

## ENGAGING: OF WINGS AND WATER

What does it mean to be engaging? There is a sense of suspension, of breath or of time, and a tension — a crackle in the air, perhaps. As artists, we may engage in art-making for many different reasons: art for art's sake, as a political statement, for the money, etc. We may be tempted to reduce these motivations to a sliding scale between the aesthetic and the functional but a hand-thrown coffee cup reminds us that the extremes need not be at odds: all motivations are legitimate and often complexly overlapping. As audience members (I hesitate to use the word consumers), we may engage with art to be comforted, aroused, challenged or entertained. Again, to reduce the conversation to art vs distraction or the mediated vs the immediatised would be an unhelpful oversimplification. There are so many moving parts, from the intention through the process to the outcome (the art), to the context and the criticism and the crowd (all frames, of sorts). Engagement is full of contradictions, in a good way.

### ENGAGING WITH THE AUDIENCE

In performance, a musician seeks to engage their audience, to win their trust and hold their attention. Some performers have a charisma that does the heavy lifting; the material is secondary, elevated by the strength of the performing personality. Some are rather the vessel for compelling material, adopting a performance style that gets out of the way of the music. Others have dazzling skill; the material here is a showcase for technical virtuosity. The rare G.O.A.T.s have all three: skill, strong material and huge charisma — think of Bowie, Billie Holiday or Beyoncé. For classical performers that specialise in interpreting others' material, however, the question of how we engage you as listeners, to what we draw your attention, is more complicated.

It is only since I have started teaching that I have begun to understand how flexible a new-music singer must be. We must be chameleons, able to embody an extraordinary breadth of aesthetics: from the pop-infused pseudo-sampling of Bernhard Lang to the expressionistic drama of Gérard Grisey, from the sensual ferocity of Rebecca Saunders to the controlled surface tension of Morton Feldman, each invites a different vocality and a different physicality on the concert platform. This is not the same as playing a character, as one might do in opera; it is a more subtle, more embodied relationship with the work's sonic material and its aesthetics. And yet cultivating this embodied relationship between physicality and material seems to be an art that is not taught. Singers trained at conservatoire according to the traditional classical pedagogy tend to engage their voice only in one sort of sound (*bel canto*) and their body only in one mode of stagecraft (dramatic); as a result, when they encounter the pluralism of contemporary classical music, the effect is either liberating or overwhelming.

MATERIAL, MATERIAL, MATERIAL has become my mantra. Enquire of the material what sort of vocality and what style of physicality it requires. Engage some intelligence and some creativity in this area! Applying the (presumed) conventions of late nineteenth-century repertoire to all classical music for evermore creates a quite unnecessary flattening out of performance. Contexts differ, as do performers' personalities, physicalities and aesthetic proclivities — far more fun for us to lean into these differences. Furthermore, the notion that we on stage have to work extra hard to 'sell' new music is

nonsense: too often an overegged performance style gets in the way of the music. As the poet and psychoanalyst Nuar Alsadir explains:

The most direct way of connecting with others is to experience genuine feeling within yourself, so that your emotion, transmitted to others as beta elements, triggers their mirror neurons to fire. It is then that they will experience and process your emotion as though it had originated within their own bodies, that they will feel moved.<sup>1</sup>

A performance can offer an audience many forms of journey. It may strew crumbs along a path and we, as listeners, hungrily follow the trail; it may offer doorways into worlds and invite us to choose our own adventure. In his essay 'Audience', choreographer Jonathan Burrows describes the pleasure of 'watching in a more wasteful way', of retaining the distance of an observer that allows for 'those brilliant shifts that stick in my head'.<sup>2</sup> It is not necessary for a performance to become a spectacle in order to engage the audience's attention — the understated, the oblique, the gentle are no less engaging than the vertiginous or the bombastic.

In contrast, the term 'audience engagement' barely concerns itself with any of these considerations. It is a speculative construct driven by twenty-first-century capitalist anxieties — about growth, about success — and utterly divorced from the creative engagement in an art form. Performers now experience intense pressure from funding bodies, promoters and agents to worry about audience engagement: contracts regularly include clauses stipulating that a performer promotes the event on social media and funding evaluations measure 'impact' in quantitative rather than qualitative terms. Engagement, we are taught, is about numbers.

I don't seek to sing the most notes, though. This sort of Trumpian metric would have me singing higher, faster, louder, BETTER than everyone else. No, engaging with my art form means, first and foremost, engaging my craft with my intellect and my emotion; my secondary aim is to engage my listeners, to move them or touch them or surprise them in some way. Measuring the first aim is entirely subjective and unscientific; measuring the second is similarly anecdotal and very patchy, and *I like that*. The audience is not a single entity: it is a group of individuals, all bringing different experiences and expectations to an occasion. Thinking strategically about how to engage 'them' seems like a fool's errand. Just busy yourself with making magic.

Barthes famously complained that the grain of the voice was being polished out by the increasing 'professionalisation' of singing. As we see in competitions, from BBC Cardiff Singer of the World to *The Voice*, the audience responds to flare over flawlessness. Witnessing a body at work is a fascinating thing — the effort compels us to watch. As Alsadir writes,

'Work that preserves the grain—the fluids and funk that flow through a living body—brings you back to a moment of cognition because, as Barthes puts it, "the symbolic ... is thrown immediately (without mediation) before us." You feel the stuff in the singer's voice, the finger

---

<sup>1</sup> Nuar Alsadir *Animal Joy* (Fitzcarraldo, 2022), 41.

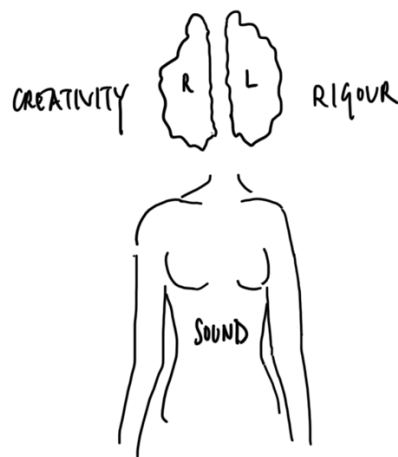
<sup>2</sup> 'Audience' in Jonathan Burrows *Writing Dance* (Varamo Press, 2022), 65-7.

that sticks through what was meant to be two-dimensional space. This “directness,” Sontag writes, “... entirely frees us from the itch to interpret.” We can feel (*rapid motion of wings*).<sup>3</sup>

Icarus ascends. The desire to engage with another sets up a moment of vulnerability — what happens if they do not take hold of the hand that we extend? A performance is always an act of discovery, for the performers and for the audience, of ourselves and of one another.

## ENGAGING WITH THE TASK AT HAND

The task at hand is the making of music. The task at hand shifts from day to day: I am engaged in an ongoing practice. In my daily practice, I begin by warming up my voice. I have my little routine of scales and exercises, but these days prefer to start with very long notes, calming the nervous system and thinking purely about vibrations and resonance. (I actively try not to engage the brain at this stage because it normally tells me that I should give up immediately.) I then open a score. This may or may not be something that I am due to perform, but it is a way of setting the singing body to work on a more precise task, and a task with some expressive intent. So, from here on I am engaging the brain, but the challenge is to hold in balance the left hemisphere of the brain (concerned with problem-solving and effective practice), the right hemisphere of the brain (injecting spontaneous creativity) and the body’s response to all that brain activity (producing the sound). Technique offers a consistency of craft that then allows the right hemisphere the space to play.



Calling all this a ‘creative’ practice somehow smooths away the corners that are so monotonous and so banal and, often, so uncreative. Most days I feel engaged more in a battle with myself than in a creative process. I don’t want to start, I don’t want to sing, I’m frightened of what it will sound like or feel like... I know I am not alone in this struggle, though voicing it remains something of a taboo.

Material is the alchemical ingredient precisely because it shifts the balance or the focus of the task. I am now engaged in a process of negotiation with an entity that is separate from me. Both sides reach towards an encounter. And it is the breadth and depth of material with which I can engage that keeps me singing: how many other genres offer a

---

<sup>3</sup> Alsadir *Animal Joy*, 316.

singer such a dressing-up box? A score rarely gives more than a hint of the transformation at hand. The magic moment comes when the material begins to speak to me, to reveal 'who' it is and what it needs from me, how best to embody it. One hopes that this magic happens during private practice, that one has time to enjoy the process of channelling, but not all material is so forthcoming; sometimes it only reveals its needs during performance — thrilling, certainly, but also a little destabilising. Which is why premieres should be much less of a spectacle and, ideally, should not be recorded.<sup>4</sup>

We tend to talk about 'a technique' and about 'a practice' as if they are somehow fixed but, in reality, they are constantly shifting, accumulating new layers of knowledge in the body or mind, or shedding dusty remnants of long-forgotten ways of doing or thinking. If the material tends to be the focus of the day-to-day, far beneath lie the tectonic plates of one's practice. This is the domain of The Existential Questions: Who am I? What am I doing? Does any of it matter? My tectonic plates seem to shift every seven or eight years, causing great upheaval, most of which is supposed to stay hidden from the public eye. The plates last shifted in 2022 and, as I continue to stumble through the long fog of uncertainty, a new perspective is slowly emerging. These shifts or crises, I now realise, are part and parcel of an unfolding practice. When the questions stop, it will be time to do something else.

Burrows proposes that 'Practice is a doing which is not yet art.'<sup>5</sup> I like this distinction between the quotidian doing and the mystical transubstantiation that turns the doing into art, but I am worried that I don't know where the line is between the two, or who gets to judge. Does my practice only become art in front of an audience? Sometimes, yes, but not only, and not as a rule. The frame cannot make the art, surely... Neither can it be contingent upon success, whatever that means. For me, art is perhaps the doing of the practice that cannot be redone. I understand better now what I am trying to do with all this music. It is the irredeemability of a performance that I find liberating: there is no turning back, only pressing onward, upward, hoping for flight.

## ENGAGING WITH THE STRUGGLE

Art takes time. It is a cliché to curse the click-bait culture of our times but here's where the struggle lies because questions take time, ambiguity takes time, change takes time. Music is all about time but where is our interrogation of form and pacing when we consider how we make and share this music? Anna Kornbluh, amongst others, situates us in an epoch of immediacy, in which the unceasing flow of images dominates the thickness of mediated encounters and, basically, we all lose our minds:

'Immediacy impedes the public, conceptual, and reasoned mediations that are essential to limiting the devastations of deinstitutionalized society, privatization, and ecocide, and crucial for imagining different frames of value, meaning, representation, and collectivity.'<sup>6</sup>

In this age of the individual, we seem to be trying to dismantle the cult of the genius composer whilst erecting the cult of the composer-of-the-moment. For all the talk of

---

<sup>4</sup> A little rant emerged at this point but was extracted to become a separate essay outlining an alternative approach to recording new works: Juliet Fraser, 'On the Record', Substack, 27 June 2024, <https://open.substack.com/pub/julietfraser/p/on-the-record?r=25b6q6&utm>

<sup>5</sup> 'Practice' in Burrows *Writing Dance*, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (Verso, 2023), 18.

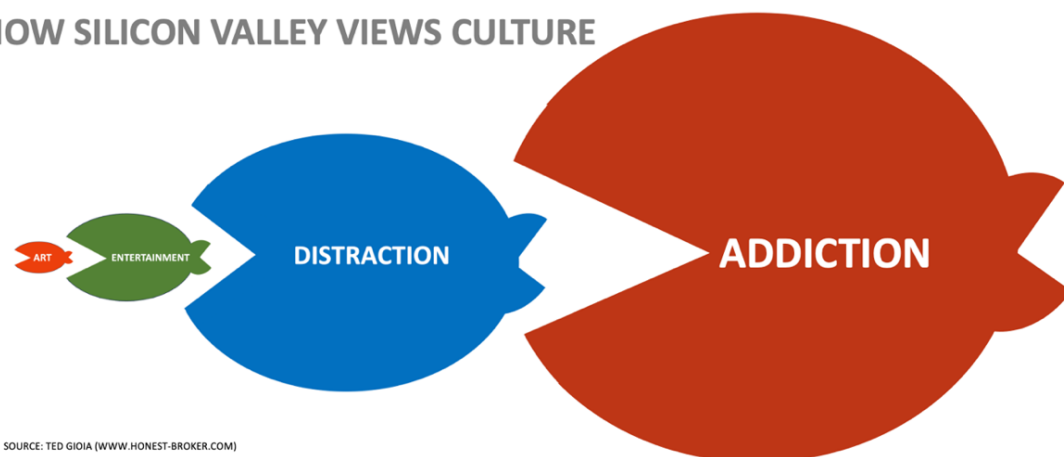
diversity, we still seem determined to celebrate only a handful of superstars. We should worry a little for the few men and the fewer women who are featured here, there and everywhere, blazingly and briefly *in demand*, as is the rule of immediacy's game. Lord, deliver them from burnout. We clamour over the individual whilst speaking loftily of community: how do we resolve this contradiction?

### 1) We slow down.

Pacing oneself is perhaps a luxury, but it should not remain the privilege of the few. As artists, we may yet have some work to do claiming the right to say “no”, or “not yet”, or “not like this”, for it takes courage to acknowledge one's idiosyncratic creative metabolism and ensure that the industry respects it. Ted Gioia, in his viral Substack post entitled ‘The State of the Culture, 2024’, articulates something many of us have sensed when he explains the enormous pressure art is under today to conform to the bite-sized hits of the dopamine culture:

The fastest growing sector of the culture economy is *distraction*. Or call it scrolling or swiping or wasting time or whatever you want. But it's not art or entertainment, just ceaseless activity. The key is that each stimulus only lasts a few seconds, and must be repeated. It's a huge business, and will soon be larger than arts and entertainment combined. Everything is getting turned into TikTok—an aptly named platform for a business based on stimuli that must be repeated after only a few ticks of the clock. TikTok made a fortune with fast-paced scrolling video. And now Facebook—once a place to connect with family and friends—is imitating it. *So long, Granny, hello Reels*. Twitter has done the same. And, of course, Instagram, YouTube, and everybody else trying to get rich on social media. This is more than just the hot trend of 2024. It can last forever—because it's based on body chemistry, not fashion or aesthetics[...] So you need to ditch that simple model of art versus entertainment. And even ‘distraction’ is just a stepping stone toward the real goal nowadays—which is *addiction*.<sup>7</sup>

### HOW SILICON VALLEY VIEWS CULTURE



In Gioia's food chain, Art is swallowed up by Entertainment which is being swallowed up by Distraction which is being swallowed up by Addiction. I just wonder if Art can dart away, and escape the jaws of all the bigger fish. It may be under pressure from the Silicon Valley culture economy, but I am hopeful that there will always be an audience for art that

<sup>7</sup> Ted Gioia ‘The State of the Culture, 2024’, Substack, 18 February 2024: <https://www.honest-broker.com/p/the-state-of-the-culture-2024>.

does not participate in this fast-paced, insatiable economy. Perhaps this is the strength of new music: composition is a slow act, and the nature of our engagement — as performer or audience — is generally too much like hard work to be categorised as ‘entertaining’. Our resilience, ironically, could lie in our resolutely slow and focused processes.

## 2) **We gather in new ways.**

Historical collectivism within classical music has failed us. According to the dominant narrative, classical music is struggling against irrelevance, elitism, the perpetuation of inequality and literal, fiscal bankruptcy. How and with whom we gather can change this narrative, however: new models of collaboration are working to discredit the myth of the genius composer, from performer-composer co-creation to far greater discussion around collaborative consent; new models of curation are dismantling old hierarchies and rewriting the guest list; new models of environmental sustainability for our industry could quickly be implemented if we looked to those already developed in the theatre world<sup>8</sup>.

When we gather, we recalibrate ourselves as individuals within a community. I have a lot of time for discussions around artistic identity, but the current strain of narcissism that treats ‘my truth’ as academic insight and facilitates the desperate proliferation of identity-focused projects is a creative dead-end: as Kornbluh puts it, ‘Every I, lousy with panache’<sup>9</sup>. This is not about woke or anti-woke — the culture wars can play out without us. It is possible to demonstrate solidarity without collapsing into tribalism, to build a community offering respite from the algorithms that exacerbate our insecurities about body, identity and status.

When we gather, we fortify ourselves. It is strategic to recognise that we cannot each fight all fights on all fronts. A contemporary, intersectional collectivism might assemble multiple battalions, united in a vision for change but with discrete targets. Marianna Ritchey, for example, wants to weaken the power of institutions:

The kind of anti-institutional orientation I wish we would develop is one that refuses to see institutions ... as the benevolent distributors of rights and freedoms that we might one day receive if we ask nicely enough. Instead, we should orient ourselves toward people, and toward constructing autonomous forms of musicking that don’t require institutional patronage.<sup>10</sup>

I take a softer view, seeing institutions and organisations as formed of people, many of whom are desperate to contribute to positive change, but Ritchey is right to challenge the conditions of institutional patronage and her ‘autonomous forms of musicking’ could pave the way for a radically different distribution of power and agency.

Meanwhile, organisations such as Black Administrators of Opera are engaged in the fight to expose and reform systems of racial inequity in opera. Their open letter, published in

---

<sup>8</sup> Theatre Green Book UK has just been released in its second edition: ‘News’, Theatre Green Book, accessed 26 June 2024, <https://theatregreenbook.com/june-2024-second-edition-launch/>. Where is classical music’s first edition?!

<sup>9</sup> Kornbluh *Immediacy*, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Marianna Ritchey, ‘A Critical Perspective on Diversity and Inclusion in US Classical Music Discourse’ in *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession: New Ideas for Tackling Inequalities and Exclusions*, Eds. Anna Bull and Christina Scharff with Ass. Ed. Laudan Nooshin (Oxford University Press, 2023), 99.

2020 and building on Black Opera Alliance's *A Pledge for Racial Equity and Systemic Change in Opera*, called for 'the necessary changes for greater equity in our field' and presented a list of five actionable solutions. When asked in an interview why Black administrators had mobilised, Quodesia Johnson explained that 'the industry needed to hear directly from its administrators because there is a habit of dismissing the artists who do not often see all of the moving pieces outside of what happens onstage.'<sup>11</sup> Later she says,

It is very difficult to hoard power when you're in community with someone because you start to share space, you start to be accountable, you start to witness the narratives of others, and you're forever changed when that happens, when you connect on a human level.<sup>12</sup>

This example models so much: one organisation supporting another, administrators supporting artists, demands accompanied by solutions. Like the opera world, our new-music scene is international but comparatively small. I am engaged in my struggles and you are engaged in yours, but if we pay attention to how our respective struggles intersect, change might come a little sooner.

### **3) We engage thoughtfully.**

We cannot afford to be unthinking in how we engage in all of this. Many of the concerns around the implications of specific technologies on our specific cultural economy, such as streaming, social media and AI<sup>13</sup> are double-edged swords, offering potential benefits as well as significant threats — this is what makes a quick-fix solution so elusive. Equally, the effort to bring our education, programming and funding models in line with twenty-first-century mores and render them fit to serve future generations requires sustained creative thought. Include artists in these efforts: please let them through the gates.

And engagement need not be a synonym for activism. You do you, babe; just do it with your eyes open. For it will require personal and collective intentionality to stem the tide of immediacy, distraction and general unthinking bullshit:

'An economy that prizes the circulation of images, human capital entrepreneurs, and the datafication of everything into endless counting of the homogenized same realizes in plasma the mythic promise of the fluid screen. Narcissus's mirror is industrially ordained.'<sup>14</sup>

I don't want to think in terms of human capital and 'content'<sup>15</sup>. I don't want to participate in the datafication and the endless counting. I don't understand why we, who are after all concerned with *sound*, are participating in the pointless circulation of images. Why is our industry so complicit in such unthinking gluttony? Where did all the questions go?!

---

<sup>11</sup> Antonio C. Cuyler '(Un)Silencing Blacktivism in Opera: An Interview with Quodesia Johnson about the *Letter to the Opera Field from Black Administrators*' in *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession*, 257.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 259.

<sup>13</sup> Gioia is useful on this topic too, see <https://www.honest-broker.com/p/how-the-music-business-can-tame-the>.

<sup>14</sup> Kornbluh *Immediacy*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> Spotify CEO Daniel Ek recently caused a twitter storm when he began a post on X with these words: 'Today, with the cost of creating content being close to zero, people can share an incredible amount of content.' The kickback from artists was glorious. Daniel Ek (@eldsjal), X, 29 May 2024, <https://x.com/eldsjal/status/1795871513293320204>.

Why are we doing things this way?  
Why participate?  
Why document?  
Why digitise?  
Why pirouette faddishly around the same few topics?  
Why fetishise the premiere?  
Why avoid the ambiguities?  
Why so fearful?

Fear is a threat because it freezes our creativity; we cannot see the possibilities. Sound, to me, is thick with possibility. Our performances can be an invitation to engage in a world that prioritises ears over eyes, listening over speaking, questions over answers, togetherness over isolation, magic over the mundane. They can help us hold fast to slow process, rigour, care and real-life connectedness. Distraction is at the surface level but engagement effects some sort of shift within us. Even better, engagement is reciprocal: we shift and we are shifted. And eventually the tide turns.

Juliet Fraser, 26 June 2024



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alsadir, Nuar. *Animal Joy*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2022.
- Bracewell, Michael. *The Spaces Between*. Ridinghouse, 2012.
- Burrows, Jonathan. *Writing Dance*. Varamo Press, 2022.
- Cixous, Hélène. 'The Laugh of the Medusa'. *Signs* 4 (1976), 875-893.
- Gioia, Ted. 'The State of the Culture, 2024'. Substack, 18 February 2024.  
<https://www.honest-broker.com/p/the-state-of-the-culture-2024>.
- Hirvanen, Maija and Neklyaeva, Eva. *Practical Performance Magic: Recipes and Spills*. Self-published, 2023.
- Kornbluh, Anna. *Immediacy or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism*. Verso, 2023.
- Eds. Bull, Anna and Scharff, Christina with Associate Ed. Nooshin, Laudan. *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession: New Ideas for Tackling Inequalities and Exclusions*. Oxford University Press, 2023.
- Raphael, Amy. *A Seat at the Table: Women on the Frontline of Music*. Virago Press, 2020.
- Spatz, Ben. *What A Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research*. Routledge, 2015.