

## Repertoire: an accidental wardrobe

On 27 April 2023, whilst on a train to Brussels, I shared this post on Facebook:

I am thinking about difference and repetition. Tonight I will perform Morton Feldman's *Three Voices* for the twentieth time. I have always loved this piece but it's really only in the last few outings that I have started to feel like I know what I'm doing with it and, therefore, to enjoy it. I suppose this is what 'repertoire' is: the pieces you get to repeat often enough that they start to feel homely. That can be tricky to find within new music. I also love performing brand-new stuff – the thrill and privilege of that never fades – but it's definitely more tiring! Perhaps my weary bones need difference AND repetition these days.

Those musings haven't gone away. I have continued to turn over in my mind the question 'What is repertoire?' Also, 'What is *my* repertoire?' and 'How did this come to be?!' I am poking at larger questions of identity and agency here — not new terrain but a new lens through which to view it.

The word 'repertoire' can be used in two ways. Much like 'the canon', 'the repertoire' casts a net back through history to gather the most celebrated and thus enduring works. From this sense, we get 'repertory theatres' and we talk of 'the choral repertoire'. (I understand 'repertoire' and 'repertory' to mean the same thing, much like 'conservatoire' and 'conservatory'; the former used more in Europe and the latter in North America.) On the other hand, 'repertoire' can also refer to the body of work of an individual artist or group. Though the time period is much shorter — one person's career rather than all of music's history — it is repetition and spectacle again that are the filters. An artist's repertoire, then, is an accrual of the works with which the artist is most closely associated.

In my case, there are two works that I have performed repeatedly as a soloist: Morton Feldman's *Three Voices*, which I first sang in 2015 and have performed 20 times, and *Skin*, by Rebecca Saunders, which I premiered in 2016 and, to date, have performed 22 times. These are outliers, though, and it's difficult to say which other works are deemed part of my repertoire if the sole criterion is the number of times I have sung them... (Bernhard Lang's *The Cold Trip, part 2?* Mark and I have performed that only six times but it's gone as viral as I get on YouTube and has been eagerly taken up by other singers. We've also performed *Natural World* by Laurence Crane six times, and that was written for us only recently; similarly, we've done *Plans for Future Operas* by Øyvind Torvund four times, but this feels like a piece that could run and run...) Then there's the filter of 'spectacle', by which I mean buzz, I suppose, and which doesn't necessarily translate into more performances but renders a piece or performance in some way memorable or significant after the event. I like to think that Beckett's *Not I* is part of my repertoire on that basis; also the works that have come out of long-term collaborative partnerships, such as I have had with Cassandra Miller and Rebecca Saunders.

The point I am making through this little survey is that a repertoire can be arbitrary. If you're a concert pianist specialising in virtuosic piano concertos of the late nineteenth century, you may be able to build your repertoire quite intentionally and pragmatically. By specialising in the Greatest Hits, you attract a ready audience and are therefore a safe bet for risk-averse promoters. Not to say that the Greatest Hits are benign: they terrify

me! I'll admit that I am intimidated by works with a long performance history that includes dozens of recordings of interpretations by history's most accomplished performers. What can I possibly add? I have always been more attracted to uncharted territory. I love the sensation of an interpretation unfurling, of the score becoming a message, of the material somehow rising up to tell me what it is and what it needs — this is the mystery and this has been my motivation.

In tension against the thrill of discovery, though, is the desire to settle into a piece. It seems to take me at least four performances to find my feet, to understand what happens in the moment and under pressure, and to really understand the form and affect of the material. Repetition is about more than popular demand, then; it is about the chance to fall in love with a piece. Not the sort of passionate love one can feel as a listener, but the steadier, slow-built love that allows a performer to feel at ease, confident and liberated — that's what I mean when I speak about a piece feeling 'homely'. I start to find my feet after four or five performances but, apparently, I only get that homely feeling after at least a dozen outings. The opportunity to build this sort of embodied bond with material is rare in new music, but when it comes you can be sure that you're dealing with 'repertoire'.

What prompted my Facebook post earlier this year was the sudden, quite alarming realisation that 'my repertoire' was emerging by accident rather than by design. I never set out to become a specialist in the music of Morton Feldman or Rebecca Saunders. I never gave much thought to the whole idea of a repertoire, in truth; I simply followed my nose, which has meant lurching from one encounter to the next, often seeking some form of redress in the next project from an overindulgence or frustration in the last. In fact, it strikes me now that 'redress' has almost been my guiding star. I have been fuelled by frustration and by hunger, for this in the aftermath of that, for the chance to try another way of doing things or to uncover another facet of myself. The result, happily, has been a catalogue of mostly very satisfying projects, but it's strange to look back at what has always felt like an ongoing process and suddenly now feels like a 'thing'. I wonder if it's a particularly 'classical' mindset that preserves the very idea of repertoire: we are quite obsessed by historical linkages and perpetuity.

I am being candid about this because, again and again, I am asked by young singers how they should build a career and, specifically, how they should choose their repertoire. It seems wise firstly to acknowledge the lack of control one has, in reality, over so many elements of a career — there are forces at play that we cannot hope to sway, such as promoters, the press, politics and fashion. One can, however, cultivate two things: a sense of who one is, as an artist, and strategies for exercising control where forces allow. In other words, we work to cultivate our identity and our agency whilst accepting that everyone else is doing the same, and we work to cultivate our identity and our agency because this is a wholesome and joyful thing to do.

Identity is not a fixed thing. In particular, when setting out on a particular career path, or indeed a new path within an existing career, an artist's identity is a soft-skinned and tender thing. It may always be that, actually, if one sees this sort of life as constantly challenging, with an infinite possibility for development and, therefore, vulnerability. Your professional identity is constructed from desires, frustrations and the slow accumulation of activity. Your repertoire is one strand of this, some of which you will have chosen with great care, some of which may have been chosen for you. Even projects over

which you have very little control (for example an invitation to sing x with y) present you with the choice between saying “yes” or saying “no”, and with that choice you learn about your desires and you develop your sense of agency.

Commissioning develops agency like nothing else. It is a big undertaking, from choosing the composer, agreeing the terms, raising the money, securing the first performances, testing draft material, learning the piece and, at last, getting up on stage or into the recording studio. You are fundraiser, promoter, administrator and performer, all in one. But you learn such a lot. For this reason, I have come to see it as a rite of passage for the fledgling new-music performer; the process both fosters and proves a certain sort of mettle.

If you're in the business of commissioning you are bound to have a looser affiliation with 'the repertoire'. Every new work is full of uncertainty: you don't know if it will be tailored well to fit you; you don't know if you will grow to love it; you have no idea how it will be received and therefore how many times you may get to perform it, where it will take you and what its place in the history books will come to be. If I had any strategy during the early years of my solo career, it was to spread the risk. Even if I was committed to commissioning, I did sense that recording a 'repertoire' piece like *Three Voices* for a major record label could help announce to the world that I was trying to become A Solo Artist. Likewise, I have gone back and forth between commissioning big-name and then lesser-known composers, partly for reasons of energy, partly to spread the love. Some of the pivotal moments, though, have unfolded through no design of my own. That element of surprise still delights me.

I often revert to metaphors to do with tailoring when talking about music. How it fits. How it feels. Whether it was off-the-peg or made-to-measure. If any given work is a garment or outfit (I do think of certain pieces as tailored suits, and others as elaborate gowns), perhaps my repertoire is the whole collection. There are the key pieces, which form the 'capsule wardrobe'; then there are the pieces that I've worn once but never felt quite right in, and which lurk at the back of the cupboard. Whilst a few pieces have been chosen with care, others are hand-me-downs or some god-awful thing I was made to wear at a friend's wedding. This is how we end up with an accidental wardrobe, and just as the body that wears these pieces evolves and changes, so does our relationship with this wardrobe.

I don't want to be hemmed in. That I can sing music that spans a thousand years has always been precious to me. What sits well in my voice and what makes my whole body sing need not be confined to one period in history or one aesthetic. I want the adventure — I want still to be surprised — because I am still evolving. There is one version of myself that knows now how to play the game and sees the path of least resistance, but there are also small fires within me that flicker with curiosity, hunger and, yes, frustration; paying attention to these flickerings is how I exercise my agency. The good news is that this industry is more flexible and accommodating than we are led to believe. More than anything, I believe, our industry responds to passion and personality. It longs to witness an artist's love for their art, to be brought into the private mystery of that creative act.

Juliet Fraser, 1 August 2023