work even better.

Real sounds, played at different pitches, are always suggestive. When this wolf is transposed to its low extremity (and if you do not know its origins), it sounds exactly like an air raid siren. There are whole semiotic worlds conjured by sirens; by horns, alarms, and what they mean.⁸² It is fitting that a transposed animal cry mimics the siren's worldly wail, psychoacoustically and semantically. This is one of the joys of working with samples: they give something back to you. This transposed wolf sound encouraged me to push the sirens in *Last Days* further, and to think more about what they might mean and offer.

Sirens are one of the most ubiquitous everyday sounds. Like distant horns, they suggest an outside sound somewhere. In some way, sirens make things feel more real. I think my fixation on them is because of this quality of heightened reality, and not just because of their role as a harbinger of something awful. I live on a busy road, there are sirens every few minutes and they sometimes work their way onto the page. There is something solid about sirens that in my head makes them harmonically pleasing with any other sound.⁸³

ii. Sirens and Telephones (beginning of Acts I, II and III)

I would consider almost all of the sounds in the opera in some way 'everyday' (and therefore part of Research Exploration I) but there is nothing more 'everyday' than the telephone. This section also explores diegetic boundaries through metamorphosis (Explorations I and II).

The telephone is a key part of the opera; it is an intrusion of the outside and, more than one might think, another siren or alarm. So much of this metamorphosis of sound is about repetitive listening (for myself *and* the audience), making mistakes and ripping sounds to pieces, listening to every iteration of that sound until you feel something. The sudden phone ringing contains a jarring element of the everyday (aside from the fact we don't use home phones so much). The phone ringing - like a knock, if unexpected, is an upset to the everyday, a little crack through which someone might be offering you insurance or telling you that your grandmother has died. It has terrifying potential. It is also regular, much like *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), the routine, as well as the intrusion, is crushing. Each act of *Last Days* begins with a phone call from the manager.

As I have written in section V, I use anything I can get my hands on; if I am at someone else's house and without any of my own equipment, there are still experiments to be done. This can involve loading different sounds on YouTube (or whatever else) and collaging them by opening multiple windows (computer) and listening. I found a sound of a telephone on YouTube that was perfect for setting out a time when home telephones were used but were no longer rotary devices (it would also be easier to recreate this phone sound

⁸² I would recommend a semi-related book, Jennifer Lucy Allen's *The Foghorns Lament: The Disappearing Music of the Coast*. Orion (2021) It comes to mind thinking about how large functional sounds become part of the musical soundtrack of an area.

⁸³ There is an air raid siren in Act II, Scene X (figure 81) of *Last Days*, which does not appear with any prominence in the recording — I decided that it sounded a little too *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) — A little too on-the-nose, referential and British music hall.

later as it is made digitally — I could make it within a synthesizer so that it would be easier to manipulate).⁸⁴ Embedded in the YouTube interface is the ability to change the speed of videos. It is perfect for quickly auditioning sounds without the downloading/sampling process. I actually slowed this telephone sound down specifically so I could clarify how it works. YouTube's speed-adjusting software maintains the pitch of the original sound, which is different to how I might play with samples normally, where pitch and speed would be linked. I discovered that when I slowed the phone sound down, a siren emerged.⁸⁵

As I discuss in section V, I usually aim to use a captured audio sample to play with when I am creating a sound. but as a telephone ring in the 1990s would often have been digital anyway, there is greater potential and flexibility in using an analogue synthesiser (emulator) to replicate it. The sound of a phone comprises two alternating pitches and quite often would use a pure wave; the alternation between the pitches is rapid (like a tremolo), making a monophonic sound appear almost polyphonic (or just like a chord). I used a saw wave (with a slightly trimmed envelope on the attack to avoid too much of a percussive rattle) and an arpeggiator to achieve the alternation. The tiny, boosted speakers in a telephone create a distinctive sound, and I used an amplifier simulator, distortion and EQ to mimic that sound.

I wanted the first telephone call in *Last Days* to emerge from the outside world, to start with a siren sound morphing into the telephone. I slowed down a bounced audio file of the telephone sound using Flexitime, which essentially cuts the sound into small bits and stretches it without altering the pitch (avoiding the time/pitch relationship). It creates a much grittier and strained sound— desperate-sounding. Sound Intermedia (sound designers at the ROH) went above and beyond mapping this sound: from my extremely general instruction 'ambience -> phone', they engineered it so that the siren instead swirled around in the outside world before zapping into the house.⁸⁶ It is unclear if Blake can hear the siren before it becomes the telephone. It moves from potentially diegetic to diegetic.

Because I have made the 'telephone' into a midi instrument with a digital sound (rather than using a sample), it is also easy to use it as a harmonic device—the timbre does not change because we are not transposing a sample. The telephone can play any pitches and still sound like a telephone - it does not metamorphose into something else like the wolf or the siren. This is the only 'musicalised' sound in the opera that behaves as a harmonic device.⁸⁷

iii. Aeroplane and Television Accidents

A large part of my work involves bombarding myself with information and sound: much like opening all those YouTube tabs, I often leave my studio door open. I can hear radio phone-ins, neighbours upstairs and

⁸⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NK92DUyyngc> (accessed 14 August 2023).

⁸⁵ See SM.14 for an audio example of the phone sound slowed down using YouTube's interface.

⁸⁶ See SM.11 for the *Last Days* technical map.

⁸⁷ See SM.15 to hear the telephone playing random notes.

television shows simultaneously. I listen to cheap reality crime shows.⁸⁸ I can not agree with the politics or content of the programmes, but they provide an endless supply of episodes with almost no music; it is just voices and car noises. I think perhaps it might be because I work alone at home most of the time, the sounds of voices give me company and deliver a dose of the familiar. It is also so mind-numbing that it jolts you into work. It's *this* or *that*. I guess this wafting in of non-musical sounds eventually endears them to me. Then, eventually, they become music.

I have mentioned the sirens that waft in from outside at the beginning of Act I and end up becoming whole pieces. I let everything come in. It feels like some Cageian philosophy: that everything is music.⁸⁹ I do not think that everything is music, but I do think that everything can be *made* into or *framed* as music.

Sometimes accidental sound offers something that I need, sometimes I find it offers a complimentary bolstering of my music.

In the 'Chorus of Things', there is a continuously descending, sliding bass line. Almost like a Shepard tone, a hypnagogic slip into the housemate's sleep. I spent so long cycling these notes in playback, to experiment with sleep sounds and distribute the text in both a clear *and* busy interpolation, that I frequently heard aeroplanes outside, flying above my studio. I started to notice that the plane sounded the same as that bass, like a glissando or a filter sweep. It offered another musically coherent sign of the outside; a dose of reality. It felt as if the plane was singing along to the music I had written. So I put a recording of a plane in the score—completely unchanged, no manipulation, no tuning. This is a great example of a 'general' sound, in a way. Planes overhead are technically very different, very rich in harmonics and complex, but they always really feel or sound the same.

iv. Vinyl Crackle to Fire (Act I, Scenes 3-4).

Analogues for cameras and panning—moving between spaces—are, I think, interlinked with diegetic flux. There are explicit examples of this in *Last Days*, where the metamorphosis of a sound changes the scene, like zooming in on something or panning to another area (see Research Exploration III).

Sometimes sound offers a scenographic solution. Or another analogue for the camera, using sound to move from one focus to another. After *Non Voglio...*, the 'vinyl' runs into its runout groove and loops that classic crackle and as we pan to the outside. Then, during the 'confusion' scene, it becomes the sound of a fire. This device might not work without visual cues; the sound and image are a confirmation of each other. With the help of Harle and his various, much grander plug-ins, we were able to boost this crackle far enough that it started to sound like a fire. We morph from a vinyl crackle to a fire crackle. We pan from the stage to the fire.

⁸⁸ *Scambusters* (BBC) works particularly well: almost never a dot of music, and almost exactly the same story in exactly the same format over and over again. See SM.16 for a video I sent to show the first finished .pdf draft to friends, accidentally capturing me watching an episode of MTV's *Catfish*, oblivious to it even being on.

⁸⁹ 'Everything we do is music': John Cage's much-overused quote in interview with John Kobler, 'Everything We Do Is Music'. *Saturday Evening Post*, 19 October 1968.

The PI tells a fireside story to the superfan whilst Blake sleeps. I attempted to mimic this fire sound in the pit using common foley techniques: twisting plastic and bubble wrap in very controlled, small movements to create the small crackles and pops of wood burning. It worked quite well with plastic wallets; their rigidity helped.

v. Cereal to rain (Act I, Scenes 7-8).

Like to the previous example, there are camera panning analogues in sounds that mimic potential other sounds. In this case, an indoor sound becomes the outside weather. We zoom out to reveal the whole frame, interior *and* exterior (see Research Exploration III). There is a moment in the opera where Blake pours himself a bowl of cereal. It pours for uncomfortably long, longer than a pack and longer than a bowl could take. There is something disconcerting about a real-world sound that departs from its original familiarity. I think of Mark Fisher's reading of Freud's *Unheimlich* ('uncanny')—that it is about placing the 'strange within the familiar'.⁹⁰

Unlike the telephone, cereal was an example of a physically manipulated sample that I had to 'play' with. I poured various granolas from different heights into variously resonant bowls. I tried to do the longest and most controlled pour possible; this would also make my life easier when I came to splicing the samples together digitally.

The music that the cereal plays is an improvisation using a sampler loaded with the cereal sound. As I worked my way down the keyboard, the lower register sounded like heavy rain (thick globules) falling on a tiled or corrugated roof (or something similar). It provided a pleasing overhang which enabled to auditory focus to pan again over to the outside; a camera-like shift to where the 'Magician's Story' is then told.⁹¹



Figure 13: Recording the cereal with Peter and Veronica Lofthouse's granola and many, many bowls on a residency in Brel. Recording with my trusty H4N Zoom recorder, making do with that because that's all I had brought.

⁹⁰ Mark Fisher. *The Weird and the Eerie*. Watkins Media Limited, 2017 p. 10.

⁹¹ See SM.16 for audio of cereal turning to rain.

IX. Non-lexical Sounds

Non-lexical sounds are the grunts of the everyday, a lack of commitment to meaning: mumbling, the errs and ahs of real conversation. By ‘non-lexical’ in this context, I also include that which is nonsensical and not understandable. I love these sounds as base communication; that with small tonal inflections they can mean completely different things. These sounds are sometimes as communicative as lexical sound. The following sections mainly focus on Research Exploration IV, dealing with varying degrees of non-lexical sound.

i. Blake: The Mumbler

Non-lexical sounds are put front and centre of the opera: Blake *only* mumbles, and this was one of the first decisions Copson and I made about the opera. It is both a dramatic and a sonic choice; the central character only mumbles and even in his one ‘song’, he still mumbles. Everyone and everything else is cursed with the opposite, eternally scored, no matter how banal the muttering. I think mumbling sets the tone of the opera; the music mumbles too (see Research Exploration IV).

Mumbling is a sound I have played with in other works, but previously it has always been my own voice that is recorded.⁹² My voice sits in a range where pitch and contour are not so discernible and it is very easy for me to abstract any words. It is radio-unfriendly and often I am asked to clarify what I am saying. A slight error of judgment on my part was assuming that everyone would make the same sound as me, or that they could feign it. Rousselle has a mid-range French voice and is not lazy with her consonants. Initially, in rehearsals, the sound we achieved was a little too pitchy, punctuated and so close to actual words that it made the listener yearn for intelligibility. The strings of garbled text she was given as a prompt were too clear, like someone trying to read gobbledegook. It took quite a bit of tweaking to get those solo moments right. Rousselle was amplified with a ‘Britney’ (headset) mic and striking the balance of naturalism and audibility on the stage was difficult. However, amplification also offered some solutions. By using EQ adjustments on the mid-range of her voice, we were able to roll off some of these more prevalent mids and highs and force more of a mumble at the bottom end (whilst also avoiding making it sound like the voice of god).



Figure 14: bar 51 Prologue, semi-phonetic mumbling written out in bar 51 of the Prologue. Eventually, these notations were mostly ignored as we moved towards realism.

⁹² See *Me Hollywood - commentary video*, the study I made for *Last Days*, in SM.3).

ii. He Said: Lexical to Non-lexical (Act I, Scene 6)

In Act I, scene 6, the non-lexical is explored as a journey. It starts with lexical material and, through repetition, ends up with something non-lexical. This scene mainly focuses on the non-lexical but also crosses a strange diegetic boundary, whereby everyone on stage and in the orchestra pit sings as a congregation (see Research Explorations II and IV).

In this scene, a pair of Mormon missionaries visits the house. In the film they leave, but here they are absorbed into the house through some backwards conversion. It is an awkward moment in the film but an ecstatic moment in our opera; it has religious grandeur. The best music I know to have punched me in the eyes to see something like god is the music of Sacred Harp, an *a cappella* vocal tradition (Protestant originally, not Mormon) thought to have started in eighteenth-century England and moved to New England.⁹³ It is a shape-note practice for mixed voices and has a very unique sound comprising parallel movements; pentatonic palettes; unisons, octaves, fourths and fifths.

I have attempted versions of Sacred Harp in my earlier music, once for the spectacular vocal ensemble EXAUDI (in this case 8 individual voices conducted by James Weeks). Of course, it was sung perfectly, my notes were right enough. But there was something too clean about it; no amount of affected dirt could get it closer to that Sacred Harp sound. It relies on congregational voices, untrained and vastly different in timbre. Even an amassed professional choir would struggle to scuff themselves to authenticity.

I never could pastiche properly. I listened to Sacred Harp extensively throughout writing the opera (which is not so much of a chore) and it had also been swirling around my skull for more than a decade. Fifths, fourths and octaves are king.⁹⁴ I have included in SM.7 the initial Sacred Harp material I experimented with. It was not good. It was beautifully sung, but confirmed that we either needed the real thing or something just as strange. I had been extremely keen to properly record a Sacred Harp choir but, being more housebound than usual (owing to the pandemic and a particular government aversion to singing), could not embed myself in one to convince them. I hopefully will one day. Instead, I turned to an unlikely piece of technology from 2000: Harmony Assistant's Virtual Singer (by Myriad). A marvel of the eerie and uncanny, this programme allows you to input notes *and* words and simulate a song. You can decide between particular singers with different vocal characteristics (see figure 17). I assembled my own congregation using midi, with micro variations in rhythm so that they might sound real. Of course, the sound is robotic. But it is in that uncanny valley, almost human but very clearly not. See SM.17 for the tape track the Mormons sing along to.

⁹³ Buell E. Cobb, 'The Sacred Harp: Rhythm and Ritual in the Southland'. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 50, no. 2, 1974, pp. 187–97.

⁹⁴ For a very useful distillation of the 'rules' of Sacred Harp, see Robert T. Kelley, 'Sacred Harp Harmony: A Part-Writing Primer for Shape-Note Hymnody', October 2009, <https://robertkelleyphd.com/home/ShapeNoteMusic/SacredHarpHarmonyPresentation.pdf> (accessed 1 January 2023).

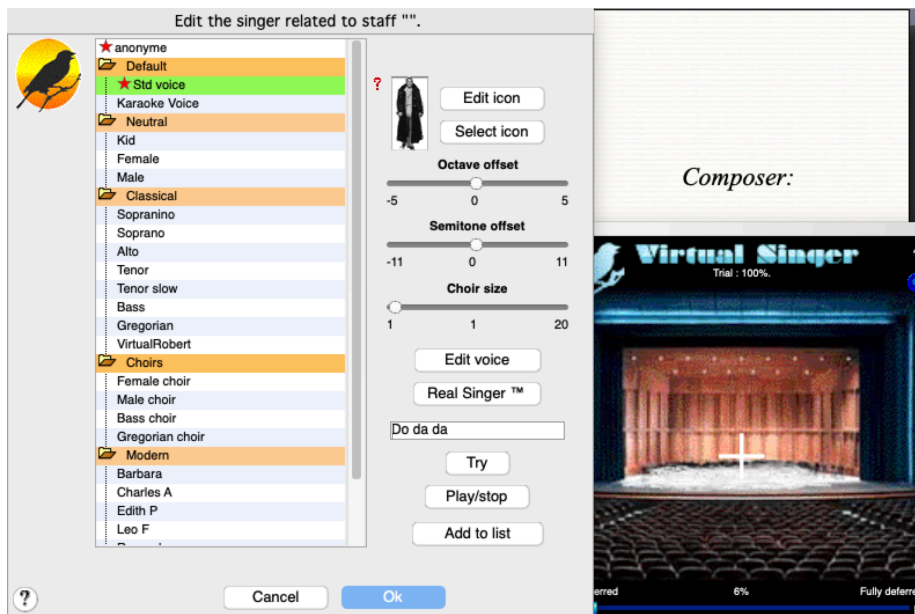


Figure 15: A screenshot of the many voices available to you in Virtual Singer, alongside the rather charming rainy concert hall that they sing from.

Part of the distinctive sound of Sacred Harp is micro variations on the same notes and forceful vowels. They describe it as ‘organ tone’, which means do not relent in volume or force. To replicate different accents resulting in slightly different vowel sounds, I would spell words slightly differently across the vocal parts. So ‘He said’ would have phonetic spelling variations like ‘Hei said’ and ‘Hey sed’. Virtual singer would churn out each line individually and I would assemble the congregation in Logic. I would also make tiny adjustments to stem placements, so that consonants would not land completely together all the time (see figure 18).

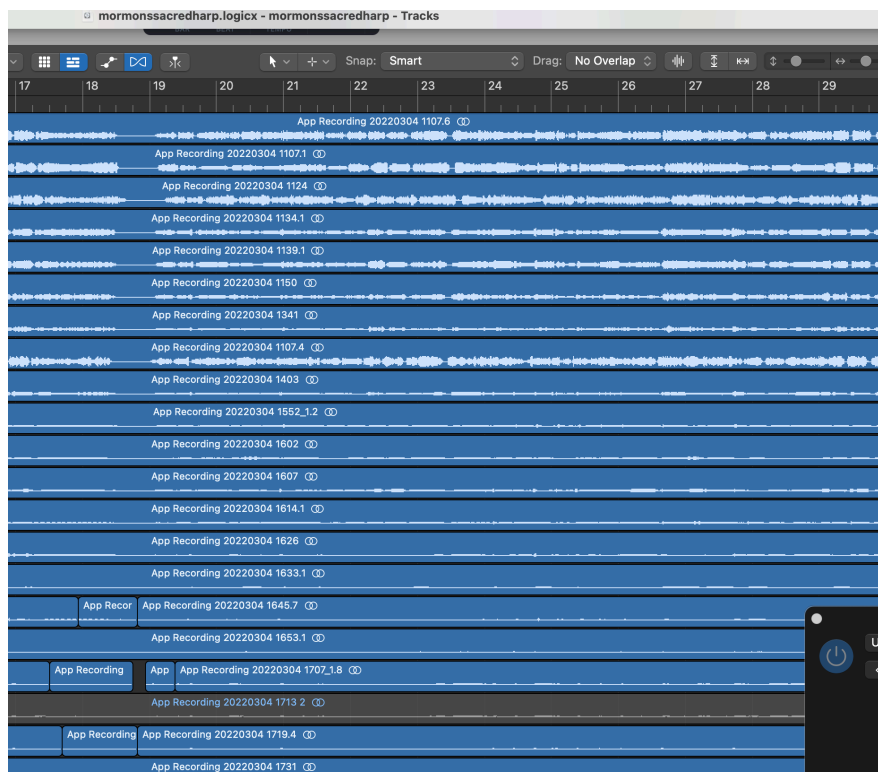


Figure 16: A screenshot of the logic file showing the microvariations in stems I made to try to achieve something more ‘real’ from something so fake. The waveforms exhibit different starts and different shapes, from vowels and voice type.

The Mormon characters sing along to a tape rendition of this Sacred Harp song which, similarly to the *Non Voglio...* aria, moves from their portable tape player (which suits the grainy sound of the electronic choir) to the main house speakers. Eventually, the cast joins in when they reach what I would call a generic corner of religious text.

We joked that a lot of preaching or religious music is alluring or hypnotic because it becomes fixated or stuck on certain phrases; generic phrases. In this case, it was the words ‘He said’ - which can be thought of as the word of Jesus (or John the Baptist, or whoever) *and* the words of Blake. The repetition of the word is so general and so overdone it *becomes* non-lexical, it goes through semantic satiation. ‘He said’ may as well be a wall of sound. Like how ‘Amen’ sometimes feels. The congregation idea extends here too: during this ‘he said’ moment (bar 297, see figure 19), the orchestra sings too. Every diegetic boundary is broken. They are all singing as if in concert, the players’ untrained voices adding to that thick, amassed sound. I say that ‘we joked’, but these moments of music where something becomes abstract and visceral, where they do that *thing* to you, are the crux of why I love music (also why I sometimes find it a little much to listen to).

92 ACT I

297 **44**

Perc.
said thing Some - thing He said he said he said he said he said

Playbk
said thing Some - thing He said he said he said he said he said

Pf
Kbd
pp in wilderness, quieter and oblivious, to self - like singing along to something in car

Sfan
said thing Some - thing He said he said he said he said he said

Hmate 1
mf
said thing Some - thing He said he said he said he said he said

Morm. 1
mf
said thing Some - thing He said he said he said he said he said

Morm. 2
mf
said thing Some - thing He said he said he said he said he said

Hmate 4
mf
said thing Some - thing He said he said he said he said he said

P. I.
pp in wilderness, quieter and oblivious, to self - like singing along to something in car
said thing Some - thing He said he said he said he said he said

Vln
said thing Some - thing He said he said he said he said he said

Vla
said thing Some - thing He said he said he said he said he said

Vc.
said thing Some - thing He said he said he said he said he said

Db.
said thing Some - thing He said he said he said he said he said

Figure 17: A rousing ‘he said’ from all - (Act 1, Scene 6, bar 297 onwards).

iii. Party Chat: ha, yeah, nah (Act II, Scene 3).

Act II, Scene 3 explores the non-lexical through crowd sounds (indiscernible nonsense) and semantic shifts, using only the words ‘yeah’, ‘nah’ and ‘ha’ (see Research Exploration IV). This scene had the largest question mark over what might happen in it and was the final scene to be written. Copson and I were interested in chaos and thought it would end up being ‘devised’ in some way. It is an adaptation of a scene in the film where Blake walks to a gig in town and Harmony Korine chews his ear off whilst he dissociates. I wanted to explore a scene that involved three of my favourite lazy (semi non-lexical) grunts: ‘yeah’, ‘nah’ and ‘ha’. That is what parties feel like sometimes, just varying volumes of those syllables. There are plenty of these in operas; nothing new about ‘ha ha has’ Johann Strauss II has Adele sing laughter in ‘Mein Herr Marquis’ (*Die Fledermaus*, 1874). It is a totally singable syllable, it can even be beautiful. Another example, closer to what I ended up doing, is the chorus of homophonic ‘has’ in Benjamin Britten’s *Peter Grimes* (1945). But it felt right to distil a *whole* party into this limited palette and for it to be brash and ugly. This whole scene is made from only ‘yeah’, ‘nah’ and ‘ha’. Through repetition they go through semantic shifts (similar to the ‘He said’ in Act I, Scene 6);. Repeating ‘yeah’, for example, goes from being affirmative to being degrading (as in ‘yeah - you said already’). They ‘yeahs’ become only positive or negative noises. They are purposefully plain for the sake of movement and choreography.

353

Molto largamente ($\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ of preceding)

[41]

f *sost.*

Z.N. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha,

Mrs.S. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha,

Bof. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha,

K. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha,

f *sost.*

f *sost.*

f *sost.*

TENOR I *f* *sost.*

TENOR II *f* *sost.*

B. *f* *sost.*

CHORES

[41]

Molto largamente ($\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ of preceding)

f *sost.*

Figure 18: Different but similar ‘ha’s in Britten’s Peter Grimes (fig 41 of Vocal score).

[illegible]

Figure 19: Bar 142, (Act II, Scene 3), orchestra chatter against Housemates' 'yeah yeah yeahs' and 'has'.

How do we make it sound like there are more people here? Early on, the ROH made it clear that we could not have volunteer partygoers crash the stage and bring the chatter. How could we capture the essence of those buzzing rooms? A recording would be fine (plenty of those around), but we wanted actual bodies for sound—energy. We used the orchestra.

Mimicking the way sampler instruments work, we experimented with these rhythmic bursts of chatter, like they were a block of timbre and texture—on and off like an electronic sample, with very stark attack and decay. Like opening a window on a party and quickly closing it again. In the initial workshop, we had 12 Ensemble doing bursts of random chatter over some pulled around Mozartesque mulch; a sort of polite society ball sound. They were instructed to try to use no discernible language and do so for fixed durations on and off, forming walls of rhythm. In the opera (with the help of conductor Jack Sheen), this polite chatter is pushed into wild bursts of foaming-at-the-mouth party crowd noise. It uses the totally familiar hum of human crowds as a material, a timbral *and* dramatic device.



Figure 20: A hum of polite chatter from the directing team. Photograph by Eloisa-Fleur Thom.

iv. Snoring: zzz? (Act I, Scenes 4 and 7).

Alongside the party scene's hum of human activity, Act I, Scenes 4 and 7 explore that hum when we sleep. These scenes explore the non-lexical, perhaps in the most overt way possible, sounds we make when we are not quite conscious (see Research Exploration IV).

Snoring finds its way into a few canonical operas, always for a very operatic belly chuckle or to indicate that someone on stage is unaware of another scene in front of them. In productions of Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1816), rather than exit after his first aria, Bartolo sometimes falls asleep and snores.⁹⁵ This example is at the comedic end of the stage-snoring scale, and tends to involve a very hammed up, unhealthy, sleep-apnoea-sounding snore. I wanted to see if we could tune snoring, if we could have wisps of melody float about whilst characters sleep. One very caricatured example can be found in a 1963 Disney cartoon—a snoring rendition of Strauss's *Blue Danube* waltz that relies quite significantly on snoring a contour and rhythm of a well-known tune.⁹⁶ I also thought of the sleeping lads in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937); a slightly gentler sound in which each character has their own distinct tonal quality.⁹⁷

In the early GSMD vocal workshop (see SM.7 for vocal workshop material), I suggested vowels to yawn and snore. It did not go well, which was nothing to do with the singers. It was clear the idea was possible, but there was something restricting a natural or realistic sound. Kate Wyatt (who attended the workshop) pointed out that it can be hard for singers to 'unlearn' something that they have seen written down, so we abandoned the sheet music and asked them to make 'real' sleeping sounds and ignore any notation.

Figure 21 is a musical score for three voices (S1, S2, B.) illustrating various sleep-related sounds. The score is written in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of one sharp (F#). S1 (Soprano 1) has a section labeled 'sleepnoises' starting at measure 259, with lyrics 'Bla - key' and 'eh heh eh'. S2 (Soprano 2) has a section labeled 'snoring' with lyrics 'we - oow' and 'out in out in'. B. (Bass) has a section labeled 'low rumble with a sort of vocal fry' with lyrics 'mmmm' and 'whistle'.

Figure 21: The original vocal workshop material.

⁹⁵ For example in Boston Lyric Opera's 2012 production, see Angela Mao, 'Boston Lyric Opera's "Barber" is a sparkling triumph', *Boston Classical Review*, 10 March 2012, <https://bostonclassicalreview.com/2012/03/boston-lyric-operas-barber-is-a-sparkling-triumph/> (accessed 8 August 2023).

⁹⁶ Television episode: 'A Square Peg in a Round Hole' from *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color* (first aired 3 March 1963). See clip (with misattributed date) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKhZTUGjCC8> (accessed 8 August 2023).

⁹⁷ See clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7j4GDeYwHZ8> (accessed 8 August 2023).



Figure 22: Bar 366 of Act I, Scene 7.

We then improvised, following roughly the same pitches but without looking at the music or following any of the text, doing impressions of snoring with notes in mind. It worked magic. It was strangely relaxing, it made me sleepy. We ended up with the notation in figure 24. The diamond noteheads indicate some sort of vocalised in-breath, and the full note heads indicate a vocalised release (a whistle, a moan or similar). Sometimes composers need to be less prescriptive. Asking for ‘sleep-talking mumbling’ is a great deal easier than me trying to conceptualise and notate the phonetics of it. It also encourages something more naturalistic from the singers. For the future, I wonder if this less prescriptive text might have suited some of Blake’s mumblings a little more straightforwardly, too.



Figure 23: The housemates falling asleep in Act I, Scene 7.

v. Cattle Auctioneer: Non-lexical to ‘Lexical’ (Act I, Scene 1; Act II, Scene 1; Act III, Scene 2)

The voice of Trip, the manager, always follows the sound of the telephone ringing. This is a structural device that occurs at the beginning of each act, an interruption from the outside on a *Groundhog Day*-esque cycle. It is voiced by a cattle auctioneer, pre-recorded and seemingly coming from the phone. This exploration of the non-lexical focuses on the use of surtitling as a device to play with ‘translating’ or giving meaning to the non-lexical or nonsensical (see Research Exploration IV).

Ever since I first encountered cattle auctioneering, I have been obsessed with it. I don’t think I need to explain why an auctioneer might make a good artist manager, selling off cattle isn’t all that different from selling off your artists to the highest bidder.⁹⁸ The sound of the call is exciting in every country but the Americans, whose cattle industry is an economic powerhouse, are the kings. Auctioneers can experience semi-stardom, commanding extreme fees and big crowds for large ranches.

Technically, cattle auctioneering is not actually non-lexical; there is a logic and syntax in the bidding, it makes sense to those versed in it and it is not random in the slightest. Copson and I even threw some small snippets of Trip’s text into the runs: you can hear the words ‘Blake’ and ‘percent’ quite clearly. The text that Copson wrote for Trip is built on very real, business-pushing lines of contracts written by actual artists’ managers. This garbled ‘calling’ is representative of jargon, the sort that Blake really does not understand. To the layman, including myself, it *is* non-lexical.

I spent a lot of time on Facebook befriending auctioneers that I could find videos of. I spoke to cattle auctioneering schools, and quite a few were not really into the idea of being in an opera. Then, enter Cole Morrison. Nick Bennet from Auction Schools (National Auction Association, USA) introduced Morrison to me: an up-and-coming auctioneer. I convinced Morrison that the work would not be demonic or otherwise nefarious. We met over Zoom and I asked Morrison to record varying lengths of call. He recorded into a voice note app on his phone. The sound would be coming from the phone in the opera and Morrison was in Montana, so using his phone was both practical and offered an authentic fidelity to the recording.

I would ask Morrison to throw particular words into different runs and at different speeds so that I had a huge range of options. The smatterings of ‘Blake’, and ‘percent’ throughout the recordings, suggest that the sounds are not *completely* random and tie them audibly to the text. Cole said that these little implants were actually easy; part of the auctioneer’s job is being able to insert some of the most ridiculous cattle and ranch names into common patterns.

⁹⁸ For a glimpse at bidding call structures (in New Zealand but part of the same tradition), see Koenraad Kuiper and Douglas Haggo. ‘Livestock Auctions, Oral Poetry, and Ordinary Language’. *Language in Society*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1984, pp. 205–34.

Trip's burbling is surtitled with manager legal-ese and demands, and is often disproportionate to the length of the auctioneer's call. For example, the audience might hear, 'onebiduhbiduhtwotwobidudhdududubidduhthreethree...' and the subtitle might read, '...ok...'. This process renders the non-lexical lexical, or artificially legible, through a false translation.⁹⁹ You could do a whole opera like this, in imaginary languages, syntax and meaning drawn only from surtitles. I have always thought that it would be the perfect way around presenting highly florid prose; you could essentially present some of the densest passages of text alongside a single pitch or line.

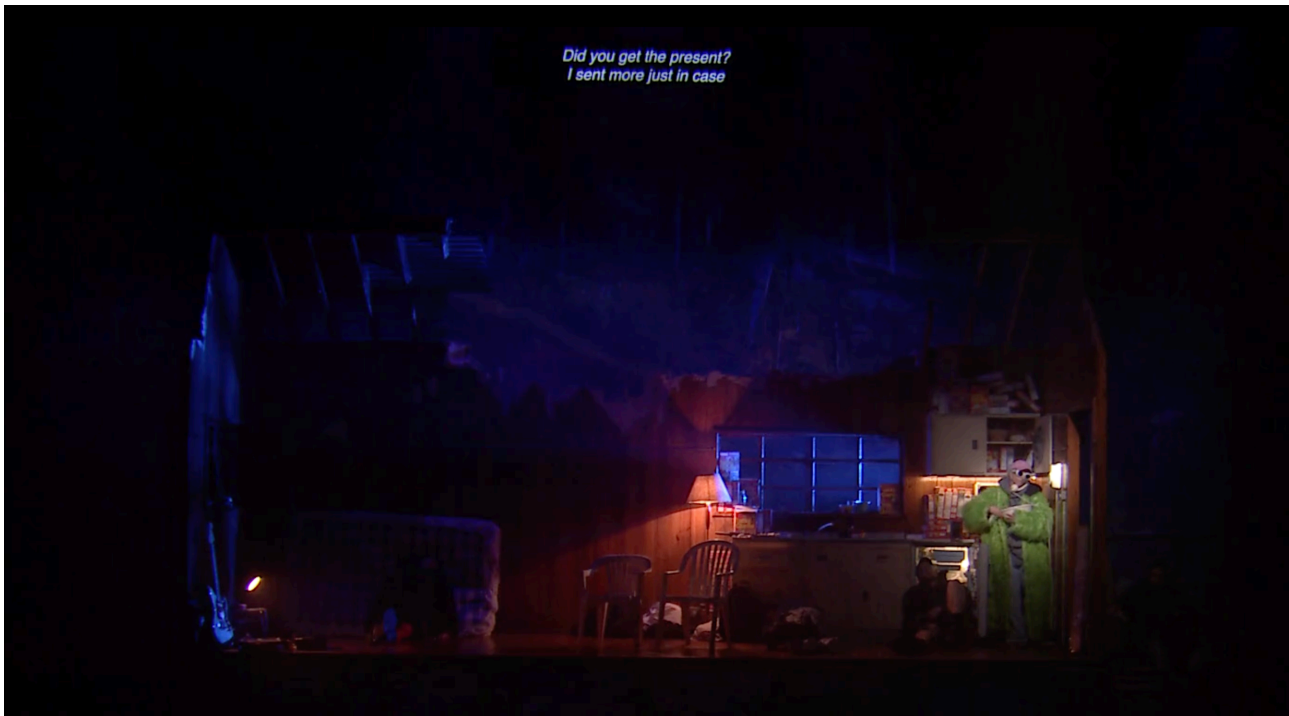


Figure 24: Blake on the phone to Trip, the auctioneering is translated in the surtitles (Act II, Scene 1).

⁹⁹ See an early work of mine, *664 love songs guaranteed to cure heartache*, for a similar idea done with instruments: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TyaMlpYHF6k> (accessed 8 August 2023).

X. Taking Out the Bins (Act II, Scene 5).

At the beginning of this thesis, I mentioned that I would not signpost Research Exploration I, the everyday. But Act II, Scene 5 should be highlighted as the *most* everyday of them all. Nothing is said, a house is tidied and then it ends. This scene also explores the diegetic in a new way. Bottles clinking on stage are echoed by physical (not sampled) tuned bottles in the orchestra pit (see Research Explorations I and II).

As I note in the ‘Contexts’ section, from the very start of this project, I told everyone who would listen that I wanted to do an opera where someone takes the bins out. One of the most mundane things that we all have to do. The bins: a scene worthy of heightening. That is how taking out the bins feels sometimes—emotional. Genuinely, as I write right now and I think about dragging the bins behind me, the music video for Kate Bush’s *This Woman’s Work* (1989) has come on the television (I did say that it is almost always on) and is doing that thing that music does: this fleeting thought now feels a little poignant. Not for any logical reason, just the music; the way that it frames this otherwise mundane daily occurrence. I could get a little teary if I lingered too long.¹⁰⁰

This was one of the first scenes I spoke about with Copson, that the groundskeeper would clean up after some ‘event’. He was similarly drawn to this tableau. Rather than sample real-life sound, I wanted to utilise real life objects:bottles. I thought of those times chucking spent and half-spent bottles into boxes mornings after (the clinking of those spent and half-spent bottles melodic in some way). That is what the groundskeeper would do. I thought about having pre-tuned bottles on stage that might interact with what was going on, or little clusters of bottles that when gathered together could essentially play chords. I slowly realised that acting, singing and over-choreographed cleaning up might be a little much.

I was keen for the real incidental/accidental stage sound to still exist (the sound of tidying up, bottles clinking), but thought we could also have this imagined diegetic world where the bottles’ sound was constant and much more controlled—that the bottles would do their own little tune. I decided that the bottles should be played by the percussionist.

The bottles are tuned to specific pitches with water, and then bunched together according to that pitch. I experimented with bottles in bin bags, muslin sacks, potato sacks and eventually arrived at boxes that were *almost* completely full of the bottles, so that any jiggle or movement would result in the note. This did work quite well but percussionist George Barton, in his infinite resourcefulness, built a custom rig that usurped my primitive boxes. This is a common trait of Barton’s: you suggest a technique and he improves it beyond recognition. The rig suspends clusters of bottles on bungee cords, carefully tied so as not to dull any resonance. It allows the pitch groups to lightly bounce with the smallest of movements. It is almost keyboard-like. It also allowed Barton to essentially tremolo the bottles, which was the closest sound I could imagine for that bin-bag-drag-vibrating-bottles constant.

¹⁰⁰ Teenage again.

I had also trialled dragging bottles in a sack over different surfaces, to see if those vibrations could activate that same lovely pitch sound so that it might also work on the stage. It did sometimes work naturally and always worked if we engineered a ridged floor. The ridged floor was not viable, I couldn't ask the whole cast to hobble around a stage in pursuit of the perfect bin bag music (that is another opera). A few times in production that sound worked, and on one or two of the performances when the groundskeeper dragged the bin bag there was a beautiful little ripple.¹⁰¹ It wasn't important that it happened, but beautiful when it did.

The bins scene is essentially a procession and a duet between Rhys (the keyboard sound made from the static of the guitar being unplugged from the previous scene) and Barton. There is no singing and only a very small amount of strings, it is a nod to the duet I wrote for them called *good day good day bad day bad day*, which as mentioned above, is also focussed on a domestic situation.¹⁰² It is also an illuminating corner to discuss because it points to something vital about working with people I know and love; people who understand my music and who are capable of making objectively grating sounds (hard electronic static and clattering glass bottles) into something endearing and gentle. People who will literally build me a better way.



Figure 25: George Barton adjusting his bottle rig, photographed by Eloisa-Fleur Thom.

¹⁰¹ In the final production, Blake ended up being the character who tidied up, overlooked by the groundskeeper. It was more practical for staging and made sense. Like someone I know who committed suicide, people sometimes do tidy up their houses, to get things in order.

¹⁰² Barton and Rhys perform together as GBSR Duo.

XI. Concrete Music: Washing Bricks for Experimental Music (Act I, Scene 8).

I want to account for an element of my work that is important in maintaining my sanity and feeling like I can still do things with my hands. Something that engages with my everyday, my domestic life, something that breaks up the sometimes mundane side of writing music.

For the ‘Magician’s Story’, I wanted to be able to play with a sound synonymous with films and video games: the high-pitched single ping of a bullet casing bouncing from the ground (and the more excessive bullet rain of machine guns).¹⁰³ I launched all the small bits of metal I could get my hands on in the local hardware shop but nothing produced a similar sound. A search on Freesound drew blanks (there are plenty of recordings, just not of the right quality). So, I bought spent bullet casings. They were *so* difficult to find that my first attempt at purchasing them resulted in a humorously light and small package, containing shells designed for miniature model-makers (see figure 28).¹⁰⁴

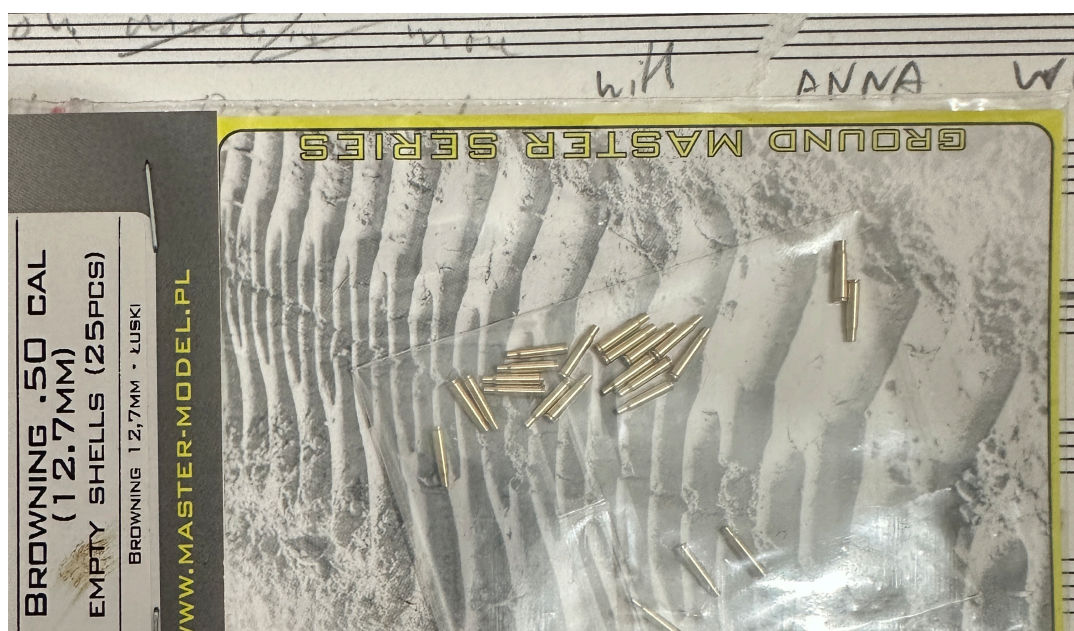


Figure 26: The first bullet rounds I bought, maybe fit for my miniature village (we’ll get onto that). See 6mm staff (or label) for scale.

This process was one of trial and error. I eventually managed to purchase around 100 ‘mixed’ casings as if they were different types of nuts (quite heavy, as the postman said). Upon throwing them down the alley of my flat, that familiar, almost shiny metallic sound rang out. I live on the A107 and the alley goes straight onto the road; it is very loud. I realised that I would have to record inside, but that the laminate wood and hospital-esque kitchen floor (see figure 29) would not work. My landlord had recently ‘renovated’ the alley (the previously paved area is now awful plastic grass), which meant there were now spare small, discarded paving bricks everywhere.

¹⁰³ See SM.18.1 and SM.18.2 for videos of me making this sound indoors and outdoors.

¹⁰⁴ The difficulty of sourcing these is presumably because of the DIY gun market. Hopefully I’m not now on a watch list.

I built a small, paved square in the kitchen and experimented. The ping was more of a dull thud; the bricks were caked in mud. I took every brick one by one and washed them with love. Warm soapy baths for them,



Figure 27: Bullets, bricks, tripod and horrible kitchen floor.

dried and wrapped in towels. It reminded me of those archaeology excavation bricks kids get, where you would delicately toothbrush and chisel out a ‘dinosaur’ skull. It took a day and a bit. Another throw of the bullets gave me a slightly brighter ping, but it was still not right.

These painstakingly cleaned and excavated bricks did not cut it. Frustratingly, something about the material and surface area made it inferior to the single slab of unbroken concrete in the yard. A waste of two days. I waited out that night until around 3AM, when the traffic slowed and neighbours wouldn’t see me with a bag of bullets. I chucked and rolled bullets for a long time. I recorded all night.¹⁰⁵ A little like the wolf howl, the archetypal sound of bullets is so familiar that for it to be recognised I had to pursue a very fussy and specific sound. Bullets in real life just sound like metal.

Another reason I recount this extremely boring story is to say something about why this side of experimental music is important to me, and why I see it as inseparable from even my more traditional practice. Everything else I do feels much more abstract and strangely similar—it can be *truly* mundane. The sourcing, physical experiments, and preparation in doing these sorts of adjacent experiments keep me interested; they are my DIY. Tending to a sound with love. It is therapeutic. I have to find solutions. I get to play. I spent three days chasing a sound that is barely audible, but fills the sky with sound.

¹⁰⁵ The postman knocked in the morning asking if everything was ok, Two spent cases of bullets lay beside the door. I had to explain what I’d been up to and that he had in fact delivered them.

Last Thoughts

have been wondering why I am so invested in pursuing this musicalised universe. Why bother to try to coax magic out of the everyday? The whole process has made my current artistic motivations clearer; I am using the familiar and the domestic as an anchor from which I can drift. The familiar can be situational, sonic or even a genre. I think it is also about the boundary between nature and artifice. I am interested in a twisting or treating of the familiar.



Figure 28: Image of Le Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, not the image I refer to below but another in my possession (it scans better).

As a way to explain this, an image of Parc des Butte-Chaumont hangs above my desk (see figure 30). It represents what I love most: man's will on nature, false rocks, fake lakes amongst real trees, real birds, mysterious semi-natural caves that you can only just peer into, grottos carved into old mines. Real rocks that were born from quarries, reshaped to resemble cliffs and mountains. Wooden railings made from stone. It is an artificial *and* natural-looking island, capped with a temple, all built from scrap.¹⁰⁶ In my image there are also fireworks and they are magic too. They look like stars and sound like screaming birds, they are not 'natural' but somehow appear like something that *might* be. I love false environments, miniature villages, Warhammer figurines, huge tunnels through beautiful mountains—things made in, or using, something else's image. I would like a miniature village of the most boring suburbia, but with one fact of nature changed: the

¹⁰⁶ It was literally a quarry and then a dump where nothing would grow. It has been made natural by man. So much so, that this seemingly organic environment is now crumbling; false stalactites now threaten joggers and are netted, mountain paths gated off as they fall into the lake.

grass pied or all the people are pigs.¹⁰⁷ I would rather see a man-made cave than a natural one, or I would like to see a painting in a natural cave. It is about heightening familiar things, changing them, making them weird, making them out-of-place. The domestic situation is most familiar of all: it is the place to launch magic, to explore feelings. This all sounds quite lofty, fluffy and woolly, but I want to share it. I like to build worlds from familiar things or make unfamiliar things into more familiar things.



Figure 29: Butte-Chaumont in construction, a lump, like the beginning of a piece.

I hope that makes some sort of sense. Caroline Potter, in her *Tempo* article on my 2021 release of *Me Hollywood* puts it better than me: ‘his music makes the everyday strange and the strange everyday’.¹⁰⁸ I like things that are in an interesting relationship to familiarity; part of, parallel, mirroring, stretching. This extends to *Non Voglio...*, the central aria in *Last Days*. It uses genre as the familiar.

I want to do this strange everydayness more in opera. I still want to use captured real sounds, but I want to push again, to have the actual physical material of the stage musicalised. I want to have sets with bells built-in, paths lined with tuned slates, costumes with harmonic trails, and resonant chainmail. I want to have parrots sing pop songs. I want to have doorbells made with my own melodies. I want nails and screws in every pitch to fall out of walls, accompanying songs. I want to do everything possible. A lot of ‘I’s there, but I’m writing this.



Figure 30: A glimpse at Matt’s own version of nature’s artifice. This is an earlier version of the backdrop of the opera seen without the house in foreground, (something that looks like the outside but that clearly isn’t).

¹⁰⁷ Or perhaps it would rain the miniature bullets shown in figure 28.

¹⁰⁸ Caroline Potter, ‘Oliver Leith, *Me Hollywood*. Explore Ensemble. Another Timbre’, *Tempo*, vol. 76, no. 299, pp. 96-97. See SM.19.

The End

I would like to end on an honest and eventually soppy note. I have demonstrated my Research Explorations throughout this text. However, I want to finish by going back to the beginning and exploring something that I learnt accidentally. I started this PhD with a project titled 'Re-balancing the Dramaturgical Construction of Opera: Embracing a Different Approach'—something that suggested a highly collaborative process in which all roles were equal, everyone with fluctuating authorship. I believed in what this might make artistically, a constantly shifting hierarchy of theatre elements, and that we might devise a piece with many people in the room. However, looking back, that may have always been an unnatural fit for me. I work alone. I have strong ideas about how things might look and how people might move. I am almost an anti-collaborator in my normal artistic life (asides from direct collaboration with musicians). The pandemic allowed me to evade my original suggested premise; I literally could not be in the room with people. During my PhD upgrade, I said that the pandemic 'frustrated' my aims, but at the time it felt more like a relief. It meant a change of tack.

There was, from my initial proposition, a careful balancing act; the opportunity was not a commission pitch (no offer of a story or premise) which might have been more alluring to the ROH. It also could not be a proposal that only satisfied research objectives. I thought that presenting a challenge to the way things were made would be open enough to find my way eventually. It was a complex contortion and manoeuvring through, that is only clear now I am on the other side.

In reality, this initial proposal lead to an extremely foggy beginning: non-starters, and a lot of kicking the can down the road. I met with potential collaborators and although, on paper, we might have shared interests, the ideas were impossibly nebulous. My fault. I could not pin down where to start.

It was not just me who struggled with this spinning-plates collaboration, it is baked into the foundations of the ROH as an institution. They were very accommodating of the idea, setting up meetings for me and encouraging different collaborations. But there was a fundamental stopping block and eventually, they need to know what it is —what are we making together. The professional rigour and cogs of an opera house seem to work best when things are 'set', for the sake of highly trained musicians, technicians and designers. There is a clear timeline for when things need to be ready: for very practical reasons, the hierarchy endures. The opera needs a score.

There is potentially a complicated dance around this institutional framework, I am certain that someone better at that dancing could make a piece in the way I originally proposed. In fact, I have just finished a piece in Basel which we 'devised' in the room together. The difference is that it exists on a *wholly* DIY axis, not just thorough me saying, 'Oh, I make my own videos'. It would mean literally being given the keys to the theatre, being able to rig the whole thing ourselves, building sets and chase any threads we wanted. Composers taping up curtains and light technicians recording whistles. Institutions like the ROH obviously cannot function in this way, for myriad reasons. There is a stark difference between self-producing and

producing in an institution. I could not have made *Last Days* in that DIY situation, nor could the piece we made in Basel happen at the ROH.

The reality of working with the ROH also gave a slight urgency to the first research exploration, there is no way I could have smuggled onto the stage an opera solely about taking the bins out — purely everyday, domestic life, whole scenes of grunts — without there being some sort of more compelling backbone.

These factors may read as somehow limiting, but they absolutely are not. The ROH is just a different environment, a very professional and polished stage, not DIY. If the rules are rigid, then you must find a way to play with them. It is like decorating a strangely shaped building. I thought about the reasons that I had been wanting to explore different, more holistic approaches to opera-making, and realised that it was about making a world that had ‘experimental’ and strange blood. I wanted to try to avoid the artistic compromise that occurs when things are not made together or with the same intention. Avoiding the ‘Oh... I didn’t realise it would look like that’ moments. Of course, sometimes those moments are amazing, but I think of them as positive compromises and those are rare gems, too rare to chase. I wanted to make something with that character of experimentation, but where the experiments have been done well before and baked into the final piece. An iterative process of strange-ing.

How to smuggle disruptive elements into a rigid institution? I think, more than material, it is about working with different people. You work with people you trust and know, people you have established relationships with, emulating as much as possible a ‘company’, from as early on as possible. Matt Copson was introduced to me on the basis that he was primarily a visual artist and that he had never worked in opera. Perfect. That relationship became genuinely collaborative and equal; the work we did was holistic. Decisions about what it would sound, look and feel like were made together. It felt healthy. You will notice that I drop a ‘we’ every so often in this writing - because it really did feel like our thing together.



Figure 31: Final night wave, sent to me by my mum.

The other, and just as important, ‘we’ in this thesis are the other people I worked with. I have a long-standing relationship working with 12 Ensemble, GBSR duo and Jack Sheen as friends and professionals. I had said to the ROH from very early on in the process that I would like to work with them. This meant that, during workshops or annoying phone calls, they could translate any idiosyncrasies or unclear mumblings on my side. They all get what I do and understand my intentions, sometimes better than me. I am not afraid to look like a fool in front of them, I am not embarrassed to

present sounds that will not see the light of others' days. I am comfortable with them; that is part of the DIY spirit.

I think working with people I did not know might have met some resistance, and less openness (to singing, for example, or 'detuning', or the grain of the sound I might ask for). In the auditions, the singers (some of whom I had worked with before) displayed a similar willingness to play and an abundant curiosity. No-one batted an eyelid at snoring for an audition or being asked to affect shrill American accents for the Sacred Harp sound. For most of the cast and band, *Last Days* was their debut on the Linbury Stage, the same as me. Something about the goodwill from everyone surrounding the piece is what got it across the line. Also: without the experience, vision and care of people like Anna Morrissey and my supervisors, producers and stage management team, this complicated operation could have collapsed. This might be an obvious thing to say, particularly when I have had such a good experience, but I had no idea quite the apparatus and feat of organisation that creating a large-scale opera would require.

This manoeuvring of the right people and attitudes also extends to the scale of ambition about who you work with. I remember floating *Last Days* around as an idea early on with the ROH and GSMD. I think sensibly, there was a feeling of, 'lovely - good luck finding them'. Institutions often go through the proper paths to contact artists, but as individuals we need not. The 'three degrees of separation' rule works quite well; Gus Van Sant responded to an out-of-the-blue personal email. HBO was a little trickier to contact: after failing to find the right person, I had to write to their copyright complaint office to get their attention (instant reply). Copson convinced Rousselle and Balenciaga to be involved, and pulled off many other coups. I should acknowledge that the clout carried by the ROH will have been very important for the success of some, if not all, of these approaches.

I called myself an anti-collaborator at the beginning of this section as a sort of barb—a bad thought that I had about myself. I hope I have made clear that the process of creating *Last Days* was illuminating for me. I am not an anti-collaborator. I *needed* all of these people to show me that. What I ended up making was, in essence, a conventional score, but made with huge amounts of background work and experimentation from everyone involved. Just like the contents of opera itself, the score, the team and the production do something strange with the conventional, the familiar—the everyday (if I may call an opera house 'everyday' to make this point). *Last Days*, for me at least, is a drift from the familiar; the product of a very specific set of circumstances. I think, with the right people around you, the limitations of large institutions (alongside the excellence of their resources) do not need to dictate what sort of work is made there. You need faith.

When the production schedule was put together, it looked as if I would only attend rehearsals on key musical dates: music calls, *Sitzprobe*, stage and orchestra rehearsals. I ended up going in every day, not to crack a whip but to witness this magical process. I was fascinated. I was terrified of the process, of hearing my music over and over again, but the production period was one of the best times of my life.

I sent a photo (figure 34) of something I spotted on my way to rehearsals to the cast. It felt like it represented the tonal vibration of the piece, which theorists might call ‘metamodern’ (but I think is just every emotion at once or, as I suggest earlier in this thesis, life). It was at that point just an image to reflect *Last Days*, but it also reflects how I feel now that it is over. We will be doing lots more together soon, I hope.



Figure 32: An overwhelmed road sign shows all of its faces at once.

Matt and I are beginning experiments for our next opera and using smaller commissions as satellite experiments and tableaux. The natural progression of this project is bedding further into the idea of musicalising everything. There was a major focus on sampling in *Last Days* that will continue in my work, but the evolution I am chasing now is for musicalisation to apply to physical and acoustic sound too. The set and props will start to sing. An experiment I am working on at the moment is dragging chairs across surfaces with particular feet that create a pitched creaking moan (there is a technique to it that eventually means I may be able to play a slow nursery rhyme with a chair). Other physical objects I am working with, quite related to the chair, are metal squeaking gates and badly oiled doors—chasing that wonderful harmonic swoop, like a disgusting miniature whale. Both of these sounds are made musical through their context (music around them in some harmonic relationship) or through using them as a chorus; many chairs or many gates at the same time. I had thought that I was going to move away from domesticity as a setting or aesthetic focus, but I realise I have just written that my current experiments are around gates, doors and chairs. Perhaps there is no escaping domesticity. Or perhaps they are castle drawbridges and banqueting chairs.

Bibliography

Secondary Literature

- Abbate, Carolyn. *Unsung Voices*. Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Abbate, Carolyn, and Roger Parker. *A History of Opera*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2015.
- Allan, Jennifer Lucy. *The Foghorn's Lament: The Disappearing Music of the Coast*. Orion, 2021.
- Andrew, Geoff. 'The sprawling brilliance of Robert Altman's *Nashville*' *BFI*, 22 June 2021
<https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/robert-altman-nashville-1975-sprawling-american-masterpiece> (accessed 10th May 2024).
- Bradshaw, Peter. 'Lovers Rock Review – Steve McQueen Throws the Best Party Ever'. *The Guardian*, 17 Sept. 2020, www.theguardian.com/film/2020/sep/17/lovers-rock-review-steve-mcqueen-small-axe (accessed 8 August 2023).
- Castelvecchi, Stefano. 'On "Diegesis" and "Diegetic": Words and Concepts'. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 73, no. 1, 2020, pp. 149–71.
- Citron, Marcia J. 'Operatic Style and Structure in Coppola's *Godfather* Trilogy'. *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 3, 2004, pp. 423–67.
- Cobb, Buell E. 'The Sacred Harp: Rhythm and Ritual in the Southland.' *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 50, no. 2, 1974, pp. 187–97.
- Cox, Christoph, and Daniel Warner, eds. *Audio Culture, Revised Edition: Readings in Modern Music*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2017.
- Danto, Arthur. *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life*. Columbia University Press, 2017.
- Ellis, Carolyn. *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*. AltaMira Press, 2003.
- Emmerson, Simon. *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*. Springer, 1986.
- Fisher, Mark. *The Weird and the Eerie*. Watkins Media Limited, 2017.
- Flint, Tom. 'Chris Watson: The Art of Location Recording', *Sound on Sound*, December 2018, <https://www.soundonsound.com/techniques/chris-watson-art-location-recording> (accessed 8 August 2023).
- Font, Frederic, Gerard Roma and Xavier Serra. 'Freesound Technical Demo' in *Proceedings of the 21st ACM International Conference on Multimedia (2013)*. ACM, 2013, pp. 411-12.

- Genette, Gerard (trans. Jane E. Lewin). *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cornell University Press, 1983.
- Glass, Philip. *Words Without Music: A Memoir*. Liveright, 2016.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, 2006.
- Ingamells, Andy. ‘Stop inhaling Oxygen and exhaling Carbon Dioxide, because “we did that in the 60s”’ *MusikTexte*, vol.149, 2016m pp.22-23. <https://musiktexte.de/WebRoot/Store22/Shops/dc91cfce-4fdc-41fe-82da-0c2b88528c1e/MediaGallery/Ingamells.pdf> (accessed 17th May 2024).
- Jarvis, Brian. “‘You’ll Never Get It If You Don’t Slow Down, My Friend’: Towards a Rhythmanalysis of the Everyday in the Cinema of Jim Jarmusch and Gus Van Sant’. *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2019, pp. 385–406.
- Kelley, Robert T. ‘Sacred Harp Harmony: A Part-Writing Primer for Shape-Note Hymnody’, October 2009, <https://robertkelleyphd.com/home/ShapeNoteMusic/SacredHarpHarmonyPresentation.pdf> (accessed 1 January 2023).
- Kobler, John and John Cage. ‘Everything We Do Is Music’. *Saturday Evening Post*, 19 October 1968.
- Kreichi, Stanislav. “The ANS Synthesizer: Composing on a Photoelectronic Instrument.” *Leonardo*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1995, pp. 59–62.
- Kuiper, Koenraad, and Douglas Haggio. ‘Livestock Auctions, Oral Poetry, and Ordinary Language’. *Language in Society*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1984, pp. 205–34.
- Kurp, Josh. ‘A *Star Wars* Tradition Dating Back to the Original Movie Has Been Retired’ *UPROXX*, 21 February 2018, <https://uproxx.com/hitfix/star-wars-wilhelm-scream/> (Accessed 14 August 2023).
- Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life: The Three-Volume Text*. Translation, Verso, 2014.
- Lefebvre, Henri, and Christine Levich. ‘The Everyday and Everydayness’. *Yale French Studies*, no. 73, 1987, pp. 7-11.
- Mao, Angela. ‘Boston Lyric Opera’s “Barber” is a sparkling triumph’, *Boston Classical Review*, 10 March 2012, <https://bostonclassicalreview.com/2012/03/boston-lyric-operas-barber-is-a-sparkling-triumph/> (accessed 8 August 2023).
- Monelle, Raymond. ‘Reviews of Books’. *Music and Letters*, vol. 75, no. 2, 1994, pp. 297–98.
- Moran, Robert. ‘There’s No Irony: Caroline Polachek Q&A Takes a Tense Turn’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 April 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/music/there-s-no-irony-caroline-polachek-q-and-a-gets-awkward-20230411-p5czn4.html> (accessed 8 August 2023).

- Penner, Nina. 'Sonic Spectacle in Erich Wolfgang Korngold's Score to Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935)', in Christopher R. Wilson and Mervyn Cooke (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Music*. Oxford University Press, 2022.
- Potter, Caroline. ('Oliver Leith, *Me Hollywood*. Explore Ensemble. Another Timbre', *Tempo*, vol. 76, no. 299, pp. 96-97.
- Prejean, Helen. *Dead Man Walking: The Eyewitness Account of The Death Penalty That Sparked a National Debate*. Vintage, 1994.
- Rapold, Nicolas, Matías Piñeiro, Matthew Morrison and Max Nelson. 'Opening Shots'. *Film Comment*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2016, pp. 6–12.
- Rehding, Alexander. 'On the Record'. *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2006, pp. 59–82.
- Schafer, R. Murray. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Inner Traditions/Bear, 1993.
- Shlomowitz, Matthew. 'The Automaton Approach'. *MusikTexte*, vol.149, 2016, <https://musiktexte.de/WebRoot/Store22/Shops/dc91cfee-4fdc-41fe-82da-0c2b88528c1e/MediaGallery/Shlomowitz.pdf> (accessed May 1st 2024)
- Smith, Rowena. 'Breaking the Waves Review – Von Trier's Bleak Drama Feels Lost in Translation'. *The Guardian*, 26 March 2020, www.theguardian.com/music/2019/aug/22/breaking-the-waves-missy-mazzoli-review-von-triers-bleak-drama-gets-lost-in-opera-translation (accessed 8 August 2023).
- Stilwell, Robynn J. 'The Fantastical Gap Between Diegetic and Nondiegetic'. *Beyond the Soundtrack*, 2019, pp. 184–202.
- Taylor, Henry M. 'The Success Story of a Misnomer'. *Offscreen*, vol. 11, nos. 8-9, 2007, https://offscreen.com/view/soundforum_2 (accessed 8 August 2023).
- Thomas, Philip. 'The Music of Laurence Crane and a Post-Experimental Performance Practice'. *Tempo*, vol. 70, no. 275, 2015, pp. 5–21.
- Turner, Luke 'The Metamodernist Manifesto', 2011, <http://www.metamodernism.org/2011> (accessed 8 August 2023).
- Vermeulen, Timotheus, and Robin van den Akker. 'Notes on Metamodernism'. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, pp. 56-77.
- Walshe, Jennifer. 'The New Discipline', *MusikTexte*, vol. 149, 2016, pp. 4-5. https://musiktexte.de/WebRoot/Store22/Shops/dc91cfee-4fdc-41fe-82da-0c2b88528c1e/MediaGallery/The_New_Discipline.pdf (accessed 8 August 2023).
- Winters, Ben. 'The Non-Diegetic Fallacy: Film, Music, and Narrative Space'. *Music and Letters*, vol. 91, no. 2, 2010, pp. 224–44.

Wolfson, Sam. 'PC Music: the future of pop or 'comptemptuous parody', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/may/02/pc-music-dance-music-collective> (accessed 14 August 2023).

Young, Toby 'The Artistic Self: Identity and Self—Representation in Nicholas Maw's *Life Studies*'. PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2015.

Scores

Adès, Thomas. *The Exterminating Angel*. Faber, 2016.

Britten, Benjamin, composer and Montagu Slater, librettist (vocal score by Erwin Stein). *Peter Grimes*. Boosey and Hawkes, 1943.

Glass, Philip. *La Belle et la Bête*. Dunvagen Music Publishers inc, 1994

Heggie, Jake, composer and Terrence McNally, librettist. *Dead Man Walking*. Bill Holab Music, 2000.

Leith, Oliver, composer and Matt Copson, librettist. *Last Days*. Faber 2022.

Respighi, Ottorino. *Pines of Rome*. Ricordi, 1924.

Shore, Howard. *The Fly*. Schott Music, 2008.

Strauss II, Johann. *Die Fledermaus*, 1874.

Audiovisual Media

Akerman, Chantal, director. *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. Paradise Films & Unité Trois, 1975.

Altman, Robert, director. *Nashville*. Paramount Pictures, 1975.

Buñuel, Luis, director. *The Exterminating Angel/El Angel Exterminador*. Gustavo Alatrisme, 1962.

Cornelius, Henry, director. Georges Auric, composer. *Passport to Pimlico*. Ealing Studios, 1949.

Cronenberg, David, director. *The Fly*. Brooksfilms, 1986.

Korine, Harmony, director/writer. *Spring Breakers*. A24, 2013.

Hand, David, Perce Pearce, William Cottrell, Larry Morey, Wilfred Jackson and Ben Sharpsteen, directors. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Walt Disney Productions, 1937.

Lee, Ang, director. *Brokeback Mountain*. Focus Features, 2006.

Luske, Hamilton, Jack Hannah, Jack Kinney and Wolfgang Reitherman directors. 'A Square Peg in a Round Hole' from *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*, Walt Disney Productions, first aired 3 March 1963.

McQueen, Steve, director. *Lovers Rock*. BBC and Amazon, 2020.

Reinhardt, Max and William Dieterle, directors. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Warner Bros., 1935.

Robbins, Tim. *Dead Man Walking*. Gramercy Pictures, 1995.

Trier, Lars von, director. *Breaking the Waves*. October Films, 1996.

Van Sant, Gus, director. *Last Days*. HBO, 2006.

Appendices

Timeline

For reference, I am including a timeline of key dates for a sense of scale and pace over the project.

Dates

Date	Event
2019	
21 June 2019	First interview for position.
25 June 2019	Second interview for position.
7 September 2019	Enrolled at GSMD and begin a year of weekly research sessions (first in-person, then online).
25 September 2019	Supervision team confirmed (Julian Philips, Richard Baker, Alex Mermikides, Kate Wyatt).
9 October 2019	First meeting with Matt Copson.
17 December 2019	Discussion of potential collaborators with ROH (Kate Wyatt leading).
2020	
17 January 2020	Engage in work with Matt Copson with a starting document 'XXXtreme Oper*'.
3 March 2020	GSMD closes because of the Covid-19 pandemic.
13 March 2020	First email with Gus Van Sant about <i>Last Days</i> . Later that day he responds, 'yes it sounds good to me'.
20 March 2020	First email with HBO (beginning of a drawn-out correspondence).
23 March 2020	Covid-19 lockdown begins in the UK, Matt and I begin plotting in the background, shapes, sounds and images.
6 October 2020	<i>Me Hollywood</i> (the study for <i>Last Days</i> , pre-rights) is finished (see SM.3).
2021	
21 January 2021	Matt Copson introduces to ROH and first day of plotting opera
14 February 2021	Matt Copson delivers first version of 'Groundskeepers Song', the music begins, first notes written down (see SM.6).
23 February 2021	Storyboard/First plot of opera fully formed (see SM.4).
31 March 2021	Doctoral upgrade submitted with focus on <i>Me Hollywood</i> and an introduction to <i>Last Days</i> (pending rights).
8 July 2021	Workshop with GSMD singers at GSMD (2 sopranos, 1 mezzo-soprano, 1 tenor and 1 baritone)
14 July 2021	HBO and Gus Van Sant rights deal signed (negotiated by Richard Paine).
20 September 2021	<i>Non Voglio...</i> finished for an Italian coaching session arranged by ROH with Emma Abbate.
21 September 2021	Signed to Faber Music.
18 October 2021	Final libretto delivered to ROH and supervisors (see SM.5).
13 December 2021	First meeting with Jude Christian (dramaturg).
21 October 2021	Recording vocal line of <i>Non Voglio...</i> with Caroline Polachek and Danny L Harle at The Premises.
2 November 2021	Workshop of string textures with 12 Ensemble at ROH (see SM.8).
8 November 2021	Percussion workshop George Barton with particular focus on playing mark tree like a keyboard instrument.
2022	
18 January 2022	First meeting with co-Director Anna Morrissey.

Dates

26 January 2022	First full team meeting (including set designer Grace Smart and lighting designer Prema Mehta)
7 March 2022	Pre-White Card presentation.
8 March 2022	White Card presentation.
11 & 25 March 2022	Auditions for singers.
27 March 2022	Recording the voice of Trip with Cole Morrison (cattle auctioneer) over Zoom.
1 April 2022	Final round of singing auditions and semi-workshopping of non-lexical textures like snoring (see SM.9).
5 May 2022	Full score and vocal score delivered to Faber Music for preparation.
12 May 2022	Recording strings for <i>Non Voglio...</i> and a solo violin and ensemble version played by Eloisa-Fleur Thom for B-side release by Perpetual Novice. 12 Ensemble recorded by Dave Rowell at St Giles Cripplegate.
19 May 2022	First music team meeting (with assistant conductor Naomi Woo and conductor Jack Sheen).
2 June 2022	Agathe Rousselle joins cast as Blake after meeting with Matt Copson.
4 July 2022	First meeting with Sound Intermedia and sound technicians of the ROH.
8 July 2022	Vocal score delivered to singers.
27 July 2022	Tickets go on sale and on same day sell out. I feel it is important to note this, not to gloat, but to point to an appetite for new opera.
7 August 2022	Final sample made in Brel, France (cereal). Final part of the opera delivered to Sound Intermedia.
17 August 2022	Pre-production meeting.
August 24-25 2022	Music call at ROH chorus room.
August 30-31 2022	Production calls at GSMD.
September 1-2 2022	Production calls at GSMD.
September 5-24 2022	Production calls at English Touring Theatre (16 days total).
24 September 2022	Studio Run then to Linbury theatre to do first stage run through.
25 September 2022	Orchestra alone rehearsals 1 and 2.
26 September 2022	Orchestra alone rehearsal 3 and <i>Sitzprobe</i>
29 September 2022	Technical rehearsal; stage and piano rehearsals 1 and 2.
30 September 2022	Stage and piano rehearsals 3 and 4.
1 October 2022	Stage and Piano rehearsal 5 and piano dress run.
3 October 2022	Stage rehearsal.
3 October 2022	Stage and orchestra rehearsals 1 and 2.
4 October 2022	Stage and orchestra rehearsals 3 and 4 (including rehearsing the 'blackout' and memorisation of music in the final scene).
5 October 2022	General rehearsal.
7 October 2022	Premiere of <i>Last Days</i> at ROH Linbury.
7 October 2022	Release of <i>Non Voglio...</i> (digital; vinyl started to be distributed in March 2023).
8 October 2022	Second performance of <i>Last Days</i> .
10 October 2022	Third performance of <i>Last Days</i> (Gus Van Sant attends).
11 October 2022	Fourth performance of <i>Last Days</i> .

Production Team

I worked with extraordinary people—and an extraordinary amount of people—on this project. A comprehensive list of acknowledgements is at the beginning of this sheet. There is a fuller team list in SM.9.

Creative Team

Music OLIVER LEITH

Librettist and Art Director MATT COPSON

Conductor JACK SHEEN

Co-directors MATT COPSON, ANNA MORRISSEY

Set designer GRACE SMART

Costumes BALENCIAGA

Costume stylist PATRICK WELDE

Lighting designer PREMA MEHTA

Sound design SOUND INTERMEDIA

12 Ensemble

OLIVER CAVE, ELLIE CONSTA, TOBY HUGHES, MATTHEW KETTLE, ALESSANDRO RUISI, MAX RUISI, SERGIO SERRA, ELOISA-FLEUR THOM, LUBA TUNNICLIFFE

GBSR Duo

GEORGE BARTON, SIWAN RHYS

Cast

Blake AGATHE ROUSSELLE

Groundskeeper/Private Investigator SION GORONWY

Delivery Driver and Housemate MIMI DOULTON

Superfan PATRICIA AUCHTERLONIE

Housemate EDMUND DANON

Mormon and Housemate SEUMAS BEGG

Mormon and Housemate KATE HOWDEN

Magician HENRY JENKINSON

Opera Singer CAROLINE POLACHEK

Trip (Blake's Manager) COLE MORRISON

Creative producers SARAH CRABTREE, KATE WYATT

Producers HAMISH MACKAY, RACHEL CACCIA

Administrative producer GRACE COOK

Assistant Director EVANGELINE CULLINGWORTH

Assistant conductor NAOMI WOO Répétiteur MICHELLE SANTIAGO.



Figure 33: (from left to right) Agathe Rousselle, Matt Copson, Gus Van Sant, myself, Anna Morrissey and Jack Sheen.



Figure 34: (from left to right) Kate Howden, Seumas Begg, Mimi Doulton, Matt Copson, Michelle Santiago, Sion Goronwy, Jack Sheen, Naomi Woo, Anna Morrissey, myself and Edmund Danon. Appearing on phone screens as absent from rehearsal (from left to right) Patricia Auchterlonie, Agathe Rousselle and Henry Jenkinson. They're all glorious.

Supplementary materials (catalogue)

SM.1 - Archival footage of *Last Days*, 8th October, Linbury Theatre

SM.2 - Programme from the Royal Opera House 2023 run

SM.3 - *Me Hollywood* - video commentary over the top of excerpts of the study I made before the rights were granted for *Last Days*, made for a symposium at Guildhall. 15th March 2021

SM.4 - *Last Days* storyboard ('beat board') made so that squares of character, material, event can be re-ordered by dragging them around

SM.5 - *Last Days* final libretto

SM.6 - Groundskeeper's Song early version

SM.7 - *Last Days* vocal workshop material

SM.8 - *Last Days* string workshop material

SM.9 - *Last Days* Cast sheet

SM.10 - *Last Days* Sound sources

SM.11 - *Last Days* technical map

SM.12 - *Last Days* Press Previews and Interviews.pdf

SM.13 - Caroline gramophone mock.mp3

SM.14 - Phone slowed down using youtube.mp3

SM.15 - Telephone playing pitches.mp3

SM.16 - Cereal to rain.wav

SM.16 - Last Days catfish trap.MOV

SM.17 - Mormons tape track.wav

SM.18.1 - Last Days bullet drop.mov

SM.18.2 - Bullets outside *Last Days*.MOV

SM.19 - Caroline Potter Another Timbre write-up for TEMPO.pdf

SM.20 - Reviews