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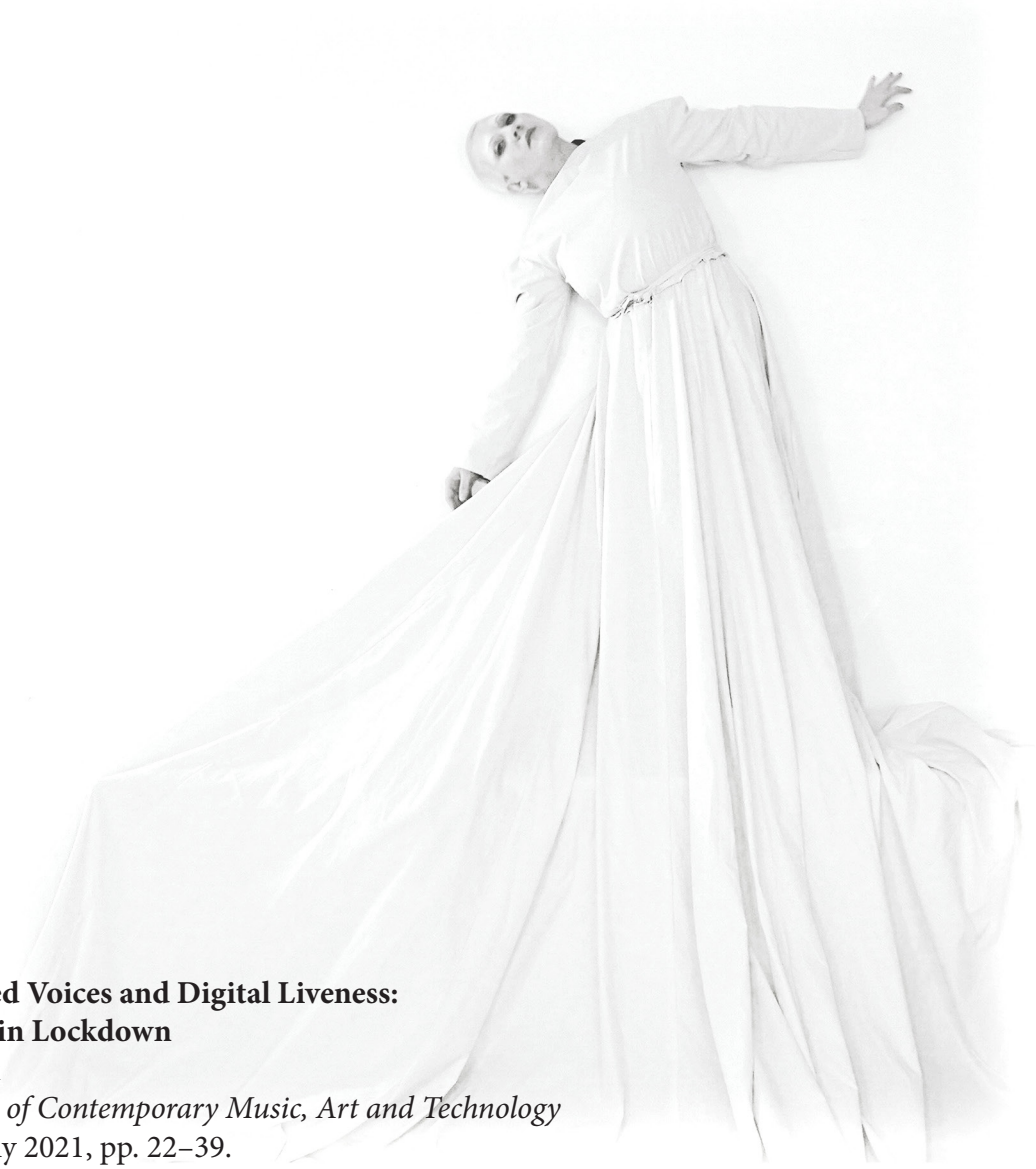

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(DIS-)EMBODIED VOICES AND DIGITAL LIVENESS: MUSIC THEATRE IN LOCKDOWN

Abstract: *20 Shots of Opera*, released in December 2020, is a series of twenty short pieces of music theatre between five and eight minutes long. They were created and produced in just a few months. What makes the pieces special is that they were conceived to be produced under pandemic conditions and with purely an online reception in mind. This has affected details of the recording process as well as directorial concepts such as the use of animation or superimposition of pictures. This article will analyze how selected Shots engage with these conditions, look at different types of how the voices are used and assess the specific aesthetic circumstances of digital reception, as well as discussing other specific challenges and opportunities of creating music theatre in times of Covid-19.

Keywords: Music theatre, contemporary music, virtual opera, pandemic, music and Covid-19, Irish new music, music in lockdown, digital liveness, embodied voices, 20 Shots of Opera

Introduction

> We do not know, and cannot predict, the long-term cultural implications of the social-distancing response to Covid-19. However, we argue that it may act as a cultural propagation catalyst with the potential to spread cultural outputs around the globe faster than ever before. This could have a profound long-term influence on cultural-aesthetic expressions. (Lee, Baker and Haywood 2020)

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These lines, published in a blog post entitled "Coronavirus, the cultural catalyst" in May 2020, can almost be regarded as a truism – yet they still need to be said given that many focus on the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This negative impact certainly is enormous, not least due to the "precarity of our cultural labour force" resulting in widespread "pandemic insolvency" (Tsoulakis, Fitzgibbon 2020). Yet it has become obvious that the continuing lockdowns, the closure of music venues and the inability of musicians to connect with their audiences in the traditional ways have also led to the development of new ways to perform and reach listeners, as well as a renewed focus of modes of production and distribution that were already tested occasionally in the past, but not pursued to a larger extent until now. Chris Parsons, director of the early music ensemble Eburacum Baroque, explains that the "unprecedented global situation has opened our eyes to a whole new range of ideas that we will be able to use in the years to come […] I think there are overriding positives" (Parsons 2020, 403). Lee, Baker and Haywood state that the "wave of creativity and online sharing that is now occurring as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic is unprecedented." If this was true in May 2020 it applies even more so today. The blog authors mainly focus on one aspect of this development, namely everyone's expanded ability to access music from remote regions and cultures: "Greater interest in online music sharing exposes little-known musical micro-cultures hitherto to a larger, newer and geographically more dispersed audience giving cultural diversity a whole new level of expression." (Lee, Baker and Haywood 2020). However, there are other ways in which musical creativity is adapting to this brave, new and exclusively digital world. These include works reacting to the pandemic situation in terms of content such as Finnish National Opera's *Covid fan tutte*, a shortened version of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* with a new Finnish text satirizing politicians' and artists' reactions to Covid-19 (Swed 2020). *We can be heroes*, an event produced between June and August 2021 in Frankfurt/Main and described as both opera and exhibition by its creators, invites individual visitors to go through seven different spaces over the course of an hour, encountering operatic installations requiring participatory reception along the way (We can be heroes 2021). The visitors become part of the action, thus dissolving the fourth wall. While operatic events engaging with individual visitors were occasionally produced before the pandemic as well (in Ireland, Evangelia Rigaki's *The Pregnant Box* from 2014 comes to mind), the current social distancing regulations strongly incentivize the creation of artistic events that visitors can only access individually. An externally imposed restriction is thus being turned into an artistic opportunity. In a recent article for *Operawire*, Ona Jarmalavičiūtė outlines a wide range of conceptual responses to the crisis, including "opera as artificial intelligence", "opera as virtual reality", "opera as animation", "opera as feature film", "opera as musical", "opera as trance", "opera as music video", "opera as performance", "pandemic opera" (Jarmalavičiūtė's example for this is *Covid fan tutte*), "opera for non-singers", and "opera as a tour" (Jarmalavičiūtė 2021).

In this essay, I shall look at *20 Shots of Opera*, a recent Irish operatic project as an example of creating innovative musical works that were conceived for online presentation and can only exist digitally – or at least would work much less convincingly on a stage in front of a physical audience. A special focus will lie on the role of the voice in relation to the character and the body from which it stems, a concept increasingly discussed in opera studies in recent years, as well as the notion of "digital liveness". Jarmalavičiūtė classifies the *20 Shots* in her article as "opera as music video", a response to her claim that "[c]lassical opera can often appear simply too long." (Jarmalavičiūtė 2021) The screen-oriented production concept of this project may also support this categorization.

On December 17, 2020, Irish National Opera (INO) released *20 Shots of Opera*, a series of twenty short pieces of music theatre between five and eight minutes long (20 Shots of Opera 2020). At this stage Ireland found itself in a brief period between two lockdowns (the country's third lockdown at level 5 – the highest in the Irish response scheme – came into force on December 24). Yet even during this period the cultural sector remained broadly inaccessible – effectively, theatres, concert halls and cinemas had been closed almost continuously since March 2020. *20 Shots of Opera* represents a very specific and innovative reaction to these conditions. The pieces are fascinating examples of artistic responses to the pandemic with regard to concept and production while also posing interesting aesthetic questions about the use of voices and the reception of digital music theatre. The economic context is also of interest – being accessible free of charge the *Shots* don't generate any income while simultaneously reaching a much larger audience over a longer period of time.

Embodied and Digital Voices in Contemporary Opera

The performative turn of the 1990s was a reaction to the focus on texts (in music represented by the score) as the main object of research and source of knowledge. Music only comes to life in performance, and in opera the voice is the central focus of attention and carrier of meaning. The voice is a material product stemming from the singer's body as Michelle Duncan outlines: "The category of performativity opens up a space in which to interrogate acts of utterance as material events and to investigate the effects of those events. Simply put, a performative orientation potentially redirects the term 'utter' from its use as an adjective […] to a verb […]. The medium at work in opera performance […] is the carnal body, the *Urmedium* of the live speech act" (Duncan 2004, 289). Thus the voice's materiality, its embodied nature is now regarded as a central component in the creation of meaning; just analyzing the score is not sufficient to uncover the full potential of a musical utterance. Michael Halliwell regards the relationship between the abstract musical text and its actual realization through the voice as being akin to that of reason and

emotion as without the performance no emotion can be created or conveyed (Halliwell 2014, 257). D'aoust is supportive of this view: "while the recollection of an image of the body or of the voice to the mind's eye is a function of reason – which objectifies a particular subject's voice or body – listening or speaking are acts of embodiment and potential expressions of the affective unknown" (D'aoust 2012, 34). For Jelena Novak the voice-body relationship is not just a central aspect of the reception and analysis of recent opera but also a driving force in its creation (Novak 2012, 1). In all these contexts the voice appears "not only as a vehicle of linguistic meaning, but as a material, and performative, corporeal agent" (Novak 2012, 147).

Duncan distinguishes three types of voices that we can encounter in an opera. Firstly it can appear as a first-person utterance representing the views of the character uttering the words. Secondly there is "the voice that emanates from outside the subject, the voice that calls the subject into being. This appears as the voice of God, […] that names the individual as a subject of ideology, or the voice of the Other in Lacan that calls the subject into law" (Duncan 2004, 290). This voice does not just convey a person's views, it places that person in a function and position, providing information beyond the specific content of the utterance. The third type of voice has agency, something changes as a result of its utterance. It is "a multiplicitous voice that emanates as force. The force of a performative utterance has been interpreted as causing effect or injury according to the impact of its meaning and has thus been linked to power and to violence. […] The third type of voice can thus be heard as having two separate aspects: the voice that is constituted by matter and the voice that engenders material effect" (Duncan 2004, 290). We will encounter all three types of voices in the *20 Shots of Opera*.

Digitally produced opera – whether streamed live or watched later – creates an even more complex picture. Now voice and body are mediated through technology. This is particularly interesting if the digital realization is a conceptual part of an opera's genesis: "various forms of recording techniques, video, film, digital technology are used. […] That significantly changed both how opera looks and how it sounds […] technology not only enables the pieces, but becomes embedded into their concepts" (Novak 2012, 146). Novak discusses different types of "re-inventions" of the singing body in a number of operas from the 2010s, for example with regard to de-synchronization, an effect she calls "ventriloquism" (the voice not only emanates from the body but also in turn affects and changes it – this is related to Duncan's third type of voice), or gender and sex (Novak 2012).

Genesis and Production of the 20 Shots[2]

Irish National Opera is Ireland's largest provider of opera and music theatre, mainly funded by the Arts Council of Ireland. Since the country has no permanently operating opera house[3] INO organizes a number of performances per year in a broad range of venues – smaller productions travel across the country while larger ones take place in Dublin in either the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre or the Gaiety Theatre.

After performances of Bizet's *Carmen* in spring 2020 had to be postponed due to Covid-19, INO's production of Rossini's *William Tell* in November also fell victim to the pandemic (the production is now planned for 2022). When it became clear over the summer that live performances in a theatre would not be possible INO's leadership considered possible alternatives that could be pursued even during the pandemic. At this point only one sixth of the budget of *William Tell* had been committed, and it was possible to redirect the remaining funding to a new project. Over the summer the company had already created "Seraglio, the Mini-Series", a series of eight episodes in which the story of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* is told by conductor Peter Whelan as narrator (and in the role of Bassa Selim) while the other protagonists present some of the opera's musical highlights from their respective homes (Seraglio, the Mini-Series 2020). While this was a condensed version of an existing opera, the new project should create new pieces and offer opportunities for as many Irish artists as possible as Fergus Sheil, Artistic Director of INO, pointed out:

> I wanted a project that would involve a huge array of Irish talent. Composers, writers, singers, instrumentalists, directors and designers. But one where everybody would work in small groups or on their own. Something that would be both small and large at the same time. Something that would be resilient as a project and not easily fall victim to the fluctuations of future circumstances. I think of it as a huge, collective act of creativity and defiance (INO 2020-21, Season Plans 2020).

The decision to commission many smaller pieces was taken not only in order to involve more artists, but also to ensure that if during the production process someone fell ill or had to self-isolate the other pieces would not be affected and

2 I would like to thank Fergus Sheil and James Bingham from Irish National Opera as well as Garrett Sholdice of the Ergodos label for providing me with information for this section.

3 There is an opera house (750 seats) in the South-Eastern town of Wexford, labelled National Opera House. However, it is not in permanent use; its main purpose is hosting the Wexford Festival Opera in October and November of each year. During the rest of the year there are only occasional operas, concerts and other events taking place there.

could continue to be rehearsed and recorded – essentially, the individual teams would form "pods" that could operate independently of each other. Hence different singers were engaged for each of the *Shots*. As it happened, only one singer had to self-isolate after contact with a positive Covid case during the production period; this is why Naomi Louisa O'Connell now features in two of the operas – she took over the part of the singer who had to drop out. Players of the RTÉ Concert Orchestra (the orchestra originally scheduled to accompany *William Tell*) were engaged to accompany the singers; due to scheduling problems some of the *Shots* were in the end accompanied by members of the Irish National Opera Symphony Orchestra. A final reason for a selection of short operas was that it would have been impossible for one or a few longer works to be completed within the extremely tight timeframe.[4]

The *Shots* were commissioned in July 2020, so there were only five months between the commissioning of the pieces and the premiere (given that the works were recorded in mid-November the composition process, the development of the directorial concepts and the rehearsals had to be completed in the even shorter time of just about four months). The composers and librettists could choose their sujets freely; the commissions asked for pieces of a length of between five and six minutes (in the end the pieces are between five and eight minutes long) for up to two singers and an ensemble of up to eleven players.

Despite being recorded on a stage (that of the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin) the *20 Shots* were produced not like filmed stage performances (such as those regularly broadcast by the Metropolitan Opera) but rather like operas filmed on location: The music was pre-recorded before the filming took place. Normally this is done to ensure the best possible quality of sound which cannot be achieved out on location, yet here this decision was enforced by the enhanced projection of aerosols during singing (as opposed to speaking). This meant the performers were not allowed to sing during the filming but had to mime their parts instead. This increased the difficulty of producing a convincing visual performance (except in the case of the two *Shots* realized as animations) – in "normal" circumstances the singers would certainly have sung during the filming process. This is an example of Novak's "ventriloquism", the voice emanating from the body and the recorded sound later affecting the body as it has to conform to it while acting during the visual recording.

The 20 pieces were written by different composers and librettists and cover a wide range of musical styles and topics (tragic, epic and comical in nature).

4 The idea of writing short operas related to recent events and designed for screening is not new. For example, in 2010 the Dutch TV channel *De Wereld Draait Door* started commissioning a number of one-minute operas that were to engage with current political or societal events. Jelena Novak discusses five of them which were written by composer Michael van der Aa between 2010 and 2014 (Novak 2019, 102-109).

- *Mrs Streicher* (Music: Gerald Barry, Text: Ludwig van Beethoven)
  Commissioned by Timothy King and Mary Canning
- *Rupture* (Music & Text: Éna Brennan)
  Commissioned by Jean and Ian Flitcroft
- *Ghost Apples* (Music: Irene Buckley, Text: Jessica Traynor)
- *Glaoch* (Music: Linda Buckley, Text: Doireann Ní Ghríofa)
- *The Colour Green* (Music: Robert Coleman, Text: Mark Boyle)
- *Verballing* (Music: David Coonan, Text: Dylan Coburn Gray)
  Commissioned by Catherine and William Earley
- *Her Name* (Music: Alex Dowling, Text: Mark O'Halloran)
  Commissioned by Matthew Patrick Smyth
- *Through and Through* (Music & Text: Peter Fahey)
- *At a Loss* (Music & Text: Michael Gallen)
- *Erth upon Erth* (Music: Andrew Hamilton, Text: Anonymous)
- *Dichotomies of Lockdown* (Music & Text: Jenn Kirby)
- *The Patient Woman* (Music: Conor Linehan, Text: Louis Lovett)
  Commissioned by Gaby Smyth
- *A Message for Marty (or "The Ring")* (Music & Text: Conor Mitchell)
- *La Corbiére* (Music: Gráinne Mulvey, Text: Anne Le Marquand Hartigan)
- *The Wait* (Music: Emma O'Halloran, Text: Mark O'Halloran)
  Commissioned by Genesis
- *Close* (Music: Hannah Peel, Text: Stella Feehily)
  Commissioned by Stephen Loughman
- *Touch* (Music: Karen Power, Text: Ione)
- *The Gift* (Music: Evangelia Rigaki, Text: Marina Carr)
  Commissioned by Jean and Ian Flitcroft
- *Dust* (Music & Text: Benedict Schlepper-Connolly)
  Commissioned by Fedora
- *Libris Solar* (Music: Jennifer Walshe, Text: Jennifer Walshe/Alphonso Lingis)
  Commissioned by John Caldwell

The works are presented on the INO webpage in alphabetical order of composers, resulting in some of the internationally better-known names (Gerald Barry and Jennifer Walshe) framing the collection. All composers and performers are either Irish or based in Ireland. INO consciously decided to opt for gender balance in this project; there are ten female and ten male composers (while 21 out of the altogether 27 singers involved in the project are female; one of the six male ones is a boy soprano). In six cases the composers acted as their own librettists while one composer (Andrew Hamilton) set an anonymous, pre-existing text. INO grouped the operas according to four categories: "political" (4 entries), "life and death" (7),

"drama" (8) and "relationships" (5), with several works featuring in more than one category. Other categories could be envisaged – comedy, for example – yet the opera afficionado should best watch all of them anyway.

20 Shots of Opera are available online free of charge, so they don't generate any income for INO. It is well known that charging for performances on the internet where so many alternatives are available for free is still a very difficult business, so this was certainly the right decision. Between October and December 2020 INO organized three live-streamed concerts entitled "Mezzo Masterpieces" (featuring soloists and full orchestra) for which tickets were sold at a price of €15 (or €40 for the entire series), but while the viewers' financial contribution was welcome it didn't get close to making a serious contribution to the costs of the enterprise. Had the concerts been taking place before the pandemic it is virtually certain that far more tickets could have been sold to a face-to-face audience. There was, however, one additional financial contribution towards the *20 Shots* beyond the redirected budget of *William Tell*: INO managed to find several donors who commissioned altogether ten of the works. These are mainly private individuals yet also a few corporate companies; one couple even commissioned two of the *Shots*. Their contributions covered the fees for the composer and the librettist of the respective projects.

Let us now look at a few examples of the *20 Shots* to demonstrate the different ways in which they operate, particularly with regard to the different types of voice and the effect the digital realizations have on them.

Digital Reactions to Real-Life Problems

The four *Shots* briefly discussed in this section have been selected as examples of the ways in which many of the pieces creatively engage with different manifestations of voices and interactions between characters, yet also different types of digital production and dissemination. In *The Gift* the two protagonists find themselves in a situation of addressing each other yet not listening, which is emphasized by placing them in two different spaces and having one of them speak while the other sings. *Verballing* (realized as an animation) reduces the second protagonist to bodyless and voiceless text that is not even sung while *Rupture* has only one protagonist to begin with, yet this person has two voices battling inside her head. These three *Shots* also represent a variety of concepts with regard to the interaction of protagonists: *The Gift* juxtaposes a singer and a speaker, *Verballing* a singer and written lines on a screen, and *Rupture* two singing voices inside just one head. While neither of these works engage with our digital world with regard to their plots, the last example does exactly that: *Glaoch* focuses on issues of connectivity. These four *Shots* are realized in ways that would not work well (and sometimes not at all) if they were performed in front of a live audience.

The Gift, one of seven *Shots* classified as relating to "Life and Death", has a libretto by Marina Carr set to music by Evangelia Rigaki. It is a story about a dying father (Seán McGinley) who awaits the return of his estranged daughter (Doreen Curran) from a trip to Italy as he wants to see her one last time – perhaps achieve a reconciliation – before passing away. Their distance is indicated by the fact that they are designated as "woman" and "old man" in the score; we only learn about their relationship from their own words. The alternating lines of the two protagonists rarely address each other directly as they appear to be lost in thought, it's almost like a double monologue in which people in the same room avoid addressing each other. From the father we learn that his "ruthless" daughter cut him out of her life 30 years ago and that he misses her (and his grandchildren) terribly; he gives as a reason that "[s]he said I tried to take her down" while she comments in one of her few direct addresses to him "You wanted me back in your clutches. Only so many times a body can forgive". She makes it back in time to witness his passing. After his death he (rather than her) concludes the work with a Shakespearean reference (from *Cymbeline*) "At my funeral she said I loved dancing. Then she recited 'Fear no more the heat of the sun.'"

Director Jo Mangan positions the two protagonists in different spaces; they never appear together. The old man is placed in a rather sterile, entirely white environment, inside an upright bed with the camera turned on its side so that it initially appears as if he is lying in the bed (the score already asks for a "vertical bed") – his sudden move out of it (or on another occasion his apparent hovering in it) are quite striking. In reaction to the daughter mentioning a cross in a church in Sicily he stretches out his arms to appear as if crucified. She stands in a separate, much darker place (sometimes with two of the instrumentalists playing in the background) while on one occasion – when accusing the old man of a lack of strength – pretending to play a violin herself. In the middle of the piece they suddenly change places for a moment: when she accuses him to want her back in his clutches she suddenly finds herself in the bed (the position of the victim) while her father addresses the two players (who listen attentively without playing, even though we continue to hear the accompaniment): "Look at this ruthless daughter." Later the now deceased father speaks the final lines without being visible; instead our view is directed upwards to the Gaiety Theatre's chandelier. The piece does not ultimately clarify what the eponymous gift is – is it the father's staying alive until the daughter returns ("I waited to say goodbye because you asked me to"), or her decision to come back to him even though she does not really want to and appears to be happy once it is over ("He slips away, last duty done")?

Rigaki's music is inspired by one of the best-known musical compositions related to death, namely Mozart's *Requiem*. Her instrumental parts are full of allusions to that work. At the beginning the strings pick up on the "Introit's" pizzicato quavers alternating between low and high strings while simultaneously alluding

to the quasi-syncopated entries of the English horns and bassoons; elsewhere the melodic movement of the "Lacrimosa" is hinted at. Yet the music does not sound like Mozart, and particularly the vocal parts give it a unique flair. The daughter is set as a mezzo soprano while the father is a speaking role, performed by an actor. This indicates his weakness, but perhaps also his sincerity. Her last word (the end of the line "last duty done") is suddenly spoken, as if she now joins his level of communication.

Both characters' lines represent examples of Duncan's second types of voice – their words go beyond their immediate meaning, setting up context and explaining the overall situation to the audience. This impression is even stronger given that the two clearly do not convey information to each other. Both protagonists don't operate at the same aural level; interestingly it is the male protagonist who resorts to the more prosaic mode of pure speaking while the woman utilizes the much richer musical mode of expression. However, the woman's lines include many note repetitions; often the pitch rises or falls by step after a number of repeated pitches. The effect is that of semi-declamation with gradually increasing or decreasing degrees of intensity. Her part starts on middle C, moves up and at the end returns to it, as if a dramatic arc comes to a conclusion.

As produced *The Gift* would be much less effective on stage than it is on screen – it would be much more difficult to place the two protagonists in two different, completely separate spaces so that they are never seen at the same time if they had to be in front of a live audience. One could imagine the double monologue taking place in the style of the duet between Senta and the Dutchman in the second act of Wagner's opera (with the two being in the same room yet more or less ignoring each other's presence), yet it would certainly be less convincing – and the placement of the musicians in one person's space in particular would also not work well.

Alongside *The Colour Green*, *Verballing* (Libretto: Dylan Coburn Gray; Music: David Coonan) is one of two *Shots* produced as animations. A female trainee Garda (a member of the Irish police) named Amy finds herself in a highly Kafkaesque situation in which an unknown interrogator coaches her how to answer questions in court regarding an (either imagined or real) case, pointing out her procedural mistakes in handling it and goading her towards a phrasing of her answers that will not threaten the admission of her report and the outcome of the case. The interrogator has no name and does neither sing nor speak; his questions and comments only appear on the screen in written format (it is difficult to imagine the interrogator as being anything other than male while it is certainly no accident that the trainee Garda is female). The young woman is thus confronted with an anonymous, seemingly all-knowing power which acts in a highly paternalistic way that constantly belittles her. The interrogator's voice is another good example of Duncan's second type of voice which does not just convey information but simultaneously outlines the overall situation for us while also creating a clear power relationship. The reduction of the interrogator's voice to text on a screen is a very effective in-

dicator of the power imbalance between the protagonists. Amy's dialogue partner is an anonymous, abstract power that can't be addressed at an equal level; without a body it loses any personality and subjectivity – for D'aout a bodiless voice represents "authoritative knowledge" (D'aout 2012, 45). Amy, on the other hand, is not just the name of the character but also of the singer who premiered the role (Amy Ní Fhearraigh to whom *Verballing* is also dedicated), so we are meant to perceive her voice as not just that of the opera's character but also that of the performer – the interrogator's reduced corporeality is juxtaposed with a voice with the merged corporeality of fictional character *and* performer.

In each of five short acts the interrogator first confronts Amy with details of her report from the crime scene, only then getting her to admit that she had omitted some relevant detail, or had committed procedural errors in her handling of a suspect. Each time the audience learns a bit more about the case, including some surprising twists that let the situation appear in ever-new, unexpected lights. This is particularly embodied by the first lines of each act which repeat what was said before and then add to it, from "Dead man in his hall he says self-defense?" at the beginning to "Dead man self-defense questions statement refusal he thinks you think he's guilty and want to stitch him up?" in the last act. Throughout the opera Amy's responses to virtually anything put to her is a single word: "Yeah" (complemented by the occasional "ok", "ah" and "no"). She appears like a deer caught in the headlights who is getting ever more nervous and panicky. This is indicated by the way in which her monosyllabic answers grow from brief intersections to extended melismatic phrases with much chromatic movement, as well as the constantly rising pitch of her melodic line (from A^3 at the beginning to B^4 as her final note). Apart from Amy's constantly rising melodic line, Coonan's music indicates increasing insecurity and confusion through constantly changing time signatures, increasing tempo and hectic, often polyphonic movement (initially in the wind parts, later spreading to the other instruments). Brass chords announce new questions by the interrogator.

Amy's part is a prime example of words providing much more emotive content than factual information. Since she only produces single words and repeats them over and over what she sings is much less relevant to the audience than how she does it; the increased intensity and ever-rising pitches convey a much clearer message than the words as such. This piece makes very clear that the text alone only provides a small part of the meaning. That the interrogator's part is neither spoken nor sung does not contradict this – his part is meant to appear as unemotional, cold and perhaps even inhuman.

Like *The Gift*, in its animated form *Verballing* would also be much less effective on stage than on screen – the animation could be projected onto a backcloth or screen, yet a live performance on a stage would only really make sense if at least the singer would there in the flesh in front of it, rather than being part of the animation. The anonymous, only readable voice of the instructor in particular works in a much

more impressive way on screen than during a live performance when we would probably find it odd not to hear the words sung live. Overall director Caitríona McLaughlin presents us with a picture of Amy's mind much more than with the physical view of this "training exercise". Amy the Garda starts the scene in what looks like the backstage of a theatre before finding herself literally more and more in the spotlight, surrounded by darkness and appearing to sink into the ground as if it was quicksand in act three. In act four the animation seems to suggest something like a black hole surrounded by gravitational fields, before this circle transforms into Amy's gradually receding face in the final act – the body "shrinks" more and more, reducing it to the mouth from which the voice emanates. At the very end we are back in the backstage area and her ordeal seems to somehow have come to an end, yet the Kafkaesque nature of the entire procedure leaves the viewer doubting whether that is really the case.

Rupture (Éna Brennan, libretto and music) is another example of a plot that could not easily be realized on a stage. It consists of two characters designated as "woman" and "conscience" who have a dialogue inside the woman's mind with the woman dreaming of a bright future while the voice of her conscience continuously pours cold water onto her prospects ("Who in their right mind would give you mortgage approval?!", or "Who in their right mind would have a child with you?!"). Through wigs and make-up director Jo Mangan makes the singers Rachel Goode (woman) and Sarah Richmond (conscience) look as similar as possible so that their faces can be continuously superimposed onto each other, thus indicating their being different parts of the same person. The "woman" is a soprano, her subconscious overseer a mezzo soprano who occasionally imitates opening motifs of the woman's lines while elsewhere singing for moments in parallel thirds and sixths which in this context sound too harmonious to be true – they are another means to ridicule the woman's words. These two inner voices demonstrate aspects of the first and third of Duncan's voice types: they convey information while also showing how the woman reacts to her conscience's words: she hears them, struggles with them yet ultimately decides to overcome their challenge and stick to her original views. The singing voices are yet again female; in this case there is no non-female character whose voice could appear in a different way.

Again, *Rupture* would be impossible to do on a stage and would probably have been conceived differently to begin with had Brennan not been aware from the outset that this project was not destined for the stage but for digital realization.

The difficulty of maintaining human connections in the age of electronic communication is the topic of Linda Buckley's *Glaoch* (Irish for "Call"). Doireann Ní Ghríofa's Irish text reflects on today's connectivity issues – literally as well as metaphorically – as our cordless devices preclude a sense of closeness and keep "breaking up" our calls. Under Hugh O'Conor's direction the singers Sarah Shine and Gemma Ní Bhriain are shown trying to connect with each other on their mobile phones in many different locations (indoors and outdoors) over a long period of

time (they are wearing many different items of clothing). Occasionally we also see apparently archival photos of them together in past, better times, before the phone indicates a loss of connection or another incoming call. Buckley's music is dominated by slowly moving string chords heavy with harmonics, with matching vocal parts that seem to reflect more on the metaphoric meaning of loss than on the often hectical attempts to establish or re-establish a literal connection (with the exception of certain quick rhythmic unison string passages to be played "col legno, like mobile phone interferences"). Again, watching the two singers performing this piece live on a stage would not make sense (their appearance on mobile phone screens is crucial); encountering this reflection on the loss of closeness in the age of digital devices on a digital device is what makes it a most poignant experience. Once again the two singing voices are female. Their appearance here is mediated through the digital production in a special way: While we encounter all of the *Shots* in recorded format, of course, here the protagonists communicate with each other through digital devices, and this mode of communication is a central element of the plot. We can assume that they would not see each other while trying to connect; it is only the audience that gets to see them separately trying to reach each other. These two voices want to have agency yet remain unsuccessful at establishing the connection they are craving. In this case there are three levels of mediation: we are watching a recording, the recording consists of people trying to connect via a digital device, and finally we hear them both while they can't hear each other (a little bit like father and daughter in *The Gift*).

Aspects of Digital Liveness

When the *20 Shots of Opera* were premiered on December 17, 2020, this was of course not a "live" premiere in the "traditional" sense of the term given that the pieces had been recorded more than a month earlier. In the digital realm the "premiere" of a piece of music indicates the time at which it is made available to the public for the first time, without the need for it to be performed in real time. Philip Auslander has pointed out that "the word live is not used to define intrinsic, ontological properties of performance that set it apart from mediatized forms, but is actually a historically contingent term" (Auslander 2012, 3). Since we can now observe that the use and understanding of the term has changed over time a new, broader understanding of it has to be developed. Auslander suggests the following definition.

> some technological artifact – a computer, Website, network, or virtual entity – makes a claim on us, its audience, to be considered as live, a claim that is concretized as a demand in some aspect of

> the way it presents itself to us (by providing real-time response and interaction or an ongoing connection to others, for example). In order for liveness to occur, we, the audience, must accept the claim as binding upon us, take it seriously, and hold onto the object in our consciousness of it in such a way that it becomes live for us. In this analysis, liveness is neither a characteristic of the object nor an effect caused by some aspect of the object such as its medium, ability to respond in real time, or anthropomorphism. Rather, liveness is an interaction produced through our engagement with the object and our willingness to accept its claim (Auslander 2012, 9).

Auslander's text is from 2012 – what is the situation in 2021?[5] What are the claims websites make today, what the real-time responses, interactions or ongoing connection to others? A first step towards their creation would be giving a specific moment in time an event-character, for example by designating that moment as "Premiere", inviting interested people to register for it and displaying to those not (yet) signed up not only when it will take place but also that a certain number of people are currently waiting for it to begin – even if the event is still a few days away. Regular YouTube viewers will know these features well – they are used not just in the context of music but also of all sorts of other events including lectures, discussions, and documentaries. A good example of this technique is represented by OperaVision, a YouTube channel that releases new opera productions every Friday at 6pm (CET). There is no attempt to hide the fact that these productions have always been recorded weeks or months earlier (the recording date is provided in the commentary). After the premiere they remain available for a limited amount of time, usually between one and six months – yet OperaVision manages to attach to the premiere the mantle of a special event, much preferable to watching the recording at a later stage. The channel does this not only by using the features described above, it also releases several clips whetting potential viewers' appetites during the days before a premiere: usually a trailer, an interview with one or several members of the creative team (director, conductor, sometimes one or more singers) and a behind-the-scenes look at the rehearsals. But YouTube's most ingenious way of creating real-time responses, interactions and ongoing connections to others is the live chat that is available only during the premiere. In it the viewers can express their reactions, exchange views and – perhaps most importantly – ask questions about the production. There is always a representative of OperaVision and another one from the opera house in which the respective production was recorded present; together they share general information and trivia about the opera, the production and those involved in it, yet also respond to questions by the audience. There is a number of "regulars" in the virtual audience who appear to know each other

5 Auslander's most extensive engagement with this topic is his book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Auslander 1999). In a recent interview he revealed that he is currently working on a new, third edition of this book which he describes as the "pandemic edition" as it will take into account recent experiences (Auslander 2021, 260).

from previous chats and display some degree of familiarity with each other, despite coming from countries a far apart as Mexico, Russia, and Zimbabwe, to name but a few. The chat is what makes the premiere really special as it is unique to it and provides a crucial moment of real-time connection and exchange – the chat itself is "live" in the old sense of the term. It is the core element that represents Auslander's "claim" for digital liveness, the Benjaminian aura that determines the quality of the experience. Later viewers can only watch the recorded chat unfolding alongside the stream without being able to contribute to it anymore. Another element supporting Auslander's concept is a line visible only during the premiere which congratulates viewers for being "officially" one of the first fans to watch the event.

The *20 Shots of Opera* were released on the INO website, without any of the YouTube features supporting the claim for liveness as redefined by Auslander. There was advertising to attract viewers, as well as interviews and a behind-the-scene video, but on release day the website with the 20 operas looked exactly the way it still looks today, with the different pieces being listed next to each other so that the viewers could watch some or all of them in any order they wanted. It is interesting to compare this to the OperaVision concept, particularly given that INO is one of the 29 European opera companies contributing to its program. The *20 Shots* were "premiered" on the OperaVision channel on March 12, 2021 – three months after their original release on the INO webpage. On the night of the premiere OperaVision streamed the twenty pieces as a single video (accompanied by the live chat as usual), not giving the audience the option to watch the pieces in another order. However, after the premiere OperaVision made the operas available individually – in fact, the complete stream of all of them in alphabetical order of composers is no longer accessible on their website. This represents yet another way of differentiating the premiere from the rest of the period during which the recording is available.

Conclusion

Covid-19 challenges music and musicians in many ways, and many different responses are possible. INO's *20 Shots* project – created on extremely short notice – is most innovative in its visual component which is specifically designed for digital production and reception. The music – while generally being of high quality and working very well with the visual realization – is conceptually less innovative insofar as it doesn't exploit the specific options of the digital world, especially its interactivity. It is score-based and by itself does not gain from (or depend on) digital transmission (although conceptually in the vast majority of cases the works' realizations depend on it as we have seen). Issue 5 of the *Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology* has presented a number of case studies about what is possible in this area. Examples of this include an essay on Gerd Kühr's *Corona Meditation*,

a piece performed simultaneously by many players in their respective homes (Göttlich 2020), or an article on a Brazilian podcast consisting of a listener's creative sonic responses to non-musical prompts (Martins, Perotto 2020).

As outlined above, projects such as the *20 Shots* can currently only be realized as publicly funded enterprises – sustainable ways of financing large-scale music theatre largely or entirely through a combination of ticket sales, philanthropy and sponsorships were rare even before the pandemic, and still are today. Individual full-scale projects may be realized on the basis of sponsorship or crowd-funding initiatives, and selected prestigious artists or institutions such as the Metropolitan Opera may be more successful than others in generating income that way, yet the continuous existence of most opera companies (particularly those performing throughout the year) can still only be guaranteed through public financial support. This is notwithstanding Gundula Kreuzer's observation of "the recent upsurge of alternative or 'indie' opera companies" (at least in New York) which focus on either new works or radically revised and slimmed down versions of canonic material (Kreuzer 2019, 131). During the pandemic the income generated through performances has shrunk dramatically; without public support many institutions would have ceased to exist, and a large number of them (such as the Metropolitan Opera and Opera Australia) laid off staff (Shaw Roberts 2020). Opera companies have engaged in these digital projects to keep busy, and also keep in touch with their audiences while having to accept those reduced income streams during this period. Once we reach a "new normal" there will, of course, be a return to face-the-face performances again, while some of the experiences gained during the enforced restriction to the digital realm are certain to stay with us, informing both productions for audiences in theatres as well as in front of screens (INO's plans for 2021/22 include filmed performances, productions mixing live singing with a pre-recorded orchestra and a "virtual reality community opera"). These will certainly include our expanded understanding of use of voices on the basis of pieces like the *20 Shots*.

20 Shots of Opera is a project utilizing the advanced possibilities of our digital age regarding both production and reception. They are not just "operas as music videos" as classified by Jarmalavičiūtė; some of them also fall into her categories "opera as animation", "opera as trance", and "pandemic opera." As pointed out at the beginning, most trends we can observe regarding the digital conception, production and dissemination of music theatre during the pandemic are not new but intensify and develop what has already been experimented with before. In their broad range of topics, styles and directorial concepts the *20 Shots* represent an interesting cross section of how music theatre can productively react to the challenge posed by Covid-19. The *20 Shots* engage with the totality of the human condition as we experience it today – age-old issues around love and death as well as more recent challenges posed by digital technology, environmental problems and Covid-19. Is the whole of the *20 Shots* more than the sum of its parts? Yes and no: Yes with regard to this broad engagement with today's human condition (and also the general

overview it offers over contemporary Irish composition), no as there is no dramatic or aesthetic concept that binds the pieces together and determines, for example, the order in which they are presented. Operas like the *20 Shots* let us discover new modes of operatic materiality, as well as a new relationship between human needs and experiences on the one hand and the non-human agency of our digital tools on the other. As Christopher Morris points out, we are perceiving these works through the fifth wall of digital mediation (Morris 2019, 88). Our look at the different types of embodied and disembodied voices as well as the degrees of liveness in these pieces demonstrate that Morris is right when stating that music theatre of this type is "instructive and exemplary in ways that have wider currency for the study of performance, the role of materiality in performance, and the limits of the human" (Morris 2019, 93).

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