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# University of Southampton

## Abstract

Faculty of Humanities

Music department

Doctor of Philosophy

How to do Things With Sounds: New Music as Political Action

By Uri Agnon

New music is becoming increasingly engaged with political themes. Musicians are searching for ways to tackle, or comment on, capitalism, the climate crisis, institutional racism and police brutality, or gender inequality, to name some examples. However, the theorisation of how pieces affect politics remains underdeveloped. The discourse around such works often oscillates between complete dismissal on the one hand, and, on the other, uncritical acclaim. The first argues that politically engaged pieces are only ‘preaching to the choir’ or ‘on the nose’, while the second labels any engagement with politics as brave, radical and successful. This research is an intervention into both the practice of political composition and the theoretical frameworks used to analyse it.

Consisting of a portfolio of 9 pieces across multiple idioms and political contexts and a theoretical commentary, this practice-based PhD research explores the practical and theoretical challenges that face contemporary politically engaged new music, and the tactics and strategies employed to overcome them. It looks at how pieces attempt to provoke thought, evoke critique, and support change, all while considering how to evaluate both stakes and impacts. The pieces include works written for the concert hall, gallery, and stage, as well as pieces of music that were composed in activist settings for direct actions and acts of civil disobedience. This PhD examines how pieces in this field engage with theme, process, and their audience; what can be gained from considering the cross-relations between new music and activism; and what techniques, practices and tactics are, or can be, employed by practitioners, and to what ends. Resonating beyond the limits of new music, this research asks more broadly: in our time of extreme political and environmental upheaval, what role can art play in affecting change?



University of Southampton

Faculty of Humanities  
Music department

**How to do Things With Sounds: New Music as Political Action**

Volume 1 of 10

By

Uri Agnon

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2024



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## List of recordings

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Concept, direction, and music by Uri Agnon  
Conductor: Lily Solomonov  
Piano: Amit Biton  
The Choir: Shira Z. Carmel, Tamar Cohen, Yael Schreiber, Michal Tamari and Lily Solomonov  
Videography and video editing: Oren Feld  
Duration: loop of 13 minutes  
Commissioned by and presented at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv.
  - a. Audio recording (music)
  - b. Screen 1 video
  - c. Screen 2 video
  - d. Screen 3 video
2. *I Hate Eggplant* (2021), for clarinet, cello, keyboard and electric guitar  
Workshopped by Plus Minus Ensemble: Pete Furniss (clarinet), Alice Purton (cello), Mark Knoop (keyboard), Steve Smith (electric guitar), Peter Falconer (pre recorded voice)  
Duration: 9 minutes  
Audio recording
3. *What Can I Do* (2021), for clarinets, accordion and electronics  
Workshopped by Zöllner-Roche Duo at the University of Southampton (online)  
Performed by Zöllner-Roche, IKLECTIK, London  
With voice-over by James Oldham, Noa Haran and Uri Agnon  
Duration: 6 minutes  
Audio recording (from workshop)
4. *Put Your Hands Together [for late capitalism]* (2021), for two pianists and a screen  
Commissioned & performed by Yshani Perinpanayagam & Katherine Tinker, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge  
Duration: 10 minutes  
Video documentation from a workshop on the piece at Turner Sims.
5. *Or Never* (2022), for orchestra  
Performed by Southampton Symphony Orchestra, Thornden Hall, Chandler's Ford  
Conductor: Matthew Hardy  
Duration: 9 minutes

Audio recording with the video projection overlaid.

Short trailer

Videography Katie Power

6. *Workers' Union (gig economy version)* (2022), for solo percussion and electronics

Duration: 6 minutes

Percussion: Eugene Ughetti

Video documentation of the workshop on the piece at Turner Sims

7. *BP Must Fall* (2020), for a mass of protester-singers

Duration: three days

Protest Performance piece at the British Museum

Piece by activist group BP or not BP?

Six minute video montage from the occupation

8. *Nero* (2021), for three violins, a choir, and electronics

Duration: flexible

Protest performance at the British Museum

Piece by activist group BP or not BP?

Audio excerpt

9. *It should be in the hands* (2022), for two soloists and a choir

Duration: 2-5 minutes

Protest performance at the British Museum, sung by Molly Lynch and Analise Dias

Piece by activist group BP or not BP?

Video documentation of song

Video montage from the action

## Acknowledgments

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Finally, thanks to my family for their support, council, and love and thank you Noam Yadin Evron for more than I can ever write.

## Academic Thesis: Declaration Of Authorship

I, .....Uri Agnon..... [please print name]

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

[title of thesis] .....How To Do Things With Sounds - New Music as Political Action

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as: [please list references below]:

Agnon, Uri. "On Political Audiences: An Argument in Favour of Preaching to the Choir." *Tempo* 75, no. 296 (2021): 57-70.

Signed: .....

Date: .....

## Introduction

On 1 May 2023 I drummed on a picket line with striking nurses in central London. The occasion of May Day, along with the largest UK union movement in the twenty-first century, called for high energies and a large group of drummers joined the picket. I had plans of attending a concert of Bernhard Lang's music that evening, so after the protest I crossed London by foot on my way to the venue. Walking with a snare-drum often brings interesting interactions with strangers and at one point a man approached me and asked if I was a musician. I said yes. He pointed at the drum and asked, "but is it for protests or for music?" "Both", I replied. He didn't like this reply and asked again, "what do you do, music or protests?" I said that one could do both, and he disagreed. "I'm a musician," he told me "so I never in my life go to a protest, I make music for me, not for anything else".

In this exchange, the man articulated a commonly held view that music and political engagement are inherently at odds. This widespread position is found in the writings of Rousseau,<sup>1</sup> Gautier,<sup>2</sup> Schopenhauer,<sup>3</sup> Adorno,<sup>4</sup> and many others, it is spoken in rehearsal rooms, voiced in reviews, and ranted on social media. This research challenges this view and the various forms it takes from 'art pour l'art' to Marxist ideas of what radical art is. Broadly, the argument positions art and political engagement as mutually exclusive: politics being seen as practical, utilitarian, direct; and art as abstract, open-ended, ambiguous. It is tempting to dismiss positions that detach 'art' and the 'world' as old-fashioned, or elitist, yet I believe we must engage with them as they remain deeply ingrained within the cultural discourse, appearing in both conservative and progressive accounts of what art does. They offer

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: A letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre*, translated by Allan Bloom, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Schaffer sees Gautier as the person who was "more than any other single individual, directly responsible for the formulation and the practice of the idea of "l'art pour l'art". John Wilcox does not disagree that Gautier embodies the notion of "l'art pour l'art", but traces the phrase back to a 1804 text by Benjamin Constant, and argues that the idea was born of a misunderstanding of Kantian aesthetics philosophy. I did not include Kant in this list of theorists, but his theories will also be contended with in the first three chapters. Aaron Schaffer, "Théophile Gautier and "L'Art Pour L'Art", "The Sewanee Review 36, no. 4 (1928): 405-6. John Wilcox, "The Beginnings of L'art pour L'art." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 11, no. 4 (1953): 360-377.

<sup>3</sup> According to Schopenhauer art should not deal with any 'concept' that is 'exterior' to it. This notion is explored in Chapter Two. See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will And Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane, and J. Kemp, (Project Gutenberg: 2011), 310-311. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38427/38427-pdf.pdf> (accessed 24/7/2023).

<sup>4</sup> Adorno is a repeating figure in this research. His critiques of politically engaged art can be found, for example, in Theodor Adorno, 'On Commitment', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Francis McDonagh ed. Frederic Jameson (London: Verso, 2007 [1961]), p. 185; Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum Books, 1997).

meaningful challenges to contend with. Rather than attempting to rebut these positions, this research takes them as a point of departure, looking at the tactics and strategies that pieces of politically engaged new music employ to navigate the tension, perceived or actual, between making music and making change.

The PhD consists of a portfolio of nine pieces and a textual commentary. The commentary places these works within a larger artistic network, using both my own compositions and the work of others as case studies for theoretical exploration. These politically engaged pieces were created in a diverse range of artistic and political contexts: concert hall works; music theatre pieces; a concept album; gallery installations, and protest-performances. The commentary is organised thematically, with each chapter investigating a distinct theoretical aspect and focusing on a different junction of music and politics. In each chapter I explore the theoretical questions at play in relation to my own work and pieces by composers such as Chaya Czernowin, Johannes Kreidler, Pamela Z, Soosan Lolavar, Stefan Prins, Sarah Nicolls, and Mary Kouyoumdjian.

### Slippery Terms

The focus of this research is ‘politically engaged new music’, a label that combines two unstable terms and is seen in this research as a cluster of ideas, techniques, practices, contexts and tactics rather than as a defined category. In the following paragraphs I unpack the ways the terms ‘political’ and ‘new music’ are used in this research and describe how they interact in the research’s organising labels ‘politically engaged new music’ and ‘activist new music’. In doing so I will suggest a working understanding of what these terms mean, at least in the context of this research.

I use ‘politics’ to mean complex networks of power relations, actions and positions that go beyond the spectacle of parliament, and that surpasses any attempted division between ‘private’ and ‘public’.<sup>5</sup> As Leftwich emphasises, politics are involved “at every level and in every sphere” of society and inform every setting from trade unions to families to bus queues.<sup>6</sup> The political manifests in interpersonal, economic, cultural and discursive concerns as well as in issues relating to governments, parties, laws and rights. Following Mouffe, this

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<sup>5</sup> Adrian Leftwich, “On The Politics of Politics”, in *What is Politics*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher Limited, 1984), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Adrian Leftwich, *Redefining Politics*, (New York: Methuen, 1983), 11-12.

research frames the political as “the expression of a particular structure of power relations.”<sup>7</sup> This fits also with Hay’s emphasis on *choice* being crucial for an understanding of politics, a situation without choice cannot be considered political.<sup>8</sup> These structures of power are ‘particular’ in the sense that they are not the product of the deterministic unfolding of a singular logic (by law of God, market forces or class struggle), but rather a specific order that has alternatives within reach, and that is ratified by means of power. The element of choice does not have to be overt,<sup>9</sup> and in fact a key feature of power is its ability to render choice invisible. Power therefore is not seen as functioning always in a single manner; rather power is understood in Foucauldian terms as always in flux, and irreducible to a singular form (such as State Authority, or Materialism).<sup>10</sup> As Levine puts it, the understanding that “no single form dominates or organizes all of the others” is crucial for “thinking strategically about how best to deploy multiple forms for political ends”.<sup>11</sup> I follow Lukes in seeing power as operating in covert ways, not simply forcing one alternative over another, but limiting the scope of decision altogether, and structuring the fields within which one can discuss choice and its lack.<sup>12</sup> I suggest that one of the challenges that politically engaged art is faced with is that a work’s reading is already shaped by political perceptions that reinforce the system’s bias, and pieces can then end up fortifying the very systems they mean to critique. I term this challenge as ‘status-quo readings’ (Chapter Three). Power in Lukes’s view is inflicted by the powerful on the powerless (though not in individualistic choices but through systemic and collective patterns of behaviour),<sup>13</sup> and I take Foucault’s position which conceives power as operating, unevenly and unjustly, on all subjects of a system.<sup>14</sup> Power, Foucault writes, “is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations.”<sup>15</sup> This informs the way I understand Israeli resistance to Israeli Apartheid, as well as climate activism in the Global North, for example. The works discussed in this commentary engage with a wide array of unjust power relations such as capitalism, imperialism, racism. While there are strong links between these ‘isms’, and therefore between the injustices that the

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<sup>7</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Art and democracy: Art as an agonistic intervention in public space,” *Open* 14 (2008): 6-15.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 66-67.

<sup>9</sup> Lukes, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is Critique,” trans. Lysa Hoschroth, in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, (Los Angeles: SEMIOTEXT(E), 2007), 41 - 81.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole Rhythm Hierarchy, Network*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Steve Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005 [1974]), 25-28.

<sup>13</sup> Lukes, *Power*, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pelican Books, 1981), 94-96.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 94.

pieces engage with, the struggles are also understood as specific, each with its own complex power imbalances and practices of subjection.

While I hope that some of the discussions in this commentary can be relevant to other artforms, its remit is limited to pieces of ‘new music’, another slippery term. Carl Dahlhaus argued that defining ‘new music’ is always “precarious” and Linda Dusman has described new music as “phantasmic” and undefinable.<sup>16</sup> There is not a single practice, genre, style or context that describes all new music works. In fact, pieces in this field deliberately disturb such boundaries and challenge categorisation.<sup>17</sup> ‘New music’ can refer to a loosely related set of music-making practices that engage in a deliberate and experimental way with a genealogy of Western classical music. This ‘engagement’ is an oscillation between maintaining and contesting traditions that are never stable; both adjusting and deliberately attempting to break free of them. Some of the music I explore is even further removed from Western classical music, engaging with the break-from-tradition initiated by composers such as John Cage and Pauline Oliveros more than with the tradition itself. Some of the works are heavily influenced by other idioms and approaches to music making; my own musical background has been just as devoted to rock, punk, jazz and musical theatre, as it has to classical music. Still I find the term ‘new music’ useful if it is taken as a flexible, ‘family resemblance’ kind of definition that acknowledges certain aspects that feature through the field. Among these features are musical notation; certain instruments and playing techniques; the concert hall ritual; the concepts of a ‘piece’, ‘composer’, ‘performers’ and ‘the audience’; institutions such as venues, festivals, broadcasters and academies; infrastructures that bring work into being such as funding bodies and residencies; the label of ‘high art’ and perceptions of complexity, exclusivity and elitism. The category born of this definition is purposefully neither well-defined nor insular, and I am not interested in attempting to delineate it. Different configurations of these features appear in different ratios in each of the pieces discussed in this research and if some of the examples discussed are perceived by readers as residing outside of new music’s remits, this does not, I believe, impact the main arguments.

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<sup>16</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, “New Music as Historical Category,” in *Schoenberg and the New Music*, trans. by Puffett, Derrick and Clayton, Alfred (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [1964]), 2. Linda Dusman “Unheard-of: Music as Performance and the Reception of the New”, *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 2 (1994): 136.

<sup>17</sup> For a critique of the notion of ‘boundary breaking’ works of new music see Marianna Ritchev, “New Music in a Borderless World”, in *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis: Expanding Approaches*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 335-346.

Most of the case studies and examples have been composed in the last three decades. New music's attempts to impact the 'political' are not exclusive to this period by any means and the work of prominent predecessors such as Laurie Anderson,<sup>18</sup> Louis Andriessen,<sup>19</sup> Julius Eastman,<sup>20</sup> Mauricio Kagel,<sup>21</sup> Luigi Nono,<sup>22</sup> Max Roach,<sup>23</sup> and Frederic Rzewski<sup>24</sup> will often echo in the background and at times be brought into the discussion. Nonetheless, as Tim Rutherford-Johnson argues, political, technological, and aesthetic changes, meaningfully differentiate the art of the last three decades, from that of the post-World War II period.<sup>25</sup> Cultural theories of postmodernism (and post-postmodernism), especially the work of Jameson<sup>26</sup> and Ngai<sup>27</sup> are therefore applicable in this research. In fact, almost all the pieces discussed in this research have been composed after November 2001, in a post 9/11 world-order dominated by 'the war on terror'. They mostly date to the last fifteen years, after the 2007-8 Financial Crash, and the rise of social media, and in the mass movement world of

<sup>18</sup>Political positions can be found in Anderson's music starting from her early works, and one can also argue that there is a political element to her postmodern approach to music, collapsing the distance between so-called 'high' and 'low' art. As Auslander and Hood point out, however, her most politically explicit artmaking started in 1989, fitting with the larger historical mapping in this PhD. I have elsewhere critiqued her more recent work, in a review of a 2018 concert in Jerusalem. See Auslander, Philip. *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 1; Woodrow B. Hood, "Laurie Anderson and the Politics of Performance." *Postmodern Culture* 4, no. 3 (1994); Uri Agnon, "Laurie Anderson Screams in Jerusalem, but Has Nothing to Say About Gaza", *Mondoweiss*, June 13, 2018, <https://mondoweiss.net/2018/06/anderson-screams-jerusalem/> (accessed 30/06/2023).

<sup>19</sup> Andriessen's *Workers' Union* (1975) is explored in this project both theoretically and through a piece that interacts with it. For more about the political aspects of the music of Andriessen, as well as his contemporaries see Robert Adlington, *Composing Dissent: Avant-garde Music in 1960s Amsterdam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Eastman was political both in his own compositions and in his performances of the music of other people, a fact that was not always seen approvingly by other composers, such as Cage. See Packer, Renée Levine, and Mary Jane Leach, eds. *Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music*. Vol. 129. (New York: Boydell & Brewer, 2015); Isaac Jean-Francois, "Julius Eastman: The Sonority of Blackness Otherwise", *Current Musicology*, 106 (2020): 9-35; G Douglas Barrett, "The Limits of Performing Cage: Ultra-red's SILENT|LISTEN." *Postmodern Culture* 23, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>21</sup> Most notably *Staatstheater* (1970). See Björn Heile, *The Music of Mauricio Kagel*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Fox, Christopher, "Kagel and I" *The Musical Times*, 148, No. 1900 (2007), 103-108; Bethany Younge, "SEEING AND HEARING DISABILITY IN MAURICIO KAGEL'S REPERTOIRE FROM STAATSTHEATER." *Tempo* 75, no. 296 (2021): 7-20.

<sup>22</sup> Mostly in his "middle period" of the 1960s and 1970s. See Martin Iddon, "Prometeo: tragedia dell'ascolto by Luigi Nono." *Notes* 79, no. 3 (2023): 443; Michael Gorodecki, "Strands in 20th-Century Italian Music: 1. Luigi Nono: A History of Belief." *The Musical Times* 133, no. 1787 (1992): 10-17; Martin Iddon, *New Music at Darmstadt: Nono, Stockhausen, Cage, and Boulez* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Especially in *We Insiste! Freedom Now Suite* (1960), see George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 37-38. Bridget R. Cooks and Graham Eng-Wilmot. "Sound of the Break: Jazz and the Failures of Emancipation." *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2016): 315-340.

<sup>24</sup> In pieces such as *Coming Together* (1971), *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* (1975), and many others. His writing on politics and music will be explored in Chapter Four. See Fredric Rzewski, 'Little Bangs: A Nihilist Theory of Improvisation'. *Current Musicology*, 67 (1999), 377-386.

<sup>25</sup> Tim Rutherford-Johnson, *Music after the fall: Modern composition and culture since 1989* (University of California Press, 2019), 1-23.

<sup>26</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism* (Duke university press, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion. The focus on politically engaged music has led the research to gravitate away from ‘purely’ instrumental music and toward pieces that employ devices such as concept, text, theatre, and video to frame their audience’s experience around a political issue.

The focus of my research is not on how power regulates musical pieces, but rather on musical attempts to impact power relations.<sup>28</sup> I take a broad view of politics and a Butlerian approach to agency, seeing it not as pure autonomy but as ways of reinforcing/subverting power relations that are always already at play.<sup>29</sup> The meanings, and therefore consequences, of our actions are constructed through contexts that predate them,<sup>30</sup> and every choice - what we wear, what we compose, what we vote, when we riot - happens in relation to social norms, which are by definition political.<sup>31</sup> These contexts are never “fully determined in advance” and possibilities always remain for an action (in the widest sense) “to take on a non-ordinary meaning, to function in contexts where it has not belonged”<sup>32</sup> This can afford political readings of any piece, since art always exists within, and interacts with, social norms. However, as Hay argues, even if we can see almost anything as political, it is still possible to discuss subjects as more and less politicised.<sup>33</sup> The focus of this research is pieces in which intervening in politics is a central feature. Mouffe opposes the term ‘political art’, arguing that once we see all artworks as political, the label is made redundant.<sup>34</sup> She suggests *critical* art in its stead, and defines it as art that “contributes to questioning hegemony”<sup>35</sup> Oppressive ideology makes us perceive systems of power as ‘natural’ or unchangeable, and art has the capacity to make the audience see these systems anew. It exposes the fact that they are

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<sup>28</sup> As John Street points out, it is impossible to fully distinguish between the two, as culture is neither purely the cause nor the effect of politics. There are still, however, pieces more and less invested in their relationship to politics, as I discuss below. John Street, *Politics and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>29</sup> Alongside Butlerian agency I draw on Ahmad’s closely related notion of ‘Queer Use’, and, Gell’s position on art and agency is also relevant to this discussion. See Judith Butler, “Critically Queer” in *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Judith Butler, *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*, (New York: Routledge, 1997); Judith Butler, *Giving An Account Of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); Judith Butler, “Performative agency,” *Journal of cultural economy* 3, no. 2 (2010): 147-161; Sara Ahmed *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*, (Durham USA, Duke University Press, 2019); Alfred Gell *Art and agency: an anthropological theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 160.

<sup>31</sup> Marx already expressed the idea that we create our “own history” not as we please but under “circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past”. Butler explores what this means for our political agency at every turn, from how we construct our gender, to how we speak as an “I”. Karl Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, Selected Works* vol 1, 5th edition (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1962), 247. Butler, *Giving an Account*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 161

<sup>33</sup> Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, 79-82.

<sup>34</sup> Mouffe, “Art and Democracy”, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Mouffe, “Art and Democracy”, 9.

artificial, created by people, and therefore subject to change. This echoes the positions of Brecht<sup>36</sup> and Benjamin,<sup>37</sup> as well as more recent theorists who argue for an art that ‘challenges’ its audience, such as Jennie Gottchalk in her description of experimental music:

“In experimental music, real change occurs in the realm of human thought and experience. The experimentalist is not trying to change the musical world, but to change the thinking of one or more listeners during – and possibly after – the performance.”<sup>38</sup>

While the notion of critical art will play a significant role in this research, I argue for a more expansive approach and will use the expression ‘politically engaged’ music.<sup>39</sup> The framework of critical art foregrounds that which is made apparent through art, therefore focusing on art’s cognitive aspects; the insights it affords. However, as Street, Inthorn, and Scott argue, there is more to cultural artefacts than what they can be seen as ‘telling’ us.<sup>40</sup> By ‘politically engaged’ I mean works that attempt to impact the political world through provoking or inspiring audiences and participants, to think, feel and act differently; as well as works that interact with political situations more directly (as in civil disobedience and direct action pieces). This research, therefore, does not only look at how artworks attempt to change their audiences’ minds by offering critique, but also at how they attempt to impact audiences’ political behaviours; seeing political participation “not only [as] a cognitive capacity, but also [as] a cultural practice”, as van Zoonen puts it (following Schudson).<sup>41</sup> The first chapters are dedicated to artistic tactics that are used to highlight and challenge the ideological forms of meaning-making, and here I will draw on both Marxist and Foucauldian notions of critique. But seeing as these do not exhaust the full range of possibilities artists have at their disposal, chapters four and five look at ways that are not reliant on ‘exposing’ the contradictions within hegemonic discourse. While meaning-making is a crucial element in this research, the

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<sup>36</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, (London: Verso, 1998), 41

<sup>37</sup> Bainard Cowan, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory.” *New German Critique*, no. 22 (1981), 110.

<sup>38</sup> These kinds of art-as-intellectual-labour positions tie into discussions of avant-garde art more broadly as in Umberto Eco’s discussion of the ‘open work’ as well as perspectives on the ‘active’ spectator as proposed by Brecht and complicated by Rancière. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* trans. Anna Cancogni (Oxford: Hutchinson Radius, 1989 [1962]); Jacques Rancière, *The emancipated spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso Books, 2021).

<sup>39</sup> As Street Inthorn and Scott suggest, art does not have to be politically explicit in order to have an impact on the political engagement of its audience. However I am here not looking directly at the political engagement of the audience, but that of the piece. The two can be examined separately even though a piece may very well be politically engaged because of how it interacts with an audience, and the audiences’ political engagement could be the product of explicit attempts by the piece. See John Street, Sanna Inthorn, and Martin Scott, “Playing at politics? Popular culture as political engagement.” *Parliamentary Affairs* 65, no. 2 (2012): 338-358

<sup>40</sup> John Street, Sanna Inthorn, and Martin Scott. “Playing at politics?”, 342.

<sup>41</sup> Liesbet van Zoonen, “Audience reactions to Hollywood politics,” *Media, Culture & Society* 29, no. 4 (2007): 533; Michael Schudson, “Politics as cultural practice,” *Political Communication* 18, no. 4 (2001): 421-431; See also Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2005).

relations between meaning and action are constantly open to exploration, and critique is seen as one tool in the toolbox of politically engaged music.

This toolbox includes artistic practices that are inspired by or related to activist tactics and practices (e.g., civil disobedience, direct action), and a recurring theme in this research is the attempt to move beyond the ‘political’ and engage with ‘activism’. Critiquing a system is not necessarily the same thing as trying to change it, not every kind of dissatisfaction is equally geared towards improvement, and not every attempt at change is equally tactical in its understanding of how change might happen. I suggest that all art is political; some political art is politically engaged; and some politically engaged art draws on activist tools and strategies. For example, influencing the audience’s opinions on politics is often the key lens used to discuss the way politically engaged art functions, but activist thought highlights politics not as a set of opinions but as a power struggle and suggests actions that are not only aimed at ‘changing minds’.<sup>42</sup> Pieces of art can follow suit and think of ways to achieve political aims that are not reliant on public opinion. Finally, pieces can be said to engage with activism when they relate to concrete activist actions. Some of the pieces discussed here are completely submerged in activist campaigns, being a part of a larger strategy or set of tools. Others highlight actions and choices that people can take in attempting to create change, and try not only to change audience/participants ideas but also their behaviour.

Again, I assert that these are not well-defined categories. I use Levine’s framework of *affordance* and believe that rather than asking which piece of political art is politically engaged, we can look at what can be *afforded* to a piece from examining its political engagement, and what can be *afforded* from reading it through activist theory and practice.<sup>43</sup> This also allows the pieces to not be considered *only* as political, politically engaged or activist.<sup>44</sup> While I will show how the political and aesthetic are intertwined, it is obvious that some of the considerations that go into making musical choices can be read in non-tactical terms. There are other lenses to approach these works that will afford different insight.

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<sup>42</sup> Attempts to create political change through other means are termed ‘direct action’ in activist thought. See for example Voltairine De Cleyre, *Direct action*, Online at The Anarchist Library (1912) <https://theadarchistlibrary.org/library/voltairine-de-cleyre-direct-action> visited 23/06/2023; David Graeber, *Direct action: An ethnography* (London: AK press, 2009); and Randy Shaw, *The Activist’s Handbook: Winning Social Change in the 21st Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013 [2nd Edition]), 185.

<sup>43</sup> Levine, *Forms* 6-15

<sup>44</sup> Levine, 11.

The label ‘politically engaged new music’ is not seen as a definite category of pieces but as a lens through which we can look at art. There are no clear boundaries between pieces that the label applies to, nor is there an exclusive definition. However, applying ‘politically engaged new music’ as a lens is useful in unpacking pieces of art, understanding how they function and why, and exploring alternative practices that can be useful in attempting to achieve similar goals. The lens would be more telling for a piece by some composers than others; it might seem more relevant for an opera about Israeli-Palestinian relations than for a string trio, but this is a spectrum. Framing ‘politically engaged new music’ as a lens rather than a category allows me to employ it in discussions of works that may seem removed from the label, namely the protest performances I examine and which fall outside the scene’s boundaries (if such exist) but nonetheless espouse musical experimentation with political goals.

### Literature Review

This creative research sits on the intersection of several fields and it is informed by academic scholarship and new music and activist practice. The musical works in the portfolio are in conversation with contemporary attitudes in the new music field, such as New Discipline, multidisciplinarity, and lecture-pieces, and the research draws on contemporary explorations of musical language, form, and the use of technology, to name a few.<sup>45</sup> It is furthermore inspired by activist actions and tactics, and by academic research in the fields of musicology, art theory, philosophy and cultural studies. As this is a creative, practice-led research, my goal here is not to exhaust the full breadth of sources that can inform the conversation, but to demarcate some of the histories and theories that will come into play in greater detail in the following chapters. The research was shaped by conversations in activist Signal groups and organising meetings, discussions in rehearsal rooms and concert venues, and peer-reviewed scholarship.

The ‘new musicology’ turn in the late 1980s placed political aspects of music at the centre of musicological scholarship.<sup>46</sup> Scholars such as Susan McClary, Joseph Kerman, Rose Rosengard Subotnik, Richard Taruskin and others, suggested understanding music not only in

<sup>45</sup> See for example Jennifer Walshe, “The New Discipline” *Borealis Festival 2016*. Available online at <http://milker.org/the-new-discipline/> (accessed 30/06/2023); Celeste Oram, “Darmstadt’s New Wave Modernism,” *Tempo* 69, no. 271 (2015): 37-65.

<sup>46</sup> Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (California: University of California Press, 2000), 2.

‘purely musical’ terms, but as products of societies.<sup>47</sup> Their reading is political in that they refuse to see music as naturally evolving, but rather as situated in, both reflecting and impacting, human-made circumstances.<sup>48</sup> These scholars are inspired by, yet differ from, the Frankfurt School theories about music and society. They are different in that they draw on more varied musical genres, are inspired by other political projects in addition to Marxism (such as feminism and post-structuralism), and formulate flexible relationships between music and culture.<sup>49</sup> The first wave of New Musicology has been critiqued both by scholars who wish to look at music only in ‘musical’ terms, and by scholars who argue that it underestimated the role of capitalism.<sup>50</sup> However, these culturally informed readings of music have had wide reaching effects,<sup>51</sup> and the practice of looking at music, culture, society as interlinked is common practice today. Scholars have continued in this direction and recent contributions to this theory include Ruth HaCohen and Yaron Ezrahi’s, *Composing Power, Singing Freedom: Overt and Covert Links Between Music and Politics in the West*, which further investigates the co-relations between politics and music as they unfolded over the last few centuries in Europe, and John Street’s *Music and Politics* which argues that music and politics “are not separate entities whose worlds collide only occasionally but rather are extensions of each other”.<sup>52</sup> Books such as Marianna Ritchey’s *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era* are especially relevant for this research since they investigate new music (or contemporary classical music). In this book Ritchey shows the profound ways in which contemporary classical music in the USA is shaped by neoliberalism, arguing that even musicians that identify as ‘progressives’ or ‘leftists’ “often passionately espouse brutal right-wing ideas without realizing that they are doing so”.<sup>53</sup>

While examining the political aspects of music is common practice, the research of explicitly political new music is scant. Research of the explicitly political appears in other artforms and

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<sup>47</sup> See for example Robbert Leppert and Susan McClary (eds.), *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>48</sup> McClary, *Conventional wisdom*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> See for example Frederic Jameson, Forward to *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xi-xiii.

<sup>50</sup> Taylor for example criticises what he sees as the theorisation of “the supposed effects of capitalism without attending to causes”. Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: a History of the Present* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>51</sup> Marianna Ritchey, *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 14.

<sup>52</sup> HaCohen Ruth, and Yaron Ezrahi, *Composing Power, Singing Freedom: Overt and Covert Links Between Music and Politics in the West*, (Jerusalem: Van Leer Jerusalem and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2017); John Street, *Music and Politics*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>53</sup> Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 18.

in other genres of music, but in new music it is rare.<sup>54</sup> One explanation for this deficit may be the overbearing shadow of political philosopher and musicologist Theodore Adorno. Adorno's impact on both the theory and practice of new music has been enormous, and as an influential leftist thinker his prominence in critical spheres is even more pronounced. While some of Adorno's views, most notably about jazz, have been largely rejected by present day musicology, in other areas his impact is still strong.<sup>55</sup> In arguments that will be unpacked in this research, Adorno rejected any explicit attempt at political engagement in art, arguing that such art is 'preaching to the converted', or even worse, not valid art at all.<sup>56</sup> According to Adorno, art's power to resist capitalism is embedded in its non-utilitarian nature, and therefore art that is explicitly political in its references is paradoxically *less* politically significant than 'autonomous' art.<sup>57</sup>

Despite this resounding criticism of politically explicit new music, it still exists, and a handful of scholars write on such pieces. Politically engaged new music of the 1960s has seen relatively more theorisation, for example Robert Adlington's *Composing Dissent*,<sup>58</sup> or Sumanth Gopinath's account of *Come Out* (1966),<sup>59</sup> but more contemporary politically engaged pieces are rarely theorised as political pieces. The work that has been done towards that end has been influential for this research. Lauren Redhead has written about radical new music pieces, arguing that they show "the ways that avant-garde art may make the components of the everyday precarious, may animate those materials discarded by capitalism, and may challenge institutions from outside their borders."<sup>60</sup> Martin Iddon has analysed several politically engaged new music pieces, including works that are important for this research, such as Johannes Kridelr's *Fremdarbeit* (2009) and Chaya Czernowin's *Adama*

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<sup>54</sup> There are countless publications about politically engaged popular music, Afro-diasporic music and many other genres and contexts. See for example: Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social movements and the sound of solidarity in the African diaspora* (New York: NYU Press, 2014); Serge Denisoff, 'Protest Songs: Those of the Top Forty and Those of the Street', *American Quarterly*, 22 no 4 (1970), pp. 807-823.

<sup>55</sup> While, as Taylor argues, Adorno's elitist tastes have drawn many criticisms, his thought nonetheless shapes many of the critical approaches to music, and he is still one of the most influential and oft-cited writers on the relations between music and politics. Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: a History of the Present* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), 8.

<sup>56</sup> See discussions of these positions in chapters five and two respectively.

<sup>57</sup> Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum Books, 1997), 43; Jacques Rancière, "The Paradoxes of Political Art," in *Dissensus - on politics and esthetics*, trans. Steven Corocan (London: Continuum, 2010), 134-151.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Adlington, *Composing Dissent: Avant-garde Music in 1960s Amsterdam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>59</sup> Sumanth Gopinath, "The problem of the political in Steve Reich's come out," In *Sound Commitments: Avant-garde music and the sixties*, ed. Robert Edlington, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 121-144.

<sup>60</sup> Lauren Redhead, "The avant garde as exform." *Tempo* 72, no. 286 (2018): 16.

(2006).<sup>61</sup> And Marianna Ritchey revisited the question of ‘utility’ in political music within a contemporary setting. Examining diverse examples by radical composers, Ritchey argues for a celebration of the uselessness of art and argues that “Music by its ephemeral nature is not fully commodifiable, not fully available to capitalism’s totalizing project.”<sup>62</sup> Even as such work sometimes engages positively with explicitly political artworks, it is still broadly Adornian, often citing him, and arguing in favour of the ‘autonomous’ aspects of music. In this research, I suggest taking a step further away from Adorno, presenting his theories as one hue within a much larger pallet of possible perspectives on political music. Adorno is still highly influential for this project; his criticisms that political art ‘preaches to the choir’ or that art must be ungraspable in non-artistic language, are taken as challenges and tensions that pieces of music navigate, but never as frameworks to be accepted in full. The goal of this research is to suggest new ways of thinking about, and acting within, the relationship between music, politics, meaning, and action.

Politically engaged art has been more extensively theorised in the visual arts, and the work of Jacques Rancière, Claire Bishop, Chantal Mouffe, Nicholas Bourriaud, and Yates McKee is especially relevant for this study. The first three have all contributed in different ways to the notions of antagonist art and dissensus.<sup>63</sup> These positions see art’s political power as tied to its ability to stand in contrast to hegemonic order, making sense-able that which is made invisible by hegemony (because it is seen as obvious and natural). They are focused on provoking the audience by challenging their positions. Claire Bishop’s use of ‘active spectatorship’, borrowed and developed from Rancière, is especially useful for this research as it animates audience-piece relationships.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, Bourriaud and McKee focus on artworks that are submerged within human relations, supporting communities and facilitating

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<sup>61</sup> Martin Iddon “Outsourcing Progress: On Conceptual Music”, *TEMPO*, 70 275 (2015), 36-49; Martin Iddon, “Giving Adam Voice: Troubling Gender and Identity in WA Mozart’s Zaide and Chaya Czernowin’s Adama,” *Masculinity in Opera: Gender, History, and New Musicology* (2013): 167-193.

<sup>62</sup> Marianna Ritchey, “Resisting Usefulness: Music and the Political Imagination”, *Current Musicology* 108 (2021): 49.

<sup>63</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*; Jacques Rancière, “The monument and Its confidences; or Deleuze and Art’s Capacity of ‘Resistance’”, in *Dissensus - on politics and esthetics*, 176; Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” *October* 2004; (110): 51-79; Claire Bishop, *Artificial hells: Participatory art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso books, 2012); Chantal Mouffe, “Art and democracy: Art as an agonistic intervention in public space.” *Open* 14 (2008): 6-15; For a contrasting perspective see also Jason Miller, “Activism vs. Antagonism: Socially Engaged Art From Bourriaud to Bishop and beyond,” *Field: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism* 3 (2016): 165-183.

<sup>64</sup> Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 18.

activism.<sup>65</sup> ‘Socially engaged art’ is a widespread concept in the contemporary artworld,<sup>66</sup> the term ‘artivism’ has gained grounds in the last decade or so,<sup>67</sup> and books on art and activism,<sup>68</sup> and ‘museum activism’ are being increasingly published.<sup>69</sup> These theories are relevant to discussions of new music, even if they were not initially formed around it, and do not consider it.<sup>70</sup>

In a sense the research project is asking two questions: ‘what can new music learn from activism?’ and ‘how can new music be useful within activism?’. Activist thought and practice have therefore also been an important influence on the work. David Graeber’s anthropological research into radical activism, as well as his work on ‘social creativity’ are explored in Chapter Four, and creative activism and joyful resistance have inspired many of the protest-performances in this portfolio.<sup>71</sup> The influence, however, goes deeper than what is reflected in the bibliography and ideas such as ‘tactical frivolity’ and ‘joyful militancy’ have helped shape my understanding of the relationship between music-making and political change in ways that do not always appear explicitly.<sup>72</sup> Actions by groups such as The Yes Men and Rhythms of Resistance, with their emphasis on experimentation, DIY, and humour,

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<sup>65</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2001); Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (London: Verso, 2017).

<sup>66</sup> Vid Simoniti defines socially engaged art as: “(1) the intended value of the art project is coextensive with its social and political impact, and (2) the methods utilized to produce that impact bear close resemblance to non artistic forms of political and social activism.” Vid Simoniti, “Assessing Socially Engaged Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 76, no. 1 (2018): 72.

<sup>67</sup> See for example Suzanne Nossel, “Introduction: On “artivism” or art’s utility in activism,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2016): 103-105; Dagmar Danko, “Artivism and the spirit of avant-garde art,” *Art and the Challenge of Markets Volume 2: From Commodification of Art to Artistic Critiques of Capitalism* (2018): 235-261.

<sup>68</sup> Steven Henry Madoff, ed. *What about Activism?* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2019).

<sup>69</sup> Robert R Janes, and Richard Sandell, *Museum Activism*. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2019).

<sup>70</sup> Political art theories in recent decades often foreground performance art, which is one of the more political forms of art, and I mostly look at theatrical new music which is deeply invested in exploring the ‘performance’. Even as the traditions and genres of new music and art are separated, the practices themselves have much in common, making these theories all the more relevant to this research.

<sup>71</sup> David Graeber, “Fetishism as Social Creativity: or fetishes are gods in the process of construction”, *Anthropological Theory*, 5, 4, (2005): 407-438.

<sup>72</sup> See for example Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery, *Joyful militancy: Building thriving resistance in toxic times*. (London: AK Press, 2017); Kate Evans, “It’s got to be silver and pink: On the road with Tactical Frivolity.” in *We are Everywhere. The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism*, Notes from Nowhere eds. (London: Verso, 2003): 290-295; Amory Starr, *Global Revolt: A Guide to the Movements Against Globalization* (London: Zed Books, 2005); Graham St John, “Protestival: Global days of action and carnivalized politics in the present.” *Social Movement Studies* 7, no. 2 (2008): 167-190.

have influenced several of the pieces in this portfolio;<sup>73</sup> most clearly but not exclusively the civil disobedience pieces.

The theories discussed above are rarely used in dialogue with one another, or applied to new music criticism.<sup>74</sup> Both the portfolio and this commentary are the fruits of this multi-perspective dialogue and in them I attempt to contribute to a larger discussion on art, politics and activism.

### Method and Structure

*How to do things with sounds* is a practice-led research project where musical pieces function both as the central research-output and as material for a theoretical study. The pieces investigate ways of creating political new music and they are influenced by a wide and diverse set of sources - musical, academic, and activist - and attempt to offer both new insight into existing methods and practices, and new ways of working. This commentary complements the creative investigation by formulating, analysing and evaluating both my own work and the pieces with which I am in conversation.

The musical works are diverse in their artistic and political contexts, presenting a wide array of possibilities. Three pieces have been composed for workshops at the University of Southampton: *I HATE EGGPLANT*, *What Can I Do*, and *Workers' Union (gig economy version)*. These pieces were created in conversation with their performers who gave informal feedback before, during, and after workshops, and they explore the research questions in a controlled environment. I have not included all the workshop pieces composed during this research, and instead focus on three that best comment on the issues at hand.

Three further pieces have been commissioned by performers and venues: '*Absentee' Means-*', was commissioned by the Tel Aviv Museum of arts, *Put Your Hands Together [For Late Capitalism]* was commissioned by Yshani Perinpanayagam and Kathrine Tinker and *Or*

<sup>73</sup> Maria Hynes, Scott Sharpe & Bob Fagan, 'Laughing with the Yes Men: the Politics of Affirmation' *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 21 no. 1,(2007): 107–121; Adam T Kingsmith, "Why so serious? Framing comedies of recognition and repertoires of tactical frivolity within social movements." *Interface: a journal for and about social movements* 8, no. 2 (2016): 286-310.

<sup>74</sup> For example, in the 2023 conference 'Music, Research, Activism' at the University of Helsinki, only a handful of papers were focused on the field, while most focused on other subcultures or on popular musics. See the conference's programme on its website: "Programme", *Helsinki University*, <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/conferences/music-research-and-activism> (accessed 23/06/2023).

*Never* was commissioned by Southampton University Symphony Orchestra. The pieces were commissioned out of an explicit interest in political-musical work and they explore politically engaged music-making within the realities of the new music field; the first is a gallery installation, the second a chamber music-theatre piece, and the last an orchestral work. In unpacking and evaluating these works I am able to draw not only on performer feedback, but also on audience reactions and reviews, and to discuss the environment in which they were created and presented. In terms of language and form, the workshop pieces and the commissioned works all reside, generally, within the same sphere of new music pieces, and they are not differentiated in the commentary. The workshopped pieces continue to have a life outside the university, with *What Can I Do* being performed in London in September 2023, and plans to perform the other two pieces currently developed.

The remaining three pieces, however, are markedly different to the workshopped and commissioned works. These pieces have been co-composed within the activist-artist group *BP or not BP?* (BONB), who protests fossil fuel sponsorships of cultural institutions. The British Museum, as the most central cultural institution to accept funding from BP, has long been a central target. During the years of protesting there the group's political stance has evolved to seeing oil extraction as a form of colonialism, and the messaging has been expanded accordingly. The group initiates creative, eye-catching, protest-performances that are co-devised by its members, who include professional and non-professional artists of multiple artforms. I joined BONB at the beginning of this PhD and have been an active member throughout this research. Alongside other activist responsibilities my role has included leading on the musical aspects of several actions, and three of the works presented in this research were created in this effect. They are protest-pieces that function within the context of an activist movement, and were performed by members of the group, by professional musicians hired by the group, and/or by protesters who joined the actions. While they are undoubtedly different from the other works, they enrich the research considerably by showing how the same concerns are navigated in a decidedly different environment. They are inspired by, and employ, creative tactics developed within new music and discussed in this research. Like any other piece in the portfolio, they experiment in using novel music-making practices to impact political realities.

The commentary combines methods from philosophy, cultural studies, art history, musicology, and practice-led research. Every chapter considers a different aspect of

politically engaged new music by unpacking theoretical questions, analysing case studies and examples by other composers, and interrogating my own pieces to think through the implications of my decisions, extrapolate positions, and suggest new ways of creating politically engaged new music.<sup>75</sup> As I list in greater detail below, the first three chapters examine *meaning* and how it is constructed within politically engaged works, the fourth looks at political implications of some experimental approaches to *process*, and the last turns its focus to the relationship to the *audience*. Therefore the research examines politically engaged art from the triangle of lenses of the *composers*, the *performers*, and the *audiences* (even as these distinctions are disturbed throughout). There are many other meaningful aspects of politically engaged art worthy of exploration; I chose the ones that I believe are most fruitful for analysing tactics and strategies, and that might prove useful for other artists wishing to mobilise their music-making in political ways. The case studies and examples in this research are not exhaustive. I opted toward examples that help stage the questions in the clearest terms, while challenging any simplistic narrative. The case studies represent a variety of styles and genres from diverse artistic movements active today in new music, written by composers from distinct backgrounds. The thesis discusses works by some of the most prominent composers in the field, as well as by emerging composers.

There is no firm boundary between politically engaged pieces and pieces that are political simply because all music is political; and searching for such a border does not seem to me like a productive endeavour. Instead I am interested in *how* art engages with politics, and attempts to change it. Pieces can openly, actively, and explicitly register political themes through titles and programme notes that frame their audience's experience of them; such is the case for example with Krzysztof Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* (1960) or Georg Friedrich Haas' *I Can't Breathe* (2014). Pieces can also register political topics through engaging extant political music, as in Jimi Hendrix's distorted rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner* at Woodstock in 1969. Musical pieces can also be regarded as explicitly political when they express, depict, or provoke thoughts and feelings regarding a political subject matter by incorporating text and narrative; as in Chaya Czernowin's *Adama* (explored in Chapter Two), by utilising recordings as in Mary Kouyoumdjian's *Bombs of Beirut* (explored in Chapter Three), or employing images and videos as in *Generation Kill* by

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<sup>75</sup> Sun terms the use of hypothetical artworks in discussions of existing artworks as 'counterfactual reasoning in art criticism'. She argues that this practice is highly effective in evaluating art. Practice-led research allows to actualise (some of) these artworks, affording a more rigorous comparison. Angela Sun, "Counterfactual Reasoning in Art Criticism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 80, no. 3 (2022): 276-285.

Stefan Prins (explored in Chapter Five). Political positions can also be articulated by the way a piece is organised and how it manages artistic decision making, an idea which has been central for the New York school of composition, Punk, and Bebop and which is discussed in this PhD (explored in Chapter Four).

These routes are explored, unpacked, and critiqued, both in the form of this written commentary and in the musical works within the portfolio. The research, therefore, investigates existing practices of politically engaged new music, extrapolates them, and suggests alternatives influenced by other art-practices and by activist tactics such as civil disobedience and direct action. Together, the creative output and the written scholarship form an incomplete roadmap of possible approaches to applying activist thought in the creation of powerful art, and to using new music as a tool of political struggle.

The portfolio consists of these nine works:

1. *'Absentee' means* - (2020) installation for three-screens, four-speakers, choir and piano.  
Duration: loop of 13 minutes  
Commissioned by and presented at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv.
  
2. *I HATE EGGPLANT* (2021), for clarinet, cello, keyboard and electric guitar  
Duration: 9 minutes  
Workshopped by Plus Minus Ensemble, the University of Southampton.
  
3. *What Can I Do* (2021), for clarinets, accordion and electronics  
Duration: 6 minutes  
Workshopped by Zöllner-Roche Duo at the University of Southampton (online)  
Performed by Zöllner-Roche, IKLECTIK, London
  
4. *Put Your Hands Together [for late capitalism]* (2021), for two pianists and a screen  
Duration: 10 minutes  
Commissioned & performed by Yshani Perinpanayagam & Katherine Tinker, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge  
Workshopped (after premiere) at the University of Southampton
  
5. *Or Never* (2022), for orchestra  
Duration: 9 minutes  
Performed by Southampton Symphony Orchestra, Thornden Hall, Chandler's Ford
  
6. *Workers' Union (gig economy version)* (2022), for solo percussion and electronics  
Duration: 6 minutes  
Workshopped by Eugene Ughetti, The University of Southampton
  
7. *BP Must Fall* (2020), for a mass of protester-singers  
Duration: three days  
Protest Performance piece at the British Museum
  
8. *Nero* (2021), for three violins, a choir, and electronics  
Duration: flexible  
Protest performance at the British Museum
  
9. *It should be in the hands* (2022), for two soloists and a choir  
Duration: 2 minutes  
Protest performance at the British Museum

The first part of this commentary (Chapters One-Three) explores musical attempts at challenging oppressive ideologies through subversive meaning-making. The three chapters unpack the challenge of ‘on-the-nose-ness’ to political new music, considering two paths to overcoming it: allegory and critical composition. Allegory offers a way to create distance between the work and its political meaning, inviting an active readership, and staging political situations as historic and changeable. Critical composition is a term I suggest for the ways of engaging with the specifics of a political matter by subversively using recordings, found-texts, statistics, and other objects that create and manipulate a notion of the ‘real’.

Chapter Four considers ‘indeterminacy’ as a compositional tool for making music that destabilises hierarchical relationships between composers, performers and the audience. I examine and critique theories that position indeterminacy as inherently politically engaged music, and that see it as a metaphor or laboratory for reconfiguring human relations more widely. Towards this end I draw on critiques of ‘socially engaged art’ as radical political engagement, such as Bishop’s argument that “models of democracy in art don’t have an intrinsic relationship to models of democracy in society”.<sup>76</sup> I then investigate when and how indeterminate music can have political meanings that go beyond the metaphorical, building on Lewis’ theorisation of the racialised differences in approaches to improvisation,<sup>77</sup> and looking at examples from jazz, open score composition, and activist interventions.

The final chapter looks at the different ways new music pieces can position themselves in relation to their audience. Using the commonly voiced dismissal of political art as ‘preaching to the choir’ as a springboard, I suggest three approaches to understanding the relationships between pieces, audiences, and political goals. I term the first as ‘expanding the choir’: pieces’ attempt to convince and recruit audiences toward a cause; the second as ‘galvanising the choir’: music that solidifies and unifies like-minded audiences; and the third as ‘activating the choir’: art that creates situations in which spectating a piece becomes a political act of transgression.

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<sup>76</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 279.

<sup>77</sup> George E. Lewis, “Improvised music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological perspectives,” *Black music research journal* (1996): 91-122.



# Chapter One

## On-The-Nose and its Opposites

“If I have a book that understands for me”, Immanuel Kant writes in ‘What Is Enlightenment’, “I need not trouble myself. I need not think”.<sup>78</sup> For Kant, such a book is cowardly and lazy. Even worse, it is a tutelage on its reader’s free mind. While Kant’s remarks are general, the critique of the ‘pre-understood book’ captures a commonly maintained attitude towards art. This position, which rejects art that understands for its reader as un-enlightened, is unmistakably marked by Kant’s era, yet it lives on in contemporary discussions on art and meaning-making. At the heart of the Enlightenment project lies the idea of a rational subject who is free to use its own reason; a subject who is not subjected to any external authority in regard to truth. Not the pope, nor a book, nor a piece of art, should attempt to replace a person’s free use of their reason. An artwork that thinks instead of its reader is an insult and a peril. It threatens the reader’s autonomy and questions their capacity for reason. Two hundred and fifty years later, Kant’s sentiment still has a hold on contemporary discourse.

The first three chapters of this commentary consider how this sentiment affects politically engaged new music. I refer to the contemporary reproof of art that ‘understands for its reader’ as the ‘on the nose’ criticism, and I argue that this offhand dismissal folds within it a rich and complex set of contemporary problematics of meaning-making and aesthetics. ‘On-the-noseness’ is taken here as a challenge and as a lens through which to explore how pieces engage with their themes, how they produce and manage ‘meaning’, and what rhetorical tactics they take. Many political pieces today are careful to tackle political issues in ways that will not be experienced as ‘on the nose’, as ‘spoon feeding’ their audience, or as being ‘heavy handed’. These corporeal metaphors criticise the way the distances between pieces, meaning, and the audience are handled. They reproach artworks for presenting meaning too prescriptively, and thus creating an audience experience that is too restricted. The ‘on the nose’ position holds that these works fail to create an active, rich, aesthetic

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<sup>78</sup> Immanuel Kant “What Is Enlightenment?,” in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, What Is Enlightenment? And A passage From The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 286. The explicit misogyny that is expressed in this text (but not in the quote above) is tied to, but not central for, the critique of universalism that I offer below. For a critique of misogyny and racism in Kant’s work see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Robin May Schott, *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant* (Philadelphia: Penn State Press, 1997).

experience for the reader. The reader is insulted, chained, patronised, and denied their basic right as reader, the right of interpretation. The chapter explores the paths pieces take to create meaning but avoid these infractions.

While on-the-noseness is deeply entrenched within art discourse, there is also something unintuitive about it as a line of reasoning. Surely if a work has meaning, that meaning ought to be accessible. That is the very purpose of ‘meaning’. If it has a statement, that statement must be comprehensible. We would not chastise a mathematical proof for being too easy to grasp, nor would we reproach an interlocutor for communicating effectively. Such reproof seems to stand in contrast to the very idea of meaning-making. Folded within this criticism, therefore, is the implication that art should convey meaning differently to a mathematical theorem. In his *Critique of Pure Judgement*, Kant defines aesthetics as a “representation of the Imagination which occasions much thought, without, however, any definite thought, [...] it consequently cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language”.<sup>79</sup> For Kant intelligibility stands in contrast with the very nature of the aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experiences provoke thoughts, but not the sort that can be grasped by language and reason. Art, according to this logic, should not be a mere representation of thoughts that could otherwise be presented in non-artistic statements. The challenge for artworks, therefore, is not that the meaning is too easily grasped, but that it is graspable at all. As we will see, whether one subscribes to this view or not, it is prevalent, implicitly and explicitly, in positions on art that are much more modern than Kant. Rancière calls this separation of the sensible element out of art the “aesthetic regime of art” and says that it is “a specific characteristic of the thinking implied by the modern regime of art.”<sup>80</sup> Music, because of its abstract properties, is even more susceptible to being contrasted with intelligibility, a notion that has led Vladimir Jankélévitch to name his book *Music and the Ineffable*.<sup>81</sup> If the aesthetic lies at the outskirts of reason, the very idea of art is to venture beyond the compassed, beyond the graspable, the intelligible. Some might argue that a piece which can be reducible to meaning should not be considered as art at all.

On-the-noseness poses a special problem for political art. An artist creating abstract pieces will be less concerned about whether their art is read as they intended than an artist who

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<sup>79</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard, (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 117-8.

<sup>80</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘The Monument and Its Confidences; or Deleuze and Art’s Capacity of ‘Resistance’’, in *Dissensus - On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corocan (London: Continuum, 2010), 172-173.

<sup>81</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

attempts to impact politics out of an ideological position. Political artworks are often inherently linked to legibility and meanings. This is not to argue that the only way art functions politically is by expressing positions, and indeed Chapters Four and Five will look at other formulations of political significance. Nonetheless, the handling of meaning is often crucial for political artworks, and the problematisation of meanings is a challenge to be contended with. Whether a piece presents a concrete position, presents an issue in a new light, or simply raises questions, the handling of meaning will be central to its function. For such a piece to have impact one must be of the belief that thought and action are interlinked, and that meaning can lead to new political possibilities.

The limitation of possible actions is embedded within Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?'. His argument for the importance of freedom of thought is based on the logic of King Frederick II's call for the public to argue as much as they will, and about whatever they will, but to always obey. While freedom of thought is crucial, it should never, according to Kant, turn into freedom of action, or freedom of resistance. Thought and action are framed as two discrete realms. This research attempts to undermine this separation, showing the ways in which thought and actions are entangled, yet one can still see how an over emphasis on the former can eclipse the latter. A position on art that is fixated on the way meaning is handled can easily underestimate the role of artworks' impact on the world. The scope of politically engaged art is certainly limited if it must be contained within Kant's formula, if it must end by echoing this royal Prussian command 'obey'.

There are some interesting and meaningful aspects of 'on-the-noseness' that this chapter will not explore. Firstly, I do not offer a full taxonomy of the distinct positions which are lumped together here under the umbrella term 'on-the-noseness'. There are nuances and differences between these formulations, which at times come from contrasting perspectives, and diverse worldviews. They are, however, united in their reproach of 'passive' readership of direct, singular, graspable meanings in art. In what follows I will follow their links, though surely there is much to be learned from studying their differences too. Secondly, I do not argue for or against 'on the nose' art or 'on-the-noseness' as criticism. The debate on whether art should or should not be 'on-the-nose' is left out of this study. Instead, this chapter looks at the ways politically engaged new music compositions manage the tension between contemporary, Enlightenment-infused notion of the artwork and their goal to say something meaningful about the world.

I first examine some of the history of the ‘on the nose’ position, looking at how it takes and changes shape from mid-twentieth century writers to contemporary theorists. I then go on to suggest two possible routes to engaging with this tension: allegory and critique. Allegory denotes a set of practices that attempt to widen the gap between a piece and its meaning: for rhetorical reasons, or as an earnest attempt to allow multiple readings of a piece to co-exist. While it has ancient roots, the path was championed by modernists such as Brecht and is still well trodden today. Critique attempts to do the opposite to allegory, closing the semiotic gap and using a piece to engage directly with a political reality by including the ‘real’ as an object within the work. In critique I refer to the Foucauldian and Butlerian understanding of the term and use it to unpack a set of practices that do not necessarily explicitly engage with it. The term ‘queer use’, as it is articulated by Butler and Ahmed, is then used to elaborate and clarify how such critical tools function. Both ‘allegory’ and ‘critique’ are well-theorised ideas, but contrasting them and linking them to ‘on-the-noseness’ and contemporary political art practices affords new insight into their nature and function.

The paths of ‘allegory’ and ‘critique’ are not stable and distinct; they intersect, merge and separate. At times they seem like different maps for the same territory.<sup>82</sup> Nor are they fool proof techniques to avoid ‘on-the-noseness’, and in fact at times it is an allegory falling flat or an unconvincing critique that makes a piece fall in this category. In what follows I discuss these approaches and the practices they are tied to, their strengths and limitations, through a set of diverse new music pieces, both by myself and others. As the focus of this chapter is meaning, the examples used are pieces that explicitly register political issues in their choice of subject matters. These subjects can appear in titles, programme notes, extant political music, musical tropes, texts (sung, spoken, or written), and narratives.<sup>83</sup> The works include an opera, an art installation, concert hall pieces, and protest-performances. While they are restricted, like this entire study, to the new music sphere and some neighbouring fields, I believe the insights in this chapter are transferable to other musical genres, and more widely

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<sup>82</sup> Habermas, for example, claimed that ‘allegory is critique itself’, and while his notion of critique is not exactly the one advanced here, there are interesting overlaps. Jürgen Habermas, Philip Brewster, and Carl Howard Buchner, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin” *New German Critique*, no. 17 (1979): 36.

<sup>83</sup> All so-called ‘external’ rather than ‘internal’ properties, which within itself can bring a sort of disdain closely related to ‘on-the-noseness’. Paul Crowther, for example, claims that artworks that engage with ‘external’ properties are “mere adjuncts to theory” that do not “stake a claim to genuine artistic status”. Paul Crowther, ‘Artistic Creativity: Illusions, Realities, Futures’ in *Rediscovering Aesthetics: Transdisciplinary Voices from Art History, Philosophy, and Art Practice*, ed Francis Halsall et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 136.

to aesthetic practices which engage both with the concept of ‘art’ and the challenge of ‘meaning’.

### Insular art

In a 1989 article, Susan McClary argued against the value system applied to contemporary music.<sup>84</sup> The article coined the phrase ‘terminal prestige’ to the economy of value created by the attitude of mid-twentieth century composers such as Schoenberg and Babbitt. These composers, McClary argues, wanted their pieces to only be understood by a small community of expert listeners; the wider the audience a piece has, the less it has value. McClary quotes Schoenberg who wrote on the post-war rise in his music’s popularity: “My works were played everywhere and acclaimed in such a manner that I started to doubt the value of my music.”<sup>85</sup> Like with Kant’s book, the problem is linked to understandability; Schoenberg goes on to write “how could it happen that now, all of a sudden, everybody could follow my ideas and like them? Either the music or the audience was worthless.”<sup>86</sup> Although McClary does not mention Kant, she traces the historical forces that formed this attitude and how it was shaped over time. McClary argues that ‘terminal prestige’ is a “*reductio ad absurdum* of the nineteenth-century notion” of autonomous music, which was thrown into crisis by the collapse of aristocratic patronage.<sup>87</sup> This collapse led to a widening divide between two art economies: art for the masses in which success is based on popularity, and art for the bourgeoisie in which “prestige conferred by official arbiters of taste.”<sup>88</sup> While art for the masses must be comprehensible to as wide an audience as possible, ‘high art’ is given value by its very exclusivity, making difficulty of comprehension a virtue.

During the second half of the twentieth century, McClary argues, “the ‘serious’ composer has felt beleaguered both by the reified, infinitely repeated classical music repertory and also by

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<sup>84</sup> Susan McClary, “Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde,” *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989): 57-81. Dusman claims the article overemphasises composers’ accounts of their music rather than the music itself. For now, however, I am interested in looking at how new music is being framed, rather than at the musical practices themselves. I will turn to such questions over the next chapters. Linda Dusman “Unheard-of: Music as Performance and the Reception of the New,” *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 2 (1994): 132-135.

<sup>85</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, “How to Become Lonely,” in *Style and Idea* ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 51.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> McClary, “Terminal Prestige,” 60.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

the mass media".<sup>89</sup> Finding success neither in art for the masses, nor in art for the bourgeoisie, the university became these composers' last refuge. Here they could experiment in increasingly insular musical languages and push their music even further away from a general public into ever more exclusive, specialist, frames of reference. Babbitt's infamous essay "Who Cares if You Listen" is an extreme articulation of a position created under these circumstances.<sup>90</sup> It is within this economy that composers subscribe to the notion, as McClary puts it, that it is "Better [to] go down with the ship than admit to meaning".<sup>91</sup>

Schoenberg and Babbitt's positions are conservative in that they aim to reinforce the hierarchy of high/low art. The composers could be said to be defending their interest in conserving distinctions that paint their art positively; it is unsurprising that the people who are praised by this prestige system will defend it. It is not, however, the only type of rationale that one finds to rejections of 'on-the-noseness' at the time. Interestingly, similar positions were voiced by explicitly left-wing post-war critical theorists such as the neo-Marxist Theodor Adorno and the New Left writer Susan Sontag.

Adorno scorned Joan Baez's anti-war songs as "unbearable"; in his eyes they amount to "taking the horrendous and making it somehow consumable".<sup>92</sup> He also dismissed Brecht's political theatre as a form of useless 'preaching', a topic which will be covered in Chapter Five. According to Adorno, only autonomous art that refuses to be deductible can resist capitalism. Valid art, he wrote, "is polarized into, on the one hand, an unassuaged and inconsolable expressivity that rejects every last trace of conciliation and becomes autonomous construction; and, on the other, the expressionlessness of construction that expresses the dawning powerlessness of expression."<sup>93</sup> For Adorno, music that expresses, signifies or articulates a concrete position on the world is no longer music.<sup>94</sup> Sontag, who came from a contrasting left-wing position and saw Marxist analysis as "aggressive" and "impious", was just as sceptical of direct meaning-making.<sup>95</sup> She claimed that artworks that

<sup>89</sup> McClary, "Terminal Prestige," 61.

<sup>90</sup> Milton Babbitt, "Who cares if you listen?", *High Fidelity* 8, no. 2 (1958): 38-40.

<sup>91</sup> McClary, "Terminal Prestige," 66.

<sup>92</sup> Ricardo Brown, *Theodor Adorno on Popular Music and Protest*, Internet Archive (2007)

<https://archive.org/details/RicBrownTheodorAdornoPopularMusicandProtest> (accessed 11/7/2023).

<sup>93</sup> Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, (New York: Continuum Books, 1997), 43.

<sup>94</sup> As Spitzer points out, according to Adorno whenever music is seen as "a document (of a theoretical model, a semiotic code, a hermeneutic window, a cultural unit, a social practice) it ceases to be music." Michael Spitzer, *Music as philosophy: Adorno and Beethoven's late style* (Indiana University Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>95</sup> Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 7

openly engage with political topics are “defective, false, contrived, lacking in conviction”, and that authors who write such work are committing the crime of “writing the literary equivalent of programme music”, an accusation that also reveals how especially fraught music’s relation to direct meaning is.<sup>96</sup> Umberto Eco argued that “the openness of a work of art is the very condition of aesthetic pleasure.”<sup>97</sup> For Eco, art is progressive for breaking free from conservative grammars that restrict its meaning and he therefore championed ‘plurivocal’ art that is intentionally open to multiple meanings, creating ‘ambiguous’ situations and veering towards the ‘indeterminate’ (a term that will be central in Chapter Four).<sup>98</sup> ‘On-the-noseness’ was (and still is) seen as a problem not only by conservative artists and art theorists who wish to protect the order of things, but also by progressive voices.

### The interesting

A range of attitudes within new music have changed or loosened over the past thirty years. While the highbrow and lowbrow distinction has not collapsed, the insularity of Babbitt’s “Who cares if you listen” position has become an extreme fringe view,<sup>99</sup> and the composers who McClary applauds for having a novel approach that does not “stringently” hold on to “difficulty and inaccessibility,”<sup>100</sup> are no longer emerging voices but rather deeply canonised. McClary calls Philip Glass, Meredith Monk, Steve Reich and Laurie Anderson ‘postmodern composers’, and argues that unlike the academic avant-garde, they are “comfortable about composing for people,” a comfort reflected both in their music, and in the ways they communicate about their music.<sup>101</sup> In a sequel text from 2015, McClary argues that over the last three decades postmodernism has “supplanted” post war modernism and that “no one pays much attention any longer to the preponderance or absence of triads from scores. What matters now is musical and dramatic effectiveness.”<sup>102</sup> With such attitudinal changes, it seems plausible to imagine that artists, critics and audiences will have also become positive about

<sup>96</sup> Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 11.

<sup>97</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans Anna Cancogni (Oxford: Hutchinson Radius, 1989 [1962]), 39.

<sup>98</sup> For more about plurivocal art see Eco, *The Open Work*, 39-42, for more about avant-garde as politically progressive see Eco, *The Open Work*, 139-143.

<sup>99</sup> That this is an unpopular opinion today is suggestive for example by the name of the USA based new music multimedia hub ‘I Care If You Listen’. Yiorgos Vassilandonakis in an interview with Trevor Wishart says: “Most composers today consciously try to engage the listener, even if that doesn’t mean flattering the listener. They at least seem to “care if you listen.” Yiorgos Vassilandonakis and Trevor Wishart, “An Interview with Trevor Wishart,” *Computer Music Journal* 33, no. 2 (2009), 14.

<sup>100</sup> McClary, “Terminal Prestige,” 67.

<sup>101</sup> McClary, “Terminal Prestige,” 71.

<sup>102</sup> Susan McClary, “The Lure of the Sublime: Revisiting the Modernist Project,” in *Transformations of Musical Modernism*. Ed. Erling Guldbrandsen, and Julian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 34.

artworks that communicate their positions directly, and that the criticism of ‘on-the-noseness’ will be rendered irrelevant. I argue this is not the case. In fact, criticism of on-the-noseness is not unique to so called ‘high art’ music pieces, and can be found in reviews of theatre shows,<sup>103</sup> Hollywood movies,<sup>104</sup> and episodes of TV series.<sup>105</sup>

Sianne Ngai’s theory of postmodern aesthetics affords a different lens for scrutinising ‘on-the-noseness’ in the twenty-first century. While she does not contend with on-the-noseness directly, her theory is useful for exploring how aesthetic judgments are made. Ngai suggests contemporary aesthetic experience is defined by the aesthetic categories of the ‘zany’, the ‘cute’, and the ‘interesting’.<sup>106</sup> These ‘minor’ categories replace the historical ‘major’ categories of the ‘beautiful’ and the ‘sublime’ which were essential to the Enlightenment’s aesthetic discourse. These three minor categories organise our contemporary culture on a wide scale, cutting through genres and styles; affecting both highbrow and lowbrow art; appearing across literature, opera, popular music, and arthouse films.

Ngai does not explore what the opposites of these categories might be; how the failure of each of them is experienced. Extrapolating on her theory one could suggest that a piece that fails at being ‘cute’ would be experienced as ‘kitsch’ or that a failed attempt at ‘zany’ is ‘cringe’, but these arguments will not be unpacked here. An artworks’ failed attempt at being ‘interesting’, however, is relevant to this research; I argue that such a failure could be described as ‘on the nose’. For Ngai, interesting is “detached, cool, ambivalent - characteristics of both scientific attitude and irony.”<sup>107</sup> In contrast, an on-the-nose ‘message piece’ is deeply and earnestly attached to its topic. The interesting has a paradoxical approach to meaning: it is at the same time “the aesthetics of information,”<sup>108</sup> and “an aesthetic *without*

<sup>103</sup> See for example: Elete N-F, “Review: The Wife of Willesden,” *Exeunt Magazine*, 20th November 2021, <https://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-wife-willesden-kiln-theatre/> (accessed: 11/7/2023).

<sup>104</sup> See for example: Luke Buckmaster, “Sia’s controversial film about autism lacks coherence and authenticity,” *The Guardian*, 20th January 2021.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/jan/20/music-review-sias-controversial-film-about-autism-lacks-coherence-and-authenticity> (accessed: 11/7/2023).

<sup>105</sup> See for example: Max Weiss, “Nashville Recap: Slap-Happy,” *Vulture*, March 5th 2015, <https://www.vulture.com/2015/03/nashville-recap-season-3-episode-15.html> (accessed 11/7/2023);

Emily Nussbaum, “The Madmen finale,” *The New Yorker*, June 11<sup>th</sup> 2012

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-mad-men-finale-2> (accessed 11/7/2023);

Jessica Garose, “Breaking Bad, Season 4, Episode 11: Crawl Space,” *SLATE*, September 25<sup>th</sup> 2011, <https://slate.com/culture/2011/09/breaking-bad-season-4-episode-11-crawl-space.html> (accessed 11/7/2023).

<sup>106</sup> Sianne Ngai, “Our Aesthetic Categories,” *PMLA* 125.4 (2010): 948-958.

<sup>107</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 135.

<sup>108</sup> Sianne Ngai, “Merely Interesting,” *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (2008): 792.

*content*" (italics in the original).<sup>109</sup> For art to be interesting it must engage with the changing world,<sup>110</sup> yet saying that an artwork is interesting is saying that, as Sontag puts it, it is "of the commonplace, the inessential, the accidental, the minute, the transient".<sup>111</sup> Ngai argues that the interesting is forever "on the way" towards content, but never arrives; it leaves meaning "indeterminate", never final.<sup>112</sup> These properties position it in contrast to the singular, prescribed, highly important meaning of the 'on-the-nose' piece. Henry James wrote that 'The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting.'<sup>113</sup> In contrast, the 'book that understands for its reader' is, simply put, boring.

Ngai and McClary convincingly argue that aesthetic categories and artistic value change over time and across context. This does not mean that Kant's judgement is no longer relevant, only that it has shifted, taking new forms. The 'pre-read book' still poses a challenge for contemporary art which must be 'interesting' (or zany, or cute) and must not be on-the-nose. This is true for both an opera and a Netflix sitcom. Moreover, it poses a unique challenge for political new music because of music's supposed abstractness, new music's history of engagement with 'terminal prestige', and political art's dependency on legibility. Whether we share the objection to on-the-nose art or not, it is deeply rooted in our relationship to art, and therefore is a useful lens for analysing how political artworks engage with their themes for political ends. In the next two chapters I explore some of the artistic responses to this challenge using both my own work and the music of others.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 781.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 787.

<sup>111</sup> Susan Sontag, "Nathalie Sarraute and the Novel," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, 101.

<sup>112</sup> Ngai, "Merely Interesting," 800.

<sup>113</sup> Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism* (New York, 1987), 191.

## Chapter Two

### Allegory, and Universal Power

Allegory is an artist's first refuge from the problem of being 'too direct'. It speaks about one thing by speaking of another.<sup>114</sup> It offers a path for the artist who wants to deal in the concrete but avoid literality. Analogy, metaphor, and fable are all ancient tools for tackling an issue, without talking directly about it.<sup>115</sup> They take, by definition, the scenic route; by its very existence and function, allegory creates distance between a representation and its meaning. Fredric Jameson writes that:

“[A]llegory consists in the withdrawal of its self sufficiency of meaning from a given representation. The withdrawal can be marked by a radical insufficiency of the representation itself: gaps, enigmatic emblems and the like, but more often, particularly in modern times, it takes the form of a small wedge or window alongside a representation that can continue to mean itself and to seem coherent.”<sup>116</sup>

A gap is opened between what is presented, what we experience, and what it signifies with gaps, enigmatic emblems and symbols. Allegory, however, does not amount only to a one-to-one code that masks a singular meaning; once the gap is opened it alters our entire experience of meaning-making. As Jameson argues elsewhere, “genuine allegory does not seek the ‘meaning’ of a work, but rather functions to reveal its structure of multiple meanings, and thereby to modify the very meaning of the word *meaning*” (italics in original).<sup>117</sup> The gap of allegory, then, is “a wound in the text,” a “breach into which meanings of all kinds can cumulatively seep.”<sup>118</sup> This chapter explores both theoretical and practical considerations related to a set of tools that attempt to widen the gap between a piece and its meaning.

Walter Benjamin saw allegory as a common thread between the art of the Baroque and post-World War I art in Germany.<sup>119</sup> He claimed that allegory was shunned during the intervening Classical and Romantic periods for reasons that are close to the issues discussed in this chapter. For example, writing in the era of German Romanticism, Schopenhauer argued against allegorical artworks, writing “we shall not be able to consent to the intentional

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<sup>114</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, (London: Verso, 2020), 1.

<sup>115</sup> For an overview of allegory in the classical world see Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, “Review: Ancient Allegory and its Reception through the Ages,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 18, no 4, (2011): 569-578.

<sup>116</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, (London: Verso, 1998), 122.

<sup>117</sup> Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, 10.

<sup>118</sup> Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 122.

<sup>119</sup> Benjamin cites Giehlow in his discussion of the connection and contrast that these allegories hold to mediaeval allegories. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans, John Osborne, (London: Lowe & Brydone Printers Ltd, 1977), 167.

and avowed employment of a work of art for the expression of a concept".<sup>120</sup> This, he continued, is "a foreign aim" to art and only a "trifling amusement".<sup>121</sup> For Schopenhauer, like Kant before him and Adorno after, art and aesthetics should be autonomous from any conceptualisation. If a piece tries to engage with a concept outside it, by allegorically *meaning* something, then it strays from art's true aims. Allegory's goal to tackle an issue makes it non-artistic. Similarly, Goethe contrasted symbolism, which seeks "the general in the particular," and allegory, which seeks "the particulars for the general."<sup>122</sup> He rejected allegory and claimed poetry lies in symbolism because "it expresses something particular, without thinking of the general or pointing to it." The two formulations are close, only one word apart, but the distinction between them is crucial. Art should be directed inwards, towards the particular, the individual, and not use that particular in order to comment on the general, on the world outside it. In contrast, Benjamin saw allegories as critical for art in the Baroque and in his time. He argued that the return of allegories in the twentieth century reflected political changes; that they are an artistic device characteristic to a world of prolonged warfare and suffering.<sup>123</sup> Allegory, it seems, had come back into fashion when the political situation in which art functions, the 'general', had become impossible to overlook.

Playwright, theorist and poet Bertold Brecht is a key figure in allegory's come-back in post-World War I Germany. His experimentations with staging music make him especially compelling for this research; the fact that he theorised his own practice makes him even more relevant. For Brecht creating distance is one of the most important artistic tools. It is at the heart of what he terms *verfremdungseffekt*, or *V-effect*, often translated as *alienating effect* or *distance effect*.<sup>124</sup> This is a set of practices an artist employs for both aesthetic and political reasons. Brecht's *V-effect* is a tangled term, which is defined and redefined throughout his oeuvre, but it always refers to attempts to create, and manage, distance. This distance can manifest as the distance between an actor and their character; a piece and its political meaning; or the artwork and its audience. For example in Brechtian acting the actor makes it

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<sup>120</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will And Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane, and J. Kemp, (Project Gutenberg: 2011), 310-311. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38427/38427-pdf.pdf>. (accessed 24/7/2023).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 311.

<sup>122</sup> As cited in Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 161.

<sup>123</sup> Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 159-163; Vincenzo Mele, "Baudelaire as the Lyric Poet in the Age of Mature Capitalism," *City and Modernity in Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin: Fragments of Metropolis*, (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 311. See also Bainard Cowan, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory," *New German Critique* 22 no. 22, (1981), 110.

<sup>124</sup> On the translations of the term see Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn, "Introduction," in *Brecht On Theatre 3d Edition* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 4-5.

apparent that they are acting and are distinct to the character they are portraying.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, in epic theatre distance is created through interrupting the theatrical illusion by breaking the fourth wall and slicing the narrative into episodes.<sup>126</sup> Brecht's plays are often cast as historical allegories, where a distant situation from far away in time and space is used to stand in for the present moment; Galileo's scientific revolution in *Life of Galileo* (1943) is used to investigate the communist revolution,<sup>127</sup> and the Thirty Year War in *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939) represents the endless war of capitalism.<sup>128</sup> Finally, even theatre itself is allegorised. Often in his works a character portrays another character on stage, acting in front of an audience of other characters, a technique that is meant to indicate to the audience how they themselves can behave as active spectators.<sup>129</sup>

Active spectatorship is the ultimate goal of Brechtian allegory. Unlike the book that understands for its reader, Brecht wanted his audience to work, think, and act. Watching and deciphering allegories in an epic show is a sort of training in political interpretation of the world.<sup>130</sup> It prompts the audience to look "beyond the surface of reality" and observe the rules that govern our lives,<sup>131</sup> and it makes political and economic systems (e.g., capitalism) which seem 'natural' appear estranged and thus historical and open to change.<sup>132</sup> This is the element of allegory that Benjamin found most impactful. Allegory exposes the temporality of a political situation, showing that such structures are not fixed and inevitable, but can be transformed from one point in time to another. In this view, allegory is both a rhetorical device and a message, both technique and content.<sup>133</sup> It is a way to present a truth, and a truth

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<sup>125</sup> To contrast, in 'method acting' the embodiment of character is directed at absorbing the audience in the experiences and emotions of the characters and drama with which they are a part of. Whereas in Brecht, the distance the actor creates with their character is intended to stop the audience from becoming absorbed so that they remain attentive to the larger moral and political questions being portrayed. The technique is most famously described in the *Straßenszene*. Bertold Brecht, "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre." *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), 121–129.

<sup>126</sup> As Silberman, Giles and Kuhn note the word Brecht uses for this is 'decentring' rather than distancing, but "he still wanted to distance the audience from the proceedings on stage." Silberman, Giles and Kuhn, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>127</sup> Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 123–129

<sup>128</sup> Francis Fergusson. "Three Allegorists: Brecht, Wilder, and Eliot," *The Sewanee Review* 64, no. 4 (1956): 547.

<sup>129</sup> Laura Bradley. "Training the Audience: Brecht and the Art of Spectatorship." *The Modern Language Review* 111, no. 4 (2016): 1029–48.

<sup>130</sup> John J. White, *Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Theory* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004), 173.

<sup>131</sup> Silberman, Giles and Kuhn, 'Introduction', 5.

<sup>132</sup> This is a point central to both Brecht and Benjamin, and is evidently linked to their Marxist positions. See Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 41, and Bainard Cowan, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory," *New German Critique*, no. 22 (1981): 110.

<sup>133</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Brecht and Rhetoric", *New Literary History* 16, no. 3 (1985), 634.

to be presented. These same properties, the opening up of meaning and the notion of transferability, also pose problems for the political allegory, as I discuss below.

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‘Allegory [...] declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things’.

-Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*<sup>134</sup>

Chaya Czernowin’s opera *Adama* (2006) was written to be performed in alternation, scene by scene, with Mozart’s unfinished singspiel *Zaide*, creating a hybrid piece. Intertwined with Mozart’s eighteenth century narrative about the forbidden love of two enslaved people and their failed attempt to escape the Sultan’s power, *Adama* explores a forbidden love story between an Israeli woman and a Palestinian man, condemned and undone by the personified figure of power in a character named ‘Father’.<sup>135</sup> While it is far from Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* (1928) in genre and style, the piece is Brechtian in splitting the drama into episodes; using generic character names - ‘woman’, ‘man’ and ‘father’; utilising non-realistic staging that disturbs the fourth wall; creating unrounded characters with no biographical background; and presenting a dramatic situation that represents something larger than itself. It is fable and allegory at once, using gaps, emissions, symbols and enigmatic emblems to create an abstracted drama. The Mozart entwinement also functions as a *V-effect* tool, with the audience encouraged to find parallels between the narratives.

*Adama* has received more exposure and critical attention than most new music pieces: it has had two productions, over thirty performances, and has been extensively reviewed and analysed. Even though the opera deals with a concrete political situation - the Israeli occupation of Palestine - and has an explicitly critical stance, it has not, as far as I could find, been accused of being ‘on the nose’. On the contrary, the piece has received largely positive reviews and sympathetic analysis in newspapers, blog posts and academic publications which I review below. Reactions often emphasise the allegorical nature of the piece. For European commentators on this piece, ‘Israeli’ and ‘Palestinian’ are symbols of opposition that do little more than embody a familiar literary trope. One commentator wrote that “impossible love [...] is of course a very tempting topic from the point of view of present day intercultural

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<sup>134</sup> Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 178.

<sup>135</sup> Linda Tyler, “‘Zaide’ in the Development of Mozart’s Operatic Language,” *Music & Letters* 72, no. 2 (1991): 217.

problems, and Czernowin easily found a parallel in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.”<sup>136</sup> According to another the characters are a “doomed Romeo and Juliet/Israeli-Palestinian couple in modern day Israel.”<sup>137</sup> A third wrote that “each represents the deep cry of their people beyond their simple personal story.”<sup>138</sup> The piece both stages the couple’s story as a fable, and turns Mozart’s opera into a historical allegory; as an Austrian newspaper reviewer put it: “[*Adama*] not only brings Mozart’s *Zaide* back to life, it also makes it relevant to contemporary listeners”.<sup>139</sup>

Setting the Israeli occupation of Palestine as allegory humanises and personifies a complex injustice. It does so with an artistic language that requests an active readership from the audience, with the overlapping of the narratives provoking thought and inviting questions about how the different scenes relate. The work features hardly any sung text, Czernowin focusses on language’s sonorities more than on its semantic meaning. Words are stretched, repeated, deconstructed (e.g., from land, *adama*, to *dam*, blood), and the similarities in sound between Arabic and Hebrew are explored.<sup>140</sup> This opens yet more space for ambiguity, and employs music’s power to “occasion much thought”, without being “completely compassed and made intelligible by language”, to return to Kant’s formulation of the aesthetic experience.<sup>141</sup> The positive reception suggests that critics feel that the piece succeeds in exploring political issues and expressing a position, all while holding on to the artistic stakes that are seen as threatened by ‘on-the-noseness’.

Before expanding on the function of allegory in *Adama*, I will explore the use of allegory in two ‘BP or not BP?’ (BONB) action-pieces included in my portfolio submission. The accusation of literalism may seem to apply particularly to supposedly ‘high’ art forms such as

<sup>136</sup> Silvia Luraghi, “Mozart and Czernowin: Side by Side,” *TheOperaCritic.com*, 17 August 2006.

<https://theoperacritic.com/tocreviews2.php?review=sl/2006/szbzaide0806.htm> (accessed 17/11/2021).

<sup>137</sup> Alfred Eaker, “Claus Guth, Mozart, Czernowin: Relentless communication,” *Alfred Eaker Reviews*, 25 June 2012. <https://alfredeaker.com/2012/06/25/claus-guth-mozart-czernowin-relentless-communication/> (accessed 15/09/2022).

<sup>138</sup> Originally in French: “L’Homme et la Femme d’Adama, respectivement palestinien et israélienne, représentent chacun le cri profond de leur peuple, au-delà de la simple anecdote de leur histoire personnelle.” David Marron, “L’opéra du dialogue (impossible ?) des cultures,” *Agón [En ligne]* 1, no. 5 (2008). <http://journals.openedition.org/agon/723>; DOI :<https://doi.org/10.4000/agon.723>; (accessed 19/10/2022). Translation mine.

<sup>139</sup> Matthias Röder, “Premiere of Czernowin’s Zaide – Adama in Salzburg,” *Zeitschichten*, 18 August 2006, <http://www.zeitschichten.com/2006/08/18/premiere-of-czernowins-zaide-adama-in-salzburg/> (accessed 17 Setember 2022).

<sup>140</sup> Linda Dusman, “Chaya Czernowin: Conversations and Interludes,” *Contemporary Music Review*, 34/5-6 (2015), 474.

<sup>141</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 117-8.

opera and ‘serious theatre’, but as I have argued, it exists in different guises across all cultural production. Allegorical tools are widely used to avoid on-the-noseness in sacred texts, musical theatre (e.g., *West Side Story* [1957] and *Wicked* [2003]), dystopian television (e.g., *The Handmaid’s Tale* [2017-]), and even advertising.<sup>142</sup> The issue is also relevant to political campaigns and protest movements where even though legibility is key, avoiding on-the-noseness still has benefits. Each of the BONB protest-performances included in this research is staged around an allegory that is meant to highlight the contentious nature of the British Museum’s BP sponsorship and their colonial past and present.<sup>143</sup> Allegory featured, for example in *Nero*, an artistic intervention that challenged the BP sponsored exhibition *Nero: the man behind the myth* which both art-washed the oil company and attempted to rehabilitate the emperor.<sup>144</sup> In the piece, which is further examined in Chapter Four, violinists were dressed as Roman emperors with large BP logos on their wreath, staging the oil company as the ruler who played the fiddle as Rome burned. Creatively relating to the exhibition’s topic, the protest highlighted BP’s inaction towards the world destruction it is responsible for, by analogising it with a historical figure who has come to symbolise idleness and cruelty.

Allegories in protests are often simple and easily decoded; women around the world have dressed up in *The Handmaid’s Tale* costumes to protest misogyny in their societies by allegorising them to the fictional Gilead.<sup>145</sup> In order for protest-performances to have a wide reach, they must be more straightforward than Brecht’s *Galileo* or Czernowin’s *Adama*. Nonetheless, they are still allegories and their position within these actions is central. In

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<sup>142</sup> See Barbara Stern’s article on allegory in advertising, as well as the contemporary response to it. Barbara B. Stern, “Over Speak: Classical Allegory and Contemporary Advertising,” *Journal of Advertising* 19 no. 3 (1990): 14-26; Stephen Brown, Lorna Stevens, and Pauline Maclaran, “What’s the story, allegory?”, *Consumption Markets & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2022): 34-51.

<sup>143</sup> Paula Serafini, and Chris Garrard. “Fossil fuel sponsorship and the contested museum: Agency, accountability and arts activism,” in *Museum Activism*, (London: Routledge, 2019), 69-79.

<sup>144</sup> Farah Nayeri, “Rehabilitating Nero, an Emperor With a Bad Rap,” *New York Times*, May 26 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/26/arts/design/nero-british-museum.html> (accessed: 11/7/2023)

<sup>145</sup> Gilead garments have been used in protests in the USA, UK, Ireland, Argentina and Israel to name a few. Since the book itself (and the TV series) is an allegory, this is a double allegory in which a political situation is allegorised to a fictional situation which is an allegory to the political again. In her ethnographic research of this movement in the US, Madeline Yu Carrola has found that these women tend to be white and middle class, this is perhaps not surprising based on the problematic relationship the book and TV series have to intersectional aspects of feminism. The risk allegory runs of reproducing power imbalances will be covered in the next section. Madeline Yu Carrola, “Activists in Red Capes: Women’s Use of The Handmaid’s Tale to Fight for Reproductive Justice,” *Journal of Undergraduate Ethnography* 17 no. 1 (2021): 89-107. Neama Riba, “Why Are These Israeli Women Dressed Up Like ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’?,” *Haaretz*, March 1 2023. On Whiteness in *The Handmaid’s Tale* see Karen Crawley, “Reproducing Whiteness: Feminist Genres, Legal Subjectivity and the Post-Racial Dystopia of the Handmaid’s Tale (2017-),” *Law and Critique* 29 (2018): 333-358.

BONB actions we have found that as a tactic, allegory affords a richness and variety that is useful for surprising the target, who must constantly react to different affronts; it is useful for ‘interesting’ the media, who are always looking for stories with a twist; and it is effective in engaging participants and creating an enjoyable activist action.<sup>146</sup> The creativity through which these pieces engage with meaning has expanded their participation and increased their media coverage, thus enhancing their impact.<sup>147</sup> Without it, the campaign would be, simply put, not interesting. After the protest-performance against the BP sponsored Troy exhibition, *BP Must Fall*, discussed in Chapter Five, images of the huge custom-built wooden horse were widely shared on social media and used by international mainstream media [figures 2.1 - 2.]. The creative use of allegory in that action has also made it insightful for other activists and it is given as a positive example in the training programme of at least one unrelated activist group.<sup>148</sup> Creative protest often takes its power from the way it is discussed as well as the amount and kind of coverage it attracts. Even if the discussions it wishes to stir up are political, its aesthetic elements are central to its distribution. Therefore, it must be zany, or cute, or most often, interesting.



Figure 2.1. A photo of the horse in an article in *the Evening Standard*, February 2020.



Figure 2.2. A photo of the horse in an article in *Le Quotidien De L'art*, February 2020.

<sup>146</sup> The importance of joy in political movements has been theorised extensively, see for example Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery, *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times* (London: AK Press, 2017).

<sup>147</sup> See a discussion of the online visibility of earlier BP or not BP? actions here: Jule Uldam, "Social Media Visibility: Challenges to Activism," *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 1 (2018): 41-58.

<sup>148</sup> As relayed to me by members of the Jewish anti-occupation group Na'amod.

## Universal power

Allegories express meaning in a flexible way; as Benjamin writes “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else.”<sup>149</sup> This feature affords creativity in both writing and reading allegories, and is central to their ability to evade ‘on-the-noseness’. It can, however, also pose challenges, especially from a political point of view. If anything might be taken to symbolise anything else, can allegorical pieces still direct their meaning? Can the same piece express one thing to one audience member and the opposite to another? Allegory’s openness requires interpretation, giving the reader agency in constructing meaning, but what determines the logic that is used to construct that meaning? If a piece aims to challenge an ideology, as political work often does, then how can it rely on the audience to not interpret it using this same ideology and thus replicate the very structures that are scrutinised? Put differently, it is exactly the parts of ideology that seem neutral, the status-quo, that are often used by audiences when they are called upon to interpret artworks. Thus, when pieces use fables, allegories, and gaps to create an open-ended message, they run the risk of opening up space for cultural bias to infiltrate and shape the meaning that the audience constructs. I suggest terming this phenomenon a ‘status-quo reading’ and I will now use the reception of *Adama* to unpack it.

*Adama* does not make explicit whose father ‘Father’ is, and commentators on the work often read the character as signifying an archetypal patriarchal figure rather than the father of one of the characters rather than the other. One writes, “Whose father? It hardly matters.”<sup>150</sup> ‘Father’ is the face of power separating and torturing the two lovers for their short love affair. An abstract figure representing power. From this perspective, the three main characters are positioned as an isosceles triangle, with ‘Father’ acting symmetrically on both lovers. The reading of father as universal is suggested and supported by the generic character names (‘Father’, ‘Women’, ‘Man’); by the absence of a conventional plot; by tying it to *Zaide*’s distinct context and in this way analogising ‘Father’ to Mozart’s sultan, another power figure;

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<sup>149</sup> Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, 175.

<sup>150</sup> While the quote is from Iddon, references to the father as archetypal and universal are found also in Marron and Mueller. Martin Iddon, “Giving Adam Voice: Troubling Gender and Identity in WA Mozart’s *Zaide* and Chaya Czernowin’s *Adama*,” in *Masculinity in Opera: Gender History and New Musicology*, ed. Philip Puvis, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 172; Marron, “L’opera du dialogue,” 5; Adeline Muller, “Mozart22: A DVD Review Portfolio,” *The Opera Quarterly* 29/1 (2013), 51.

and by the music, which like many of Czernwein's pieces, pushes towards the abstract.<sup>151</sup> It is supported by the same set of tools that is employed to allow for more ambiguity, the tools that stick a wedge in the gap between the piece and its meaning, the tools that create distance. Yet a consideration of the piece situated in its specific political and artistic contexts reveals why such a reading is incomplete.

Forbidden love between Israelis and Palestinians is a trope in Israeli art.<sup>152</sup> Examining this artistic tradition reveals how the complexity of gender and racial politics informs its figures of power. For example, A.B. Yehoshua's 1977 novel *The Lover* stages the forbidden love between Daphi, a young Israeli woman, and Na'im, a young Palestinian man who works for Daphi's father, Adam. While Na'im's parents do not have a voice in the novel, Adam's voice is central, casting him as the book's father figure (the word *lover* in Hebrew is gendered and the book is simultaneously named after both Adam and Nai'm). Since patriarchal norms dictate that women must seek approval for their romantic choices from the men in their lives, a literary 'father figure' in depictions of hetero-normative relations is more often the woman's father, rather than the man's.<sup>153</sup> Within the context of Palestine-Israel, he must also be Israeli to signify power.<sup>154</sup> In *Adama* we are never told who Father is related to. This ambiguity has led commentators to construe Father as neither Israeli nor Palestinian, but representing the role of a universal father. Universal power, however, is often a veil for hegemonic power, and in this case: Israeli. In turn, I argue that the figure is Woman's Father not literally, but in the sense that she shares something of his power: she is related to him by being related to his violence. Universalising Father reveals a covert implication that power acts equally and

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<sup>151</sup> Chaya Czernowin, "The Primal, the Abstracted and the Foreign: Composing for the Voice." *Contemporary Music Review*, 34/5-6 (2015): 449-463.

<sup>152</sup> See for example: Françoise Saquer-Sabin, "Les Relations Amoureuses Entre Juifs et Arabes Dans la Littérature Israélienne," *Littérature, Société et Politique* Hors-Série: Cinquante ans de Littérature Israélienne: Tome 1: Littérature, société et politique (1999): 144-159; David C. Jacobson, "Intimate Relations Between Israelis and Palestinians in Fiction by Israeli Women Writers," *Shofar* 25 no. 3 (2007): 32-46.

<sup>153</sup> The role of the patriarch can at times be filled by an older brother, such as in the films *Eastern Wind* (1982) and *Uphill Start* (2014), in both it is the Israeli woman's brother who violently stands in love's way.

<sup>154</sup> A mirror image is found in another canonical book, Sami Michael's *Trumpet in the Wadi* (1987), where it is the Israeli man's mother who attempts to break his love affair with a Palestinian woman. This might hint that the racial dynamics are stronger than the gender ones in this specific aspect. In Eli Amir's *Yasmine* (2005) both parties' fathers are present, but the Palestinian woman's father, Abu George, is implicated with Israeli power: Abu George tries to push his daughter away from Palestinian nationalism and rather than standing in the way he is the one who introduces the two lovers. This is taken to the extreme in the film *A Weekend in Tel Aviv* (2012) where the Palestinian man's father is an informant for the Israeli secret service.

symmetrically on Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>155</sup> In reality, however, the separation of Palestinians and Israelis is non-egalitarian.<sup>156</sup>

Making explicit that Father is Woman's father would not fit well with the piece's abstract, fable-like nature. It would clash with the same allegorical choices that have given the piece an artistic ambiguity, an abstract richness, which has led to a positive reception. The consequence of this ambiguity, however, is that it allows 'status-quo readings' of the work: audiences are left with the task of constructing meaning and do so based on their worldview and political positioning. Many European spectators, in this case, see the Israeli occupation of Palestine as a 'conflict' rather than an oppression. The allegorical structure has allowed readers to misconstrue the power imbalance that is at the heart of the piece's topic.<sup>157</sup> When a work constructs meaning ambiguously, it contracts the act of meaning-making to an audience, and this audience must use some logic to produce meaning. This logic is inescapably based on hegemonic ideology, on biases, positions, and feelings that are taken as neutral; as 'universal'. Ambiguity can come at the expense of precision?, running the risk of replicating the status quo within its reception.

A starker example of the connection between abstraction, universalism, and the replication of power dynamics is found in Jane Benson's installation *Toothache* (2017), which in 2019 was gifted to the Manchester Gallery as part of a group of "Evocative & Politically Challenging Works".<sup>158</sup> *Toothache* is made of six pieces of white paper. Words that were written on the papers were cut out, leaving literal holes in the text, except for small islands of letters that read 're', 'fa', 'sol', etc [figure 2.3]. An audio track accompanying these pages features a mezzo-soprano singing these sounds as solfège. The piece cannot be said to be on the nose; in fact, when one encounters it, it is impossible to know what the work is about, and improbable

<sup>155</sup> On the 'covert' and 'overt' aspects of power see Steve Lukes, *Power; a Radical View*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005 [1974]).

<sup>156</sup> Adam Hanieh shows how a similar neutralisation of power impacts international aid strategies and neoliberal development of the occupied Palestinian Territories. Adam Hanieh, "Development as struggle: Confronting the Reality of Power in Palestine," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 45, no. 4 (2016): 32-47.

<sup>157</sup> The ever-political gender aspects are much better theorised than those relating to Palestine-Israel. See Iddon, "Giving Adam Voice", 167-193.

<sup>158</sup> Nigel Barlow, "Evocative & Politically Challenging Works Worth £7000 Gifted To Manchester Art Gallery," *About Manchester*, 31 October 2019.

<https://aboutmanchester.co.uk/evocative-politically-challenging-works-worth-7000-gifted-to-manchester-art-gallery/> (accessed: 12/7/2023).

to read it in political terms. The label, however, directs the reader towards the political. It reads:

Jane Benson has meticulously hand-written out a short story by Sameeha Elwan, a writer and poet living in Palestine, then cut out the words, apart from the syllables that form the sounds 'do re mi fa sol la ti do'. This scale of notes, the *solfège*, is used in the teaching of western music. Benson describes this process as 'searching for the tone of exile, and for the potential music of Elwan's prose'. She collaborated with New-York based mezzo-soprano Hai-Ting Chinn, who sings the notes excavated from the story. The story, *Toothache* in Gaza, tells of the difficulties in obtaining even simple things such as dental treatment when one is designated as 'stateless'.

After reading the gallery label the viewer understands what act of erasure has taken place. Gaps have been inserted, replacing most of the text with white empty place-holders in a technique I suggest calling 'redaction'. As with texts that have been redacted for legal reasons, crucial parts of the text have been hidden in order to remove its details and make it more general, more abstract. The text that has been redacted is a short story by a Palestinian author, presumably tackling political issues such as statelessness and exile. The details of this story are not apparent, and we experience them only by knowing that the islands of letters and random pitches are descendants of that text. The artist chose to eliminate any specificity from the text, and thus to abstract it, making the artwork less on-the-nose, more universal.



Figure 2.3. *Toothache* by Jane Benson, Manchester Art Gallery.

The gaps make the piece more universal in a sense that fits the Kantian formulation of aesthetic experience: it is not tied down by language to any specifics, and the viewer's mind

is free to be moved by the audio and visuals regardless of their prior knowledge or political position.<sup>159</sup> Additionally one could say that Elwan's text becomes universal, as Jameson writes "allegory turns all books into a single central text."<sup>160</sup> This artwork would not be significantly *visually* or *audibly* different had Benson redacted a short story by Hemingway or even her tax returns. Any text with Latin letters will produce moments where 'do' or 'sol' appear and while their order will be different, it is hard to see why such a difference would be a meaningful one in the way the piece is set up. In radical abstraction, the *distance* that is created between the work and its meaning can be so great that the theme itself almost disappears. In trying to focus on the non-intelligible aspects of art, the piece holds on to nothing legible from the original work on which it is based.

The choice of text does, however, impact the *conceptual* meaning of the work, rather than its visual or audible elements. If the label said that the redacted text was a CIA report, the piece's meaning would alter. There is a tension in this work then between the abstractness it presents the viewer and the concrete and specific source that it uses as its foundation, which is crucial for its concept. Since nothing of the original details of the text remains in the artwork, the piece is experienced as being 'about' the tension between concrete and abstract; the content is not the text, which is not legible, but the artist's actions *on* the text, the artistic concept itself.<sup>161</sup> The redaction of text becomes the piece's message.<sup>162</sup> The piece does not

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<sup>159</sup> For Kant the very fact that art is devoid of any moral goals or utilitarian ambitions is what makes judgments on it universal. Only in this way one reacts to it without trying to advance one's interests. It is what Kant calls 'disinterested interest' that allows me to enjoy a piece as a human, and not as Uri. Of course, Kant knows that aesthetic judgements are subjective, rather than objective, but they have a *subjective universal validity*. They are based on the way the artwork creates harmony between our faculties of mind. It is not the content, not the details, that make art beautiful, but the abstract way it inspires the mind's ability to imagine, remember, and reason. For more on Kant and the universality of taste judgement see Jack Kaminsky, "Kant's Analysis of Aesthetics," *Kant-Studien* 50, (1958): 77-88.

<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/kants-analysis-aesthetics/docview/1294131143/se-2> (accessed April 11 2023).

<sup>160</sup> Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, 1.

<sup>161</sup> Danto discusses the complex relationship between artworks and their meaning, arguing that to understand a piece's meaning we have to go "outside the objects and into the atmosphere of their ontological status" (140). In the most extreme cases of abstraction, which I would argue this piece falls under, "what they are is about aboutness, and their content is the concept of art" (148). Arthur C. Danto, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 33 no. 2 (1974): 139-148.

<sup>162</sup> Butler argues that we can see censorship not as the restriction of speech, but as a way of *producing* speech. Judith Butler, *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 128.

engage with any specifics of exile or statelessness, but rather in their abstraction, which means their concealing. The content of the piece is their *removal* in the search for a “potential music” that is abstract and universal. While the piece may be visually or audibly abstract, the act of erasure in it is concrete and exists within a political context, within power dynamics.

As in *Adama*’s reception here too the ‘universal’ replicates hegemonic power relations. In this example the status-quo does not only slip into the reading of the work, but is embedded in the piece’s structure. *Toothache* takes the voice of a young Palestinian woman living under siege and erases it into abstraction. It excavates ‘musicality’ out of the text, keeping only the bits that fit into the artist’s quintessentially Western version of art, and discharges the rest into long white trenches. The original story is not found in the gallery, and all that remains of Elwan’s expression of her pains and fears (themselves expressed in the story through allegory) is the title, and even that is redacted for the sake of universalism: the piece is called *Toothache* while the story “Toothache In Gaza.”<sup>163</sup> Benson’s piece attempts to empower a marginalised voice but I believe it ends up doing the opposite because of its loyalty to the strictest sense of artistic ambiguity.

My argument is not that any piece that uses allegory inevitably replicates injustice. Artistic devices that insert ambiguity and attempt to reach some level of abstraction can be used effectively in political art. I have explored some examples of this above and allegorical tools will appear in almost every piece discussed from here on. Yet the risks discussed here, of status-quo readings, and of replicating power imbalances in ‘universal’ works, are important to take into consideration. In what follows I will chart some of my own attempts at using enigmatic, allegorical, artistic tools, exploring both the advantages and prices of this path. The Israeli occupation of Palestine, which has been the main theme of pieces so far, will return in pieces discussed in the following chapter, dedicated to critique.

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<sup>163</sup> As the story appears on the author’s personal website. Sameeha Elwan, “Toothache in Gaza,” *Here, I Was Born*, 13 August, 2010. <https://sameeha88.wordpress.com/2010/08/13/toothache-in-gaza/> (accessed 12/7/2023)

## I HATE EGGPLANT

Gaps and allegories are central to my piece *I HATE EGGPLANT*, for live chamber ensemble and recorded voice. Similarly to *Toothache*, a text sits behind the work as a concealed blueprint, with crucial parts of it redacted. The redaction, however, is more localised: while in *Toothache* only fragments remain of the original, here entire phrases are legible and only single words are removed. Additionally, the gaps in the texts are not left empty but are filled with short instrumental moments. At the heart of the work is a failed narrative; a voice is telling a story from a first-person position, but this narration is continuously disturbed by a range of musical interventions. As I will argue below, in *I HATE EGGPLANT* redaction and allegory are not only means of inserting ambiguity into a concrete message, but are a way of expressing the message itself. Ambiguity and failure of speech are the piece's emotional and political crux.

The piece begins with the spoken sentence:

“Hi, I’m [---]. I recently moved to [---]”.<sup>164</sup>

The redacted words are positioned in crucial points of the statement; they hold the content of the phrase and without them we are left only with the sentence's architecture. These holes are filled with live instrumental music, expanding the hermeneutics of the text to include musical symbols. The first word, which defines the speaking *I*, is replaced by a short melody on the clarinet. The second, indicating the location to which the *I* has moved, is replaced by a major chord on the keyboard. Thus, identity is tied to the clarinet: “I’m [clarinet melody]” and location to the keyboard: “I recently moved to [keyboard chord]”. The musical content of each of these instrumental moments sharpens their meaning as symbols. The clarinet melody is set in Freygish, or Ahava Rabba, mode; the most common mode in Eastern-European Jewish music.<sup>165</sup> The melody emphasises the augmented second that lies between the second and third modal steps (spelled as a minor third), arguably the most straightforward signifier of Jewishness in Western music [example 2.1].<sup>166</sup> In contrast, the keyboard plays a major C chord, using a church organ sound and signifying a hegemonic Westernness. Thus, the first sentence can be described as:

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<sup>164</sup> ‘[---]’ indicates words that have been deleted from the original recording.

<sup>165</sup> Chris Haigh, *Exploring Klezmer Fiddle* (London: Schott, 2016), 67.

<sup>166</sup> Marina Ritzarev, “The Augmented Second, Chagall’s Silhouettes, and the Six-Pointed Star,” *Musica Judaica* 18 (2005): 43–69.

“Hi, I’m [Jewish]. I recently moved to [the West]”.

**Example 2.1 *I HATE EGGPLANT* b. 1-4**

It would be a tall order to expect the audience to unpack all the nuances of meanings in the piece's first few seconds. The symbols, however, reappear throughout the first part of the piece several times. The next sentence is "it's a [cello] time to move to the [keyboard]." The cello stands in for adjectives: 'hard', 'odd', 'difficult'. Whether or not the audience correctly assigns meaning to these sounds, I hope it is clear that there is a game of symbols, with some kind of logic, at play [see figure 2.4.]

As the piece progresses the symbols become more complex and intertwined. It is impossible to fully unpack each and every one of them, but the sense of some sort of order remains. The failure to decode every symbol and experience the text as fully legible is presented as part of the piece's subject. "I'd like to talk about [keyboard + cello] but it's a [cello] thing to talk about. Really, it's [cello] to talk about anything." The desire to speak and the challenge of expression are the main themes. The word "meaning" appears and reappears, as do words such as "euphemism".

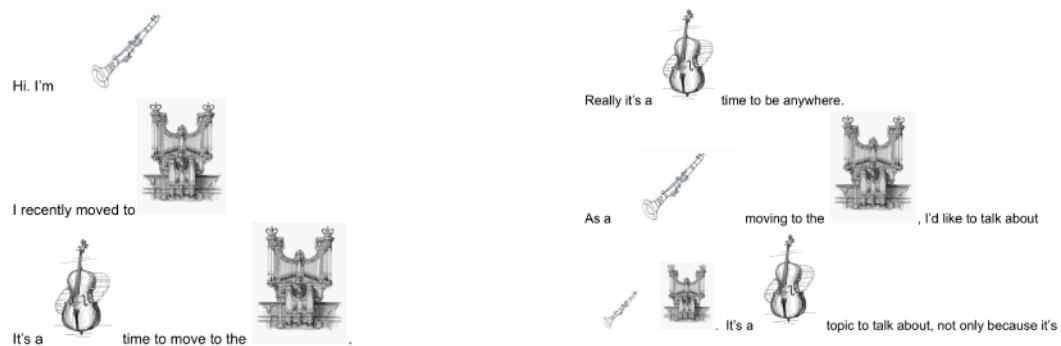


Figure 2.4 Textual blueprint of the opening of *I HATE EGGPLANT*

The piece is about antisemitism, and more specifically it is about the relationship between meaning-making and antisemitism in the diaspora. It investigates the limits of what language can express, as well as the way meaning is shifted, hidden, and fractured when discussing this form of bigotry. Hints, dog-whistles, and euphemisms are surely central to any form of bigotry, but they have a unique link to antisemitism.<sup>167</sup> A central aspect of antisemitism is the belief that Jews control the discourse. Antisemitic conspiracies often mask themselves as punching upwards, and therefore as having to be careful in the way they are communicated, to protect themselves from the power that Jews wield to censure debate. Therefore, supposedly, there is a special need for secret hints. Or rather, by speaking in hints one can both say the bigoted thing one is saying, and support conspiracy theories about the control of discussion, by implication. These qualities of antisemitism and the discourse around it make the allegorical practices in pieces about it meaningful as both rhetorical tools and as content.

The bigoted use of triple parentheses on social media offers a good illustration of the way antisemitism is often performed as covert. Names are written in triple parentheses, for example (((Agnon))), to indicate that a person is Jewish, and mark them for bigots as a target for hate and trolling. The symbol has been described by its supporters as “closed captioning for the Jew-blind,”<sup>168</sup> and it is meant to represent an echo around the name. It refers to the

<sup>167</sup> Jamie Moshin, "Hello Darkness: Antisemitism and Rhetorical Silence in the 'Trump Era,'" *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 8 (2018): 26-43.

<sup>168</sup> In a now deleted tweet that has been widely quoted in reports on the phenomena ([https://twitter.com/ProtocolReal/status/666839532038430721?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/ProtocolReal/status/666839532038430721?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)). See for example Caroline Mortimer, 'Google removes racist Chrome extension used by Neo-Nazis to target people with Jewish-sounding names', *Independent*, 05 June 2016.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/google-removes-racist-chrome-extension-used-by-neonazis-to-target-people-with-jewish-sounding-names-a7066496.html> (accessed 11/04/2023).

practice of drenching Jewish names in reverb on the alt-right podcast *The Daily Shoah*.<sup>169</sup> The reverb audio-effect here is more than simply identifying a name as Jewish, it also represents the antisemitic myth that Jews have conspiratorial ways to have their voices heard, that our names give us exaggerated power.<sup>170</sup> The parentheses symbolise this ‘echo’ in written form, and have become memeified, their reach far exceeding that of the original podcast.<sup>171</sup> This and other forms of symbolised hate (‘globalists’, ‘merchants’, ‘red sea pedestrians’, ‘oven-ready’) are meant to be simultaneously clear enough to be understood by both victims and perpetrators, but also somehow vague or ambiguous.

At bar 34 the piece starts to pick up steam and at bar 44 it goes into a rhythmic section [example 2.2]. This section employs textual samples alongside the instrumental parts, overlaying layers of meaning, and further engaging with the themes presented in the opening. The samples quote antisemitic euphemistic language such as “globalist” (in Donald Trump’s voice) and “whose thirst for control,” as well as “google it,” which both quotes a common line from conspiracy theorists, while also pointing towards the vast faceless bigotry of the Internet and role search engines play in fostering hate. Amongst these antisemitic euphemisms, we also hear the voice of Barbara Streisand saying the word “bagel” in *Funny Girl* (1968), and excerpts of Lenny Bruce’s comedy routine “Jewish Vs. Goyish” from 1961.<sup>172</sup> The loop that ties the section together is my own voice saying, “What if [---] means [---], and [---] means [---]?” The piece asks, “What if [Globalist] means [Bagel], and [Blah blah blah] means [Patriots]?” And also “What if [Globalist] means [Blah blah], and [Patriots] means [White supremacy]?” The section does not explicitly unpack any specific euphemism but rather expresses the feeling that anything can mean anything else, if it is used as a euphemism. We as listeners are left outside some of these secret codes, and inside others; often unsure and living in a paranoia of meaning.

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<sup>169</sup> Cooper Fleishman; Anthony Smith, “(((Echoes))), Exposed: The Secret Symbol Neo-Nazis Use to Target Jews Online”, *Mic* (1 June 2016). [Archived](#) from the original on 27 August 2016.

<sup>170</sup> Cooper Fleishman; Anthony Smith, “(((Echoes))), Exposed: The Secret Symbol Neo-Nazis Use to Target Jews Online”, *Mic* (1 June 2016). [Archived](#) from the original on 27 August 2016.

<https://www.mic.com/articles/144228/echoes-exposed-the-secret-symbol-neo-nazis-use-to-target-jews-online#.sS1GX29cQ> (accessed 3/8/2023).

<sup>171</sup> It was used as a Google Chrome extension before Google removed it. Mortimer, ‘Google removes racist Chrome extension’.

<sup>172</sup> See Devorah Baum, “Comedy as a source: Lenny Bruce’s ‘Jewish vs Goyish’,” *The Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish Non-Jewish Relations Resources*. Online. Available at: <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/parkes/resources/sources/pogromsdbstandup1.page>

Example 2.2 *I HATE EGGPLANT* b. 44-48.

‘Indirect’ antisemitic speech is supposedly used to evade discourse monitoring by social media platforms, but this is always a short-lived strategy due to the simultaneous goal to be widely understood by the ‘relevant’ people.<sup>173</sup> A deeper reason is that by leaving space for ambiguity, antisemites both hint at Jewish domination which makes this ambiguity needed *and* allow space for their own deniability. Furthermore, by constantly adding and shifting symbols, bigots create a discourse where one feels that almost any word or symbol can embody hate. Finally, this euphemised speech is effective rhetorically. This last point is expressed in a quote that concludes *I HATE EGGPLANT*, and which is taken from an online guide teaching far right speakers how to radicalise others. The guide says: “Don’t go into ‘Jews control the world’. They need to come across that idea themselves.”<sup>174</sup> An audience needs to be weaned into antisemitism, and it is best if they feel like they have thought of it themselves. The antisemite leaves hints, like breadcrumbs, that will lead to the conspiratory realisation, creating not a book that understands for its readers, but allegorical hate speech that demands active audienceship. Jamie Moshin describes the rhetorical appeal of Donald Trump’s lightly veiled antisemitism: “Trump’s ability to blend antisemitism into presidential rhetorics interpellates new audiences willing to accept these rhetorics—they’re just more unvarnished truths from a straight-talker, wrapped in the guise of something else—and

<sup>173</sup> See Rabinowitz on ‘rhetorical passing’ and on dual audiences: “two assumed, intended and necessary targets for the text: it requires one audience (what we might call the “gullible authorial audience”) that is ignorant of the subtext and a second audience (the “discerning authorial audience”) that not only understands the subtext, but that also realizes, and even relishes, the ignorance.” Peter J. Rabinowitz, “Betraying the Sender: The Rhetoric and Ethics of Fragile Texts,” *Narrative* 2, no. 3 (1994), 203.

<sup>174</sup> As quoted in Mark Townsend, “How Trump Supporters Are Radicalised by the Far Right,” *The Guardian*. January 17, 2021.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/jan/17/how-trump-supporters-are-radicalised-by-the-far-right>  
(accessed 3/8/2023).

creates and expands the acceptance of these rhetorics.”<sup>175</sup> In short, antisemites use indirect speech acts, simultaneously saying something and not saying it, or wrapping “unvarnished truths in a guise of something else.”<sup>176</sup> They do so in a complex way for a variety of reasons that could be summed up as avoiding ‘on-the-noseness’, a phrase that itself becomes somewhat sinister in their context.

*I HATE EGGPLANT* was written in response to the January 6th insurrection which saw fascists storm the US Capitol. While the international mainstream media was mostly interested in the parliamentary drama embedded in this moment, and expressed shock at the assault against symbols of American sovereignty, for many Jews, and members of other minority groups, the focus was different. The insurrectionists used Neo-Nazi symbols on flags, banners, cloths, and tattoos. Except for the confederate flag, most of these symbols were not identifiable to most viewers. They were not the straightforward swastikas, but niche emblems such as the KEK and N-AM flags; and ‘humorous’ slogans such as a “Camp Auschwitz” T-shirt.<sup>177</sup> It was not just the symbols of sovereignty but the symbols of hate which caught my eye; not the action but its doers; a visceral reaction to the ideology we were witnessing rising and gaining power.<sup>178</sup>

Benjamin describes allegory as a fragmented, enigmatic experience of the world not only as physical space, but as a cluster of signs in which politics, morals, and aesthetics are intertwined.<sup>179</sup> This perhaps explains why I (and many others) experienced the episode as an allegorical rhyme of an historical event: the burning of the Reichstag, a key moment in the rise of Nazism and in generational Jewish trauma.<sup>180</sup> The cognitive dissonance between the specific, historical kind of horror and anger I was feeling and the generalised newspaper-selling outrage that was surrounding me is conveyed quite directly in the text that

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<sup>175</sup> Moshin, “Hello Darkness,” 42.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Jonathan Sarna, “The symbols of Antisemitism in the Capitol Riot,” *BrandeisNow*, Jan. 11, 2021.

<https://www.brandeis.edu/now/2021/january/anti-semitism-capitol-riot-sarna.html>

Kristin Romey, ‘Decoding the hate symbols seen at the Capitol insurrection’, *National Geographic*, January 12, 2021. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/decoding-hate-symbols-seen-at-capitol-insurrection>

<sup>178</sup> David Rapoport examines the role played by the alt-right and Neo-Nazis in the insurrection and calls this the 5th wave of terrorism. I have reservations about the usefulness of ‘terrorism’ as a term as I believe it is itself embedded in Whiteness and is beyond salvageable. However, the article is useful in showing the contemporary rise of the American antisemitic far-right, in relation to this event. David C. Rapoport, ‘The Capitol Attack and the 5th Terrorism Wave’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 73 no. 5 (2021): 912-916.

<sup>179</sup> Cowan, ‘Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory’, 110-111.

<sup>180</sup> The debate on whether the burning was a Nazi plot or not exceeds the realm of this research. It was nonetheless utilised by the Nazis as part of their power grab.

forms the basis of the text-solo section of the piece (b. 178). However simply hearing this text read out would have it fall flat, earnest, preachy, intellectual, dry. It would also not express the emotional experience in which these thoughts arise, a failure to communicate, and be heard by the people around me. The piece therefore tries to oscillate between explaining these thoughts and feelings, and expressing them.

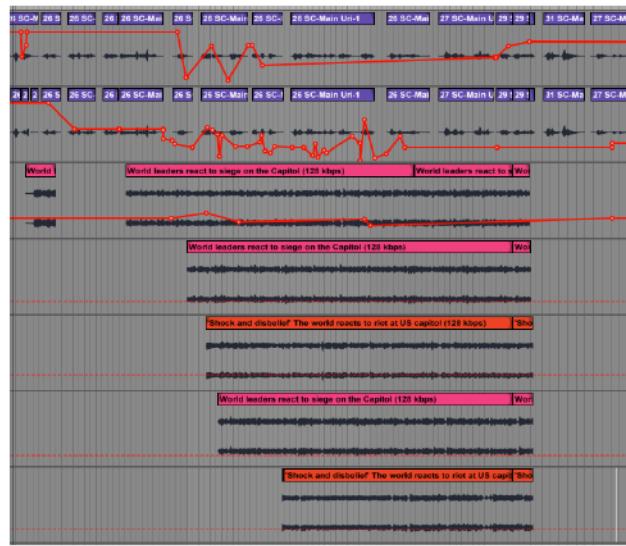


Figure 2.5 DAW processing of the spoken text solo in *I HATE EGGPLANT* b. 250

Two types of techniques are employed in this recorded-text solo to explore the limits of literal legibility and express its failure: processing and layering. The chain of processing that the recording goes through includes gate, EQ, compression, reverb, and panning. These elements are automated and change in relation to the meaning of the text. In this way, for example, the EQ only allows the high and low edges of the spectrum of frequencies to be heard, but the cut-off points move drastically (see the second purple channel in Figure 2.5). When they are close to each other, we hear a normal speaking voice, but over the words that felt too on-the-nose, such as “This was never about Democrats and Republicans,” the cut-off points are so far apart that only the very high and very low frequencies go through, and the semantic significance is lost. Legibility is placed on a spectrum and played with; the audience is able to follow the words for large sections but lose them at critical moments. Additionally, layers of other voices slowly mount, creating a wall of sound that masks the main narration, making legibility harder still, though never impossible (see the bottom five channels in Figure 2.5). This wall of texts is made of audio clips of news anchors relaying the events of the

insurrection on channels like the BBC and CNN. They follow the media narrative, its focuses and intonations. The main narration gets swallowed by these texts at critical moments, leaving the audience with a text they can almost understand.

As Cathy Lane argues, the same processes that dissolve the meaning of spoken text can be used to enhance it. In this example the literal denotation of the text is blurred by layering and processing, but these same techniques also create “accumulation of meaning by semantic extension or elaboration,” to use her words.<sup>181</sup> The challenge of expression is an important metaphor within this piece, and it is delivered by way of digital processes. As is the wall of dull, scandalised outrage, swallowing the personal reflection. Their inclusion in the piece does not only make it harder to decode the words, inviting the audience to work at piecing the piece together, but also expresses key emotional messages in ways that are not completely compassed by language. Finally, the aggressive manipulation of reverb on the recorded speech is a musicalised reclaiming of the ‘echo’ metaphor in antisemitic bigotry.

Different audience members will comprehend different symbols in this piece. They will follow the narrative and lose it at different points. Unlike *Toothache* it is *possible* to understand *I HATE EGGPLANT* without reading about it, though one is unlikely to understand it exactly in the terms that I conceived it. Audiences will take the piece to mean distinct things, though probably not contrasting ones. The piece attempts to manage the tension between on-the-noseness and status-quo reading by constantly moving towards and away from ‘the nose’, approaching signification in varied ways, and making the challenges of expression constantly apparent. Some listeners’ ears will latch on to the news-anchors’ words but many may not know that the piece engages with January 6th at all. While there are some straightforward, concrete references, such as “Jews control the world”, other references are masked. This ambiguity is not only a means towards avoiding the critique that the piece is ‘on the nose’, though it acts in that direction, nor is the ambiguity seen as the goal itself as in *Toothache*. Rather the ambiguity that the piece creates is tied to the ambiguity it deals with. This comes at the expense of clearly relaying the theoretical thoughts that are behind the piece, but it is crucial for expressing these thoughts. An important part of the compositional process was hitting the right balance between these elements so that some of the emotional-political baggage that drives both theory and aesthetics in this piece will be evident to an attentive listener.

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<sup>181</sup> Cathy Lane, “Voices from the Past: Compositional Approaches to Using Recorded Speech.” *Organised Sound* 11, no. 1 (2006), 4.

“Donald Trump”, Moshin writes, “has made stirring, impassioned music out of silence—he has managed to play the dog-whistle, as well as other instruments of quietness, with virtuosity.” This rhetorical music, he continues, “serve[s] as a lesson and warning [...] encouraging us all to listen to the darkness.”<sup>182</sup> *I HATE EGGPLANT* is an exercise in listening to the darkness and a dog-whistle etude. Not a book that understands for its reader, the piece invites the audience to work hard at following, unpacking, and constructing meaning, while knowing that some dark meaning always lurks below and beyond the graspable.

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<sup>182</sup> Moshin, “Hello Darkness,” 42-43.

## Chapter Three

### Critique, and ‘the Real’

“Critique only exists in relation to something other than itself: it is an instrument, a means for a future or a truth” Michael Foucault, “What Is Critique?”<sup>183</sup>

After thirteen minutes of tense string music, Mary Kouyoumdjian’s *Bombs of Beirut* (2014) is suddenly shattered by the sound of explosions. The lights are switched off and almost four minutes of archival recordings of the bombing of a Beirut neighbourhood are played at a “floor-shaking volume level”.<sup>184</sup> Nothing can prepare the audience for this breakdown, although in retrospect the build-up is clear: the piece’s first section is a collage of voices remembering their life in the years leading up to the civil war. These are the voices of Kouyoumdjian’s Armenian-Lebanese family members whose testimonies she recorded, edited, and underscored with repetitive, loopy, quartet music à la Steve Reich.<sup>185</sup> Still, the recording of bombs catches us by surprise, breaking the sense of narrative and introducing a new emotional intensity.

Composed for string quartet and electronics, *Bombs of Beirut* might be seen as an example of an ‘on the nose’ piece, with literal bombs playing a major role. The experience of listening to this piece, however, is more nuanced than this might suggest. The pacing of the work in the opening is extremely slow, challenging the audience and inviting us to find meaning in every small variation. When the recorded bombs are played the sounds of the explosions themselves, their details and volume are impactful.<sup>186</sup> The contrast with the slowly evolving details of the opening, and the nature of the sound and its origin, make it hard to form an aesthetic relationship to the sound at first. We are thrust into it, and only as the sounds continue, on and on, does the audience reconstruct the aesthetic experience. The length of the recording—first two minutes of only captured sound, and then two more minutes slowly shifting back to string music—feels like eternity. People who have first-hand experience of the sounds of war may react more strongly than others (the programme note advises people with PTSD to consider avoiding the performance), but many audience members will

<sup>183</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is Critique,” *The Politics Of Truth*, trans. Lysa Hoschroth, ed. Sylvère Lotringer. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 42.

<sup>184</sup> Arianna Philip-Hutton, “Destroying the Imagined City,” *Twentieth-Century Music*, 19, no. 2 (2022), 231.

<sup>185</sup> Philip-Hutton, ‘Destroying the Imagined City’, 230.

<sup>186</sup> In his review, George Hall applauds the piece as ‘powerful’, pointing out the bomb recordings as the climax. George Hall, ‘Kronos Quartet Review: Sonic Slinkys and Exploding Bombs’, *The Guardian*, 10 May 2016, [www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/10/kronos-quartet-review-barbican-london](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/10/kronos-quartet-review-barbican-london)

nevertheless have an emotional reaction to the sudden shift in the piece's material. Some might feel that the transition is heavy-handed, but as the seconds move on, the ear either sinks into the horrifying details of sound, or disengages from them completely, and more thoughts might arise. Even if one asks oneself 'How long will this go on for?', another question uneasily follows: was this a question those who originally experienced these sounds and their impact asked themselves, 'How long will this go on for?' The sounds the audience encounters are not symbols, hints or allegories, as the piece takes a different approach to political meaning-making, an approach I suggest calling 'critique'. I will first unpack this term before further examining *Bombs of Beirut*.

In 1978 Michel Foucault used Kant's "What is Enlightenment" as a springboard for a lecture titled "What is Critique?"<sup>187</sup> He recognises a "critical attitude" that ties together Kant's philosophical enterprise and "the little polemical professional activities that are called critique".<sup>188</sup> This attitude, he argues, originated in 15th century Europe, and has shaped many intellectual projects in European thought. Rather than suggesting a universal form which describes the critical attitudes through the ages, Foucault understands critique as investigating an ever-fluctuating balance between power, knowledge, and the self. The proposition affords a different lens into the ways in which meaning is made, transferred, and experienced, and to the ways knowledge interacts with power. It is particularly useful for this discussion as it explicitly confronts universalism and power, which are potential problems for allegory (see chapter two).

Foucault applied his critical method to investigate the history and politics of a diverse range of concepts and discourses relating to issues such as mental health, sexuality, as well as punishment and discipline. A Foucauldian approach has subsequently been employed by countless academics across most disciplines in the humanities, social science and beyond.<sup>189</sup> This approach can also be useful in this interrogation of political art and on-the-noseness, suggesting a different way to navigate between the two. If we conceive of politically engaged art as an attempt at critique, as 'critical art',<sup>190</sup> then on-the-noseness can be repositioned as a problem of knowledge, power, and the self. For example, it can be formulated as the

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<sup>187</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is Critique," 41-81.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>189</sup> Moya Lloyd, Andrew Thacker, *The Impact of Michel Foucault on the Social Sciences and Humanities* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 1.

<sup>190</sup> While I do engage with Mouffe's ideas on critique, my formulation of 'critical art' is not identical to hers.

experience of knowledge by a self that does not alter its position in relation to power (by challenging power, revealing something new about it, ‘empowering’ the subject to tackle power, etc.) While allegorical pieces can absolutely be critical in the broad sense of the word, fitting with Marxist critique (as well as with Mouffe’s definition of ‘critical art’), I explore below a different approach to artistic critique.

Foucault argued for a critique that tries to gain access “not to the problem of knowledge, but to that of power.”<sup>191</sup> Allegory confronts on-the-noseness as a problem of knowledge: artists make knowledgeability more difficult by creating gaps, codes, symbols, etc. Allegory both forms a challenge to knowledge—an obstacle it must overcome to no longer be a book that understands for its reader—and challenges knowledge itself by allowing for several ways of knowing to co-exist. In what follows I will suggest a set of practices and tools that attempt to overcome ‘on-the-noseness’ in ways that are not focused on creating gaps for meaning. Simply put these are ‘direct’ pieces that tackle political subjects head on, but as I will show, there is often a critical apparatus both highlighting and challenging the way knowledge is created and distributed within power relations.

Butler claimed that to abstract or generalise critique makes it lose its very character.<sup>192</sup> This is argued in the context of Foucault’s “nexus of knowledge-power” which he describes as always in flux, always shifting and never reducible to “pure form.”<sup>193</sup> This implicitly distances the notion of critique from Marxism which *is* an analysis that is, broadly speaking, based on a generalised, universal, form: class struggle. Seen from this perspective, it is perhaps unsurprising that so much of the work around allegory as a political tool has been taken up by Marxists such as Brecht, Benjamin and Jameson.<sup>194</sup> If one writes about class struggle in Setzuan in order to say something about class struggle in Europe, then one is at least gesturing towards a universalism of class struggle. Foucauldian critique, in contrast, never aims to be universal. Thus, critique offers answers to two risks identified in allegory: it reinserts power into the relationship between the self and knowledge; and it does not search for general, universal, formations.

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<sup>191</sup> Foucault, “What is Critique,” 59.

<sup>192</sup> Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” *The political* 220 (2002).

<sup>193</sup> Foucault, “What is Critique,” 61-63. See also Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole Rhythm Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 17.

<sup>194</sup> For more on the “elective affinity between this poetic form and [...] “the elementary form” of the capitalist system” in Benjamin’s writing see Vincenzo Mele, “Baudelaire as the Lyric Poet in the Age of Mature Capitalism,” in: *City and Modernity in Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin: Fragments of Metropolis* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 311.

Foucauldian critique is always related to an object; it is a critique *of* something. There is always a realm it latches on to, to which it is subordinate while also attempting to regulate.<sup>195</sup> Artworks that exemplify this critical attitude will not be pieces that make general claims about ‘war’ or ‘capitalism’ as an all-encompassing system, but rather pieces that relate to the specificity of a political matter, as it manifests itself within a larger structure. Instead of creating a gap between the piece and its meaning, and relying on a universalising abstractness to make that gap meaningful, they engage directly with the topic, incorporating it as an ‘object’ within the piece. They are not invested in creating a code that the audience must decipher, but rather attempt to be pieces “whose address is so direct that the work can be... just what it is”, in Sontag’s words.<sup>196</sup> In contemporary music (and art in general) this specificity, this “just what it is,” the ‘object’ inserted into the piece, is often an engagement with the notion of the ‘real’ as central to the work.

Writing on social critique and radical politics, Mouffe distinguishes between “critique as withdrawal *from*” and “critique as engagement *with*” institutions of power.<sup>197</sup> Advocating for the latter, she writes: “the process of social critique characteristic of radical politics cannot consist any more in a withdrawal from the existing institutions but in an engagement with them in order to disarticulate the existing discourses and practices through which the current hegemony is established and reproduced, with the aim of constructing a different one.”<sup>198</sup> De-articulation is not enough, and critical politics must also work at re-articulation. This does not mean ‘change from within’, but rather a critical stance that is explicitly directed at the hegemonic “nodal points of power”.<sup>199</sup> Without such an explicit position we are “leaving the door open for attempts of re-articulation by non-progressive forces.”<sup>200</sup> This is what we encounter with the rise of conspiracy theories: they are built on a healthy and important scepticism towards the state, pharmaceutical companies, scientific discourse, and other forms of hegemonic speech, but they replace them with articulations that are no better. To protect critique from this we must make sure that the moment of de-articulation is tied to a

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<sup>195</sup> Foucault, “What is Critique,” 42.

<sup>196</sup> Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 5.

<sup>197</sup> Emphasis my own. Chantal Mouffe, “Critique as counter-hegemonic intervention,” *The European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics (EIPCP)*, (2008), online. Available at: <https://transversal.at/transversal/0808/mouffe/en> (accessed, 25.5.2023)

<sup>198</sup> Ibid

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

re-articulation. I argue that allegory is a form of “critique as withdrawal” and the critical compositional approaches discussed here are a form of “critique as engagement”.<sup>201</sup>

While Foucault, Butler and Mouffe did not construct their critical approaches to inform artistic practice, they can nonetheless be usefully applied to art and its discourse.<sup>202</sup> In the previous section I have explored how a focus on de-articulation can open a door to bigoted re-articulation in the form of the status quo. In some cases, allegories even run the risk of being utilised by opposing political positions; dystopian allegories such as *1984*, *The Matrix* and *V for Vendetta* have been appropriated by conspiracists of the far-right.<sup>203</sup> In contrast, critique that is focused on engaging *with* the political question at hand, inserting the notion of the ‘real’ as an object to the work, is exactly the kind of artistic practice that is discussed in this section.

### The ‘Real’

Through recordings of bombs and testimonies, *Bombs of Beirut* stages the ‘real’. Kouyoumdjian describes the piece as “a sonic picture of what day-to-day life is like in a turbulent Middle East not filtered through the news and media, but through the real words of real people.”<sup>204</sup> It is this sense of the ‘real’ that acts to give credence and power to a piece. This is what it is like *really*. The sense of the ‘real’ is used across genres to produce an aura of authenticity. It is the drive behind social realism and the reason for which some Hollywood movies state that they are “based on a true story”. Archival documents are central to both postmodern and millennial artistic practices,<sup>205</sup> and ‘reality’ is amongst television’s most prominent genres.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Mouffe has written on art, elsewhere. See for example Chantal Mouffe, “Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension,” *Grey Room* 2 (2001): 98–125; Chantal Mouffe, “Art and Democracy: Art as an Agonistic Intervention in Public Space,” *Open* 14 (2008): 6–15.

<sup>203</sup> See for example Beatriz Buarque, “Red Or Black Pill: How The Far-Right Appropriated The Matrix Metaphor,” *Centre For Analysis of the Radical Right* September 2, 2021. Available at: <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2021/09/02/red-or-black-pill-how-the-far-right-appropriated-the-matrix-metaphor/> (accessed 29/3/2023)

<sup>204</sup> See the programme notes on the publisher’s website. “Mary Kouyoumdjian, Bombs of Beirut for string quartet, pre-recorded backing track, and live processing,” *Project Schott New York*, <https://www.eamdc.com/psny/composers/mary-kouyoumdjian/works/bombs-of-beirut/> (3/8/2023).

<sup>205</sup> Christian Berger and Jessica Santone, “Introduction: Documentation as Art Practice in the 1960s,” *Visual Resources* 32, no. 3–4 (2016): 201–209; Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (2004): 3–22.

<sup>206</sup> Randall L. Rose and Stacy L. Wood, “Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity through Reality Television,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32 no 2, (2005): 284–296.

It is beyond the scope of this research to articulate how art, society and the notion of the ‘real’ are tied up in each other in the twenty-first century. Any such theory will have to tackle the political implications of the relationship between the ‘real’ and its representation; a topic that has been thoroughly theorised for millennia in works like Plato’s *Sophist* (~360 BC) and Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981),<sup>207</sup> and is a matter of theoretical dispute.<sup>208</sup> What is important here is that we (or at least many of us), as both artists and audiences, have a desire towards the ‘real’,<sup>209</sup> even if we accept (as I do) that the ‘real’ is always mediated and manipulated.<sup>210</sup> In their study of reality television spectatorship, Rose and Wood argue that audiences are drawn to the paradoxical fantasy of the real, even as they are aware of its being fabricated.<sup>211</sup> By analysing interviews they show that while viewers are aware of the production’s manipulation, the realness of the shows (that the participants are not actors) allows them to relate their own life to the scenes on screen in a powerful way.<sup>212</sup> Similarly Street et al have found that when teenagers are asked if specific TV shows and musicians are insightful or powerful in a political way, they debate their sense of the ‘real’ as a marker of political significance, showing that this is the case across popular music, soap operas and even science fiction shows.<sup>213</sup> The context of new music is different and perhaps there is not a huge overlap in audienceship, but the draw towards the ‘real’ and its effects have similar attributes, as I will show below.

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<sup>207</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, (Project Gutenberg, 2008, updated January 15 2013), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1735/1735-h/1735-h.htm> (accessed 13/7/2023); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>208</sup> Butler, for example, disagrees with Zizek’s Lacanian reading of the ‘real’, claiming that in an attempt to “protect” it from poststructuralist and feminist theories he has depoliticised it. The question at heart is if the ‘real’ is or is not part of the symbolic discourse of language and I will return to it later. Judith Butler, “Arguing with the Real,” *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 181-222.

<sup>209</sup> The desire towards the ‘real’ can be theorised in different ways. Whether it is the desire for authenticity in existential philosophy or Marxism, or *Das Ding* in Lacanian psychoanalysis, this desire is often theorised in relation to ethics and politics; see for example Simon Critchley’s analysis of the ‘real’ in Lacan and Levinas. Simon Critchley, “‘Das Ding’: Lacan and Levinas,” *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 72-90.

<sup>210</sup> Butler articulates this idea in her discussion of the relationship between the body and language. The body exceeds language, its ontology escapes the graspable, however, the escape itself also escapes language. While the body exists outside of discourse, we cannot discuss its existence outside of discourse. Judith Butler, “How Can I Deny These Hands And This Body Are Mine?” *Qui Parle*, 11, no. 1 (1997), 4-5.

<sup>211</sup> Randall L. Rose and Stacy L. Wood, “The Consumption of Authenticity,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 32 no 2, (2005): 295.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid, 294-5. The writers do not draw a connection to Brechtian acting but that strikes me as an interesting comparison.

<sup>213</sup> John Street, Sanna Inthorn, and Martin Scott, “Playing at Politics? Popular Culture as Political Engagement,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 65, no. 2 (2012): 338-358. Realism and the notion of the “real” is also a thread that runs through van Zoosen’s research on the politics of entertainment. Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2005).

As Kouyoumdjian's quote above notes, reality is not filtered in *Bombs of Beirut* through the power dynamics of the media. The work offers a counter-story to the one that appears on mainstream USA media where violence in the Middle East is sold as an exotic horror to justify American imperialism, especially since 9/11 and 'the war on terror'.<sup>214</sup> However, not being filtered "through the news and media" does not mean that it is accessed as a purity. The 'real' can never be accessed, discussed and portrayed, without mediation. Instead, the 'real' here is regulated, that is to say manipulated, through artistic practice. This is made evident from the first sentence "I always fantasise about Lebanon before the Civil War" which is repeated three times, each with more intense processing, highlighting from the very beginning that the 'real' is materialised via the artist's practice. Manipulation does not make the 'real' into a fiction: these words were actually said by people who lived through the war, and these really are the sounds of bombs. Manipulation only means that these real objects are used by an artist to express an idea, or feeling, and to create an effect on the audience. The 'real' is mediated, utilised, for the purpose of some "future or a truth" to use Foucault's phrase.<sup>215</sup>

One cannot claim to know what it is like to live through war after experiencing *Bombs of Beirut*. If the recordings were taken from a video game, or even if they were not recordings of bombs but aggressively slowed down hand claps, would the audience know the difference? Only some. The 'real' affects the audience not as knowledge, not as a lesson, but by inviting them to relate to it and investigate what they do and do not know about it—how it feels, what it sounds like, how long does it last, and why. Politically, stylistically, and meaningfully the piece is distinct from reality television: it is a sensitive manipulation of a painful reality made out of respect and kinship. But like viewers of reality television the audience is drawn towards a realness that they know is manipulated, and they give it power over them by positioning themselves in relation to it by imagining themselves in that reality, and by knowing that they cannot fully grasp it.

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<sup>214</sup> Schwalbe argued that American media portrayals of the Iraq War reflect a narrow perspective that centres violence and advances patriotic agendas. Altwaiji argued that American representation of the Middle East, and especially of violence in the Middle East, are constructed within 'neo-Orientalist' and 'neo-Imperial' frameworks. Mubarak Altwaiji, "Neo-Orientalism and the Neo-Imperialism Thesis: Post-9/11 US and Arab World Relationship," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2014): 313-323; Carol Schwalbe, "Visually framing the invasion and occupation of Iraq in Time, Newsweek, and US News & World Report," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 239-264.

<sup>215</sup> Foucault, 'What is Critique', 42.

Critique takes as its point of interest the relationship between knowledge, power, and the self. It asks: under which circumstances, under what power dynamics, can a truth be formed? And where does it break? What makes a truth knowable for a self? As Butler writes:

not only is it necessary to isolate and identify the peculiar nexus of power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things, but also to track the way in which that field meets its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities, the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility for which it stands.<sup>216</sup>

It is geo-political reasons that make most audiences in the contemporary USA unable to *know* the sounds that are played in the piece. Kant's 'unintelligible' returns in a different form with these recordings - no longer as universal aesthetics, but as a form of politics. The recordings are ungraspable to some not because of the way they interact with universal faculties of the mind (as in Kant), but because of political realities that force a knowledge of war on some groups of people and not others.

An audience member is meant to be harrowed by the sounds, by their violence, by the shaking of the floor - whilst at the same time be acutely aware of the fact that it is only a recording played in a safe environment, and that for others this is 'real' on a whole other level, as they either live through such atrocities or carry them as trauma. This is reflected in Kouyoumdjian's remarks on the piece: "the discomfort that an audience feels for four minutes in a concert where they are safe, they've paid for a ticket, they're sitting in a padded chair... if they can just feel a little bit of that [discomfort], then that is like the tiniest fraction of the discomfort of somebody who's actually living in that moment."<sup>217</sup> The audience feels both the impact of the 'real' and the power dynamics that distance this 'real' from them. The 'real', for its part, does not sit neatly within the comfort of the piece. It shatters the work, even if only for a few minutes, creating sounds that are ungraspable in a politically meaningful way.

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<sup>216</sup> Butler, "An Essay on Foucault's Virtue".

<sup>217</sup> Mary Kouyoumdjian interview with Anthony Joseph Lanman, *One Track Podcast* #95, S8E7, (2019) <http://1trackpodcast.com/1-track-contemporary-classical-podcast-s8e7-mary-kouyoumdjian/>

## Misreading

Composing the ‘real’ has been a part of musical practice at least since Halim El-Dabh’s reel-to-reel tape recorder pieces starting from 1944 and Pierre Schaeffer’s 1948 experiments with *musique concrète*.<sup>218</sup> Recorded sounds are not, however, the only means by which to compose the ‘real’, and *Bombs of Beirut* is part of an array of political new music pieces that do so in different ways. In Johannes Kreidler’s *Chart Music* (2009), kitsch synth melodies are composed based on the contour of stock market price graphs depicting the plummeting stock values during the 2007-8 Global Financial Crisis. Stefan Prins’ *Generation Kill* (2012), discussed in Chapter Five, is focused on the manipulation of war drone footage; and recordings of melting icebergs appear in both Laura Bowler’s *Antarctica* (2018) and Hollie Harding’s *Melting Shifting, Liquid World* (2019). Found texts are also a ‘real’ that is used in compositions, both within this portfolio and outside it. Tali Keren’s *Jerusalem* (2015), for example, sets to music excerpts of the codex to Jerusalem’s municipal plan.<sup>219</sup> In introducing a track in a concert at the Barbican in July 2023, Hamed Sinno told the audience “This is true, if it was a lie I’d make up something better. It sounds too obvious. Too on the nose”.<sup>220</sup> The true story was about how on his way back from a visit to the Museum of Neoliberalism, his train was held up due to a suicide attempt on the tracks. The people on the train, he said, were talking about how upset they were for being late to work, complaining that nobody will believe their reason. Sinno recorded their conversations and used the recording in a piece for string quartet, live electronics, and singer. Over the processed recording and quartet accompaniment, Sinno sings a text that is composed of adverts on the tube, adding another layer of ‘the real’.

If an ‘on the nose’ piece fails at being interesting, composing the ‘real’ is an attempt at satisfying this category. Arthur Danto writes that the attempt to collapse the distance between an artwork and its meaning is “logically foredoomed” but nonetheless “interesting”.<sup>221</sup> There

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<sup>218</sup> While the term was coined by Schaeffer, the first pieces that use recorded sound were created by El-Dabh. On El-Dabh’s early work see for example Nicolas Puig, “Recording Culture. Une figure égyptienne du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle: Halim El-Dabh, compositeur, collectionneur et pionnier des musiques électroniques,” *Annales islamologiques*, no. 53 (2019): 113-136; Daniel Teruggi, “Musique Conc<sup>r</sup>ète Today: Its Reach, Evolution of Concepts and Role in Musical Thought,” *Organised Sound* 20, no. 1 (2015): 51-59.

<sup>219</sup> The use of found-text is useful to revealing the sense in which allegory and critique are not mutually exclusive; Cathy Lane’s *Hidden Lives* (1999), Trevor Wishart’s *American Triptych* (1999) and many other pieces use found text but emit and reduce it in ways that are meant to open up new possible meanings for it.

<sup>220</sup> Hamed Sinno, “Poems of Consumptions,” The Barbican Hall, 8/7/2023.

<sup>221</sup> Danto, “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace”, 148.

is something that draws and interests us in the paradox of the manipulated ‘real’. It could be that it answers our desire for authenticity in a hyperreal world, or that in the paradox we see a reflection of our own paradoxical living. Whatever the reason for the allure, these practices navigate on-the-noseness not by creating distance between the work and its meaning but by trying to eliminate it. Instead of hiding the meaning of the piece with allegory and redaction, its topic is positioned right at the centre of the work.

The ‘real’ is not a symbol, but neither is it outside of symbolisation, outside of language. It is not experienced as an allegory (x signifies y), but neither is the real that appears in a work unmediated. As seen in *Bombs of Beirut*, the ‘real’ is not legible, nor illegible, but rather it highlights the changing, political, borders between the two.<sup>222</sup> In all the examples above, the ‘real’ is mediated, represented through recordings or statistics - symbols that are not meant to open up ambiguity, but to close it. However, often in these pieces, representations are not used as they are meant to be used, they are ‘read’ incorrectly. Stock prices are legible as economic information, but by misreading them as musical notes Kreidler highlights their superficiality at signifying the catastrophic economic collapse - a collapse that was created by the very logic of such graphs, by their incapability to signify reality, by the widening of the gap between real estate and the allegories of capital.

Highlighting and challenging the shifting borders of the legible are the sense in which these pieces are ‘critique’. Drawing on queer theory can help to better understand this point. “If I have a book that understands for me”, Kant asks, “what’s the use?”<sup>223</sup> Sara Ahmed’s 2019 book *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use* can offer some answers. In the book, Ahmed defines ‘queer use’ as using something not in the way it was meant to be used, and/or not by the people who were intended to use it.<sup>224</sup> The archetypal example of this is the word ‘queer’ itself, which was first used as a homophobic slur before being reclaimed and repurposed as a term for critical identity by the people it was meant to reduce.<sup>225</sup> Thus, ‘queer use’ describes a critical attitude towards language and culture. Butler writes that queer use is “an aesthetic enactment” to make use of a word “to produce certain effects but also at the same time make

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<sup>222</sup> Butler argues that if we see the ‘real’ as resisting symbolisation then “there is no way within this framework to politicize the relation between language and the real”. Unintelligibility, she argues, is “mobilized variably to regulate the political field”, meaning that anything that we place outside of language, outside of legibility, is an exclusion with political significance. Judith Butler, “Arguing With the Real,” 207.

<sup>223</sup> Immanuel Kant “What Is Enlightenment?,” 289.

<sup>224</sup> Sara Ahmed, *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham USA, Duke University Press, 2019), 199.

<sup>225</sup> Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 226.

reference to that very use, calling attention to it as a citation, situating that use within a citational legacy, making that use into an explicit discursive item to be reflected on rather than taken for granted".<sup>226</sup> A double usage, both as a signifier and as the signified. Alongside the creation of new positive terms, the word 'queer' was reclaimed not only to describe a sexual identity, but also to fold a political stance within it. It is not a reference which simply says 'x means y' but a direct engagement with bigotry and a challenge to the power dynamics that allows some to create meaning and others to be restricted by it. Examples of queer use go beyond language and are prevalent throughout queer culture, from drag shows to queer art. Over the last decades terms such as 'queer use' or 'queering' have been employed to describe similar tactics of performed critique of other power-structures as well.<sup>227</sup> While this fits with how some prominent writers have articulated queer theory,<sup>228</sup> others have been ambivalent towards the use of 'queer' outside discussions of gender and sexuality.<sup>229</sup> I believe the theory is highly effective for understanding how artworks tackle diverse political issues whilst also acknowledging the specific context in which these terms originate. In what follows I will show how compositions can deliberately misuse the 'real' in order to challenge and critique power relations.

Critical compositions that engage with the 'real' do more than simply place it in a new context. Rather, critical techniques attempt to expose or challenge the 'legitimate' ways in which the 'real' is manipulated, and governed. They suggest alternatives that expose the politics of 'legitimate use' and that paint the boundaries between legible and illegible as shifting and political. There is no singular mechanism through which all such pieces operate, each engages with the 'real' in a different manner and for different ends. The recording of bombs is used by Kouyoumdjian to reclaim a violence that has shaped her family's life. It calls on the audience to relate to a pain, and to experience the failure of relating to it, to feel discomfort and to question the extreme comfort in which the discomfort is felt. In *Charts Music*, the disastrous stock market graphs turned funny melodies reveal the deep flaws in a signification system that has been exposed as pure simulacrum. The contrast between the graveness of the graphs and the lightness of the music forces the audience to choose how they

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<sup>226</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 99.

<sup>227</sup> One of the first pieces of research in this direction is Ian Barnard's *Queer Race* which asks how queer theory can "contribute to anti-racist work". Ian Barnard, "Queer Race," *Social Semiotics* 9, no. 2 (1999): 199-212.

<sup>228</sup> Butler writes that "The political deconstruction of 'queer' ought not to parole the use of such terms, but, ideally, to extend its range," and Ahmed's examples for "queer use" include protests, squats, and turning post boxes to bird nests. Butler, "Critically Queer," 229; Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 197-214.

<sup>229</sup> See for example Baitz' review in Dana Baitz, "Review of Queering the Popular Pitch," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 13 (2009): 109-112.

relate to the ‘reality’ of the situation. Other pieces function still differently, as critique is not reducible to a universal form. In the discussion below I will show how I have used these theories and techniques in pieces that tackle the Israeli apartheid legal system, activism, and green capitalism.

### The (un)Acceptable

My installation ‘*Absentee’ means-*’ blends several of the techniques discussed so far. Commissioned by the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, my motivation to make the piece originated from a concrete struggle in which I was involved, and that the piece aims to influence. Therefore, it has a clear and direct message. The struggle is that of the Sumreen family, a Palestinian family in East–Jerusalem, faced with the threat of displacement and eviction from their home. The aggressor is the Jewish National Fund (JNF), a quasi-democratic Zionist organisation, who, for over three decades, has attempted to take over the family’s home and give control of it to Jewish settlers.<sup>230</sup> I first started participating in the struggle in 2011, and over the years helped organise protests, acts of civil disobedience, public letters, petitions, and other solidarity actions. The commission for this work followed my oratorio *Custodian*, which was performed in 2018 on the doorsteps of the JNF headquarters in Jerusalem and is discussed in Chapter Five. Working within an art gallery context required and afforded a kind of creativity of expression different to the language of petitions, op-eds, and public letters. Yet, as the piece was exhibited at a crucial moment in the campaign, during the supreme court hearing on the family’s case, I was not interested in presenting an ambiguous stance which would risk a Palestinian family paying the price of my artistic ambition. While I wanted the message to be clear, I nonetheless wanted the piece to resist being entirely on-the-nose, fearing it would be easily dismissed if it were. In creating the piece, I attempted to find a way that is both effective and direct, nuanced and impactful. Therefore, the piece employs allegory and redaction, but they appear within the context of a critical approach that directly engages with the topic through presentation and manipulation of the ‘real’.

In ‘*Absentee’ means-*’, the ‘real’ and allegorical are simultaneously presented as two layers: three screens present interviews with members of the Sumreen family, interjected with footage from their neighbourhood Silwan in occupied East-Jerusalem (the ‘real’); and an

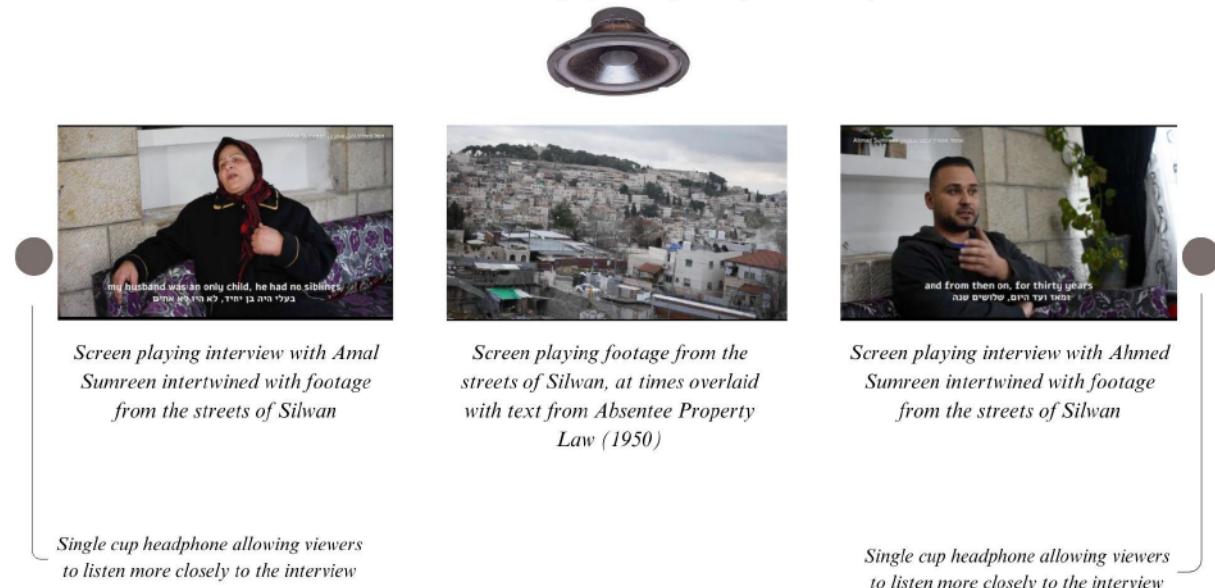
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<sup>230</sup> Uri Agnon, “How settler groups could use annexation to deepen Palestinian dispossession,” *+972 Magazine*, June 24, 2020. <https://www.972mag.com/settlers-annexation-jnf-elad-palestinians/>

overhead stereo speaker plays a vocal setting of a Biblical story (the allegorical) [figure 3.1]. The family members narrate the story of their struggle against settler organisations who have been trying for decades to take their home. Simultaneously, overhead, the singers relay the Biblical story of Naboth's Vineyard (1 King 21). In this story, King Ahab and his wife Jezebel compose new laws to steal a common man's property under legal guise. Condemned and convicted by their custom-built rules, Naboth is executed, and his vineyard seized by the palace. The piece draws a connection between Naboth's myth and the story of the Sumreen family, who are at risk of being displaced from their home with a controversial application of a 1950 Israeli law *Absentee Property Law*, a law which was passed explicitly to legalise the seizure of Palestinian land after the 1948 war.<sup>231</sup>

Figure 3.1 '*Absentee*' means - screens and speakers chart

Overhead stereo audio projection of music for choir and piano



The 'real' is set in its most straightforward sense in the field recordings and video footage presented on three screens and played both on speakers and headphones. This element anchors the piece in a specific time and place, tying it to a concrete struggle. Amal Sumreen, who was born in Silwan and who has lived in the house most her life, tells the story of how her husband's great uncle built the house in the 1950s, how she moved there after her wedding, and has lived there since. She speaks of the family's three-decade-long fight against the settlers who are trying to take over their house and throw the family to the street, as they have done to many of their neighbours. Amal is a strong and animated speaker. She shares

<sup>231</sup> *Nevo, Absentee Property Law full text*, באתר נבו נפקדים, [https://www.nevo.co.il/law\\_html/law01/313\\_001.htm](https://www.nevo.co.il/law_html/law01/313_001.htm) (accessed 13/7/2023);

Haitam Suleiman and Robert Home, "'God is an Absentee, Too': The Treatment of Waqf (Islamic Trust) Land in Israel/Palestine," *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 41, no. 59 (2009): 49-65.

her memories, feelings, and aspirations, and she tells her story with charisma and nuance. This clarity is maintained even as the interview's documentary-like nature is weakened by the splitting of the interview into episodes, and despite its position within a larger work that includes elements of different natures, such as the choral singing of the Biblical text.

A double power imbalance exists between me and the family members. Firstly, I am Israeli, and they are Palestinian, meaning the entire political and legal system in which we live is skewed to privilege me. Secondly, as the artist I have control over their footage and narrative. I have addressed this by both taking precautions not to misrepresent the family, and by making the power imbalances explicit within the work itself. The precautions included discussing the piece's goals with the family; never taking their speech out of context; and making sure their voices are always audible. The power imbalances are then also made explicit in the work; in fact, the way in which the law acts differently on Israelis and Palestinians is the piece's main theme. The filmmaker's authority is dealt with less explicitly in the work, but the videos of Silwan are constantly interrupted by clips portraying security cameras directed at the audience. These clips capture the intense securitisation of Silwan and invoke in the audience the uneasiness of being watched. This highlights the presence of the camera that is shooting the artwork, making it appear less natural. Knowing the family, their struggle, and the context for years helped me navigate these intricate issues, and I believe I am relatively well placed to make this work. However, being mindful of power imbalances does not make them disappear.

The musical element in this work is a recorded oratorio of sorts. The vocal setting of the Biblical text is composed of seven tracks that oscillate between a soloist accompanied by piano and a choral setting. I edited the text to tell the story concisely, and most of the plot is sung by the soloist. The musical style of these songs references mid-century Zionist compositions in a style known as 'the Good Old Land of Israel' and which Edwin Seroussi has called "Zionist sonic nostalgia".<sup>232</sup> The style combines chromatic Western harmony with slightly 'oriental' sounding melodies and rhythms, and is often sung in a technique that

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<sup>232</sup> A record series by the quintessentially Israeli singer Arik Einstein is plausibly what gave the style its name. The record series includes songs by Mordechai Zeira, Alexander Uriah Boskovich, David Zehavi and other Ashkenazi composers of that period. It also includes slightly newer songs that reproduce the musical language, such as Shalom Hanoch's "The Ballad of Moshe Yoel Suliman", set as an early Zionist-era fable. For more on this music see Arie M. Dubnov, "The Missing Beat Generation: Coming of Age and Nostalgism in Arik Einstein's Music," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 21, no. 1 (2015): 49–88; Edwin Seroussi, "Nostalgic Soundscapes: The Future of Israel's Sonic Past," *Israel Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 41–42.

foregrounds diction and ‘proper’ pronunciation of Hebrew.<sup>233</sup> The overall effect is faux-folk, and it is easily recognisable to most Israelis. This musical language is referenced for example in the song “Nifkad” which is the first track of the piece. “Nifkad” places an expressive melody in phrygian mode over a standard middle eastern rhythm, Iqa’ Baladi, in the piano part [example 3.1 emphasis added, figure 3.2].<sup>234</sup> The singer pronounces the words as someone in the fifties would and the song brings to mind the work of performers such as Shoshana Damari. The codification of this Biblical story, which is a central ethical fable in Jewish traditions, in quintessentially Zionist music, steps in a critical direction. Baladi, the name of this very common Iqa’, is a politically loaded and relevant word that translates as both ‘local’ and ‘my land’. This name is poignant in pointing out how the Zionist music that is being referenced functions, how it appropriates local musical tradition in an attempt to construct a sense of nativeness, which in turn is used to justify Zionist claims over the land. The music says “I am from here (Baladi) and therefore this land is mine (Baladi)”. Most audiences will only be aware of some of these complexities, but the work’s criticality is made much more explicit by the partnering of the story with that of the Sumreen family.

Example 3.1 *'Absentee' means* -b. 20-22

<sup>233</sup> Assaf Shelleg discusses similar stylistic considerations in the music of Mordechai Seter and Andre Hajdu, Assaf Shelleg, "IMPLODING SIGNIFIERS." *Hebrew Studies* 60 (2019): 255-292.

<sup>234</sup> Iqa’ is a term in Arabic music for a repeating rhythmic unit..



Figure 3.2 Iqa' Baladi (also known as Masmudi Zaghir)

The Biblical story ends with Eliyahu's reproach of the king: "Hast thou killed, and also taken possession?"<sup>235</sup> This has become a Hebrew idiom employed to denounce abuses of power which combine violence and profiteering ("הרצחת וגם ירשות" which translated to hast thou murdered and inherited?). The phrase is so prevalent and overused in Hebrew culture that having the performers simply sing it would have a trivialising, predictable effect. It would be too 'on-the-nose'. Instead, it is set vertically, each syllable sung and repeated by a different singer, and stacked one over the other, allowing the audience to reconstruct the sentence in its original order [example 3.2]. This occurs twice, with variation, in the second and penultimate movements of the score.<sup>236</sup> These movements treat the text as abstract sound, rather than as semiotically meaningful, exploring the similarity between its vowels and the contrast between its consonants: HA RA TZ A KH TA VE GA M'YA RA SHTA. The phrase, however, is well known enough, and these moments long enough, for most Israeli audience members to reconstruct it in their imagination.

**Lily:** Start after **Michal**, together with **Yael** and before the other singers. Alternate between the two melodic options. Wherever a note ends with a tie that is attached to nothing, it should last until the next "ta". Start with long notes. After singing "ta" three times continue while listening to **Tamar** and **Michal**, and only start a new "ta" after **Tamar** starts a new "tza" and **Michal**'s Kha intensifies.



**Yael:** Start after **Michal**, together with **Lily** and before the other singers. Alternate between the two melodic options. Wherever a note ends with a tie that is attached to nothing, it should last until the next "ha". Start with long notes. After singing "ha" three times continue while listening to **Lily**, and only start a new "ha" after **Lily** starts a new "ta".



**Tamar:** Start together with **Shira** and after the other singers. Alternate between the three melodic options. Wherever a note ends with a tie that is attached to nothing, it should last until the next "tza". Start with long notes. After singing "tza" three times continue while listening to **Shira**, and only start a new "tza" after **Shira** starts a new "ra".



Example 3.2 text-score for the second movement of '*Absentee*' means -

<sup>235</sup> King James Translation, 1 Kings 21:19.

<sup>236</sup> The performance is circular and has no beginning and ending, and so the order of the score is given as reference.

The description of the piece as being composed of two separate layers, the ‘real’ and the ‘allegorical’, is complicated by one element that appears both on screen and in the sung text. The use and misuse of the *Absentee Property Law*, which has given the piece its title, ties the two layers of the piece together. The original, dry, legal, text is both sung by the singers, and read out on screen in Hebrew by Ahmed Sumreen. The authors of this text did not intend it to be heard. Its overly formal and dull construction is used purposefully to conceal its meaning beyond legibility, to make it knowable only to an exclusive few. Its despicability is masked by its unspeakability. Thus, the text functions in this piece in a way that fits with Sara Ahmed’s definition of ‘queer use’: “how things can be used in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended”.<sup>237</sup>

The misuse of the text goes beyond merely speaking it: in the musical realm, segments of the law are interjected within the Biblical story; they are placed as if they themselves were the unjust laws that Jezebel wrote to frame Naboth, thus dramatically recontextualising them to expose a truth about their function. The analogy between the laws that Jezebel wrote and those in the Israeli book of laws is not meant to gesture towards a universal truth about laws. Instead it asks, how can these painfully similar rules exist at the same time? How can a culture have one as an example of immorality and the other as an active and encouraged force? It not only shows that the Israeli legal system is historical, human-made, and open to change, but also asks what implicit justifications within this system are perceived as so obvious that most do not see them? This is what Foucault calls “the conditions of acceptability,” and critique aims at both exposing them and following them to their breaking points.<sup>238</sup> There is a paradox in having the example of immorality ratified into law and accepted as justice; in order for this paradox to be acceptable one has to agree to a set of conditions of acceptability such as considering Naboth, a non-living and possibly fictional Israelite, as more deserving of humanity than the living Palestinians. The piece both reveals and challenges these conditions. This has not been lost on viewers, with one reviewer writing that it captures the “fraudulent absurdity” of the *Absentee Property Law* with “poetic vigour”.<sup>239</sup>

<sup>237</sup> Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 199

<sup>238</sup> Foucault, “What is Critique?,” 62.

<sup>239</sup> Esther Zandberg, “Kafka Could Not Have Written a More Kafkaesque Law,” Haaretz 11 May, 2022 [Hebrew] 2022 אסתר זנדברג, “קפא לא יכול היה לנסה חוק קפאי יותר,” ביקורת תערוכה, הארץ, 11 במאי, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/architecture/environment/2022-05-11/ty-article-magazine/.premium/00000180-d62c-d452-a1fa-d7ef19090000?gift=e1fe640a1ea743248270f63adef007df> (accessed 14/7/2023)

On screen, the law is used “not by those it was intended for.” Or rather, it is recited exactly by those it was intended to subject. Ahmed’s vocalising of the law that has ruled his life since he was three years old exposes the violence that is embedded within the state’s legal language. He reads the law in Hebrew for the same reason that I believe *Adama*’s ‘Father’ is Israeli, because power is Israeli, and its law is written in Hebrew. While Ahmed speaks Hebrew well, we can hear that it is not his native tongue, his slight accent giving a sonic form to the injustice in the law. This text was written in Hebrew to control those for whom Hebrew is not their first language; however, by its very nature the law cannot be used against Israelis. At the same time, the piece’s Hebrew speaking audience can understand the words, but not fully grasp their horrific power.

The ‘real’ law is not used in the piece as a symbol for something else, but neither is it presented as outside of language. Rather, the piece attempts to reveal and resist the way the ‘real’ law manages meaning with consequential, real repercussions. Sitting in the house he has always lived in, which was built by his family and inhabited by them since it was built, Ahmed reads the segments that define the owners of this home as ‘Absentees’. He is thus simultaneously *present* by law of art and *absent* by Israeli law. Even less than absent, the house in which he has always lived is considered first the property of absentees who have never lived in it, and then the property of settler organisations due to the absentee status of those owners. Ahmed’s claim on the house is disregarded, deemed unintelligible to an Israeli law system which attempts to eliminate his presence by displacing him. The violent paradox at the heart of their family story - that they are present; their home is absentee property; and therefore, they must be made absent - is embodied in Ahmed’s reading of the definition, a *misreading* of the very text that is the weapon used against him.

### The (im)Probable

Key to ‘*Absentee*’ means- is the practice of assembling found-texts in a composition: the setting to music of texts that were not written within an artistic context. This practice allows a piece to extract, highlight, and create meanings in texts in order to engage with the politics that they reflect and/or contribute towards.<sup>240</sup> Found text is used in a number of other pieces

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<sup>240</sup> See Redhead’s analysis of Chris Newman’s *Cologne* (1986/7), as well as Wolff’s reflection on own practice. Lauren Redhead, “The Avant Garde as Exform,” *Tempo* 72, no. 286 (2018): 11-14; Christian Wolff, “On

in the portfolio such as *I HATE EGGPLANT* and ‘Absentee’- means discussed above, and the BONB action-piece *It Must Be In The Hands*, where the repeating line, “It must be in the hands of those who live in the country” is taken from the text inscribed on the Rosetta Stone, the central artefact of the exhibition that was protested.<sup>241</sup> Found-text composition has a long history and relates to similar practices across other artforms (e.g. the poem *Testimony: The United States (1885–1915)* by Charles Reznikoff). A key figure in the practice’s recent history is composer Trevor Wishart, in pieces such as *Two Women* (1998), which uses recordings of Princess Diana and Margaret Thatcher; *American Triptych* (1999) with recordings of Elvis Presley, Martin Luther King and Neil Armstrong; and *The Division of Labour* (2000-2005) which uses an extract from Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*. In the latter, the text is a few lines from Smith’s book which appear on British banknotes. In them, the ‘father of capitalism’ writes about the division of labour, using pin manufacturing as an example, where the labour is divided into eighteen separate actions, each done by separate people. This makes the manufacturing process highly efficient, according to Smith, but Wishart, whose father was a factory worker, adds that it also makes it very uninteresting.<sup>242</sup> In his piece, Wishart treats Smith’s text as Smith treats the human labour in the creation of pins; he breaks it up to tiny bits and reconstructs it as he pleases.<sup>243</sup>

The driving force in many of Wishart’s pieces is the metamorphoses of recorded material. Through gradual electronic processing, recordings change their meaning and transform from one thing to something altogether different. To explain this technique Wishart introduces the term ‘plausibility’.<sup>244</sup> One never knows for sure, when listening to his work, whether a given sound has been altered. Yet even the sounds that are clearly manipulated appear plausible, as if, even if they could not be recorded in this world, there are some circumstances that could make them ‘real’. These circumstances may not be realistic - a recording could sound as if it was on the moon - but it still makes some sort of sense to our ears. The pieces often stretch

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Political Texts and New Music,” in *Occasional Pieces: Writings and Interviews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017 [1980]), 71–83.

<sup>241</sup> Wallis Budge’s translation of the Rosetta Stone, line 52, says “it shall be in the hands of those who live in the country”. E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Nile, Notes for Travellers in Egypt*, 9th Edition, (London: Thos. Cook and Son, 1905), 199-211, online. <https://www.sacred-texts.com/egy/trs/trs07.htm> (accessed: 13/7/2023).

<sup>242</sup> Trevor Wishart, “Composing The Real,” CIRMMT Distinguished Lectures in the Science and Technology of Music (McGill University, Montreal, April 17 2018), online. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyixalrH7xo> (accessed 13/7/2023).

<sup>243</sup> Wishart stated about this piece: “the eventual degradation of the text (in the penultimate variation, and the tail of the piece) is the closest the form comes to direct political comment”. Yiorgos Vassilandonakis and Trevor Wishart, “An Interview with Trevor Wishart,” *Computer Music Journal* 33, no. 2 (2009): 12.

<sup>244</sup> Wishart, ‘Composing The Real’.

the audience's acceptance of the reality of sound; they stretch the plausibility so as to create new, implausible, worlds.

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"[I]t's not too late for us to have bodies." Jennifer Walshe, "The New Discipline".<sup>245</sup>

A conceptually similar process happens in my work *What Can I Do*. The piece combines live clarinet, played by Heather Roche and accordion, played by Eva Zöllner, with recorded samples and a recorded textual narrative. The recorded narrative features my own voice, and it engages with the tradition of 'lecture pieces' where the composer comments on and directs the meaning-making of a musical performance (e.g., Matthew Shlomowitz's *Lecture About Bad Music* [2015]). The fact that the voice is pre-recorded produces a decidedly different experience from lecture pieces in which the composer (or a narrator) is on stage. However the text is similar in that it remarks on the music and frames the way the audience interacts with the piece. At 01:53 the listener hears me say: "I've asked Heather and Eva to record the actions they make for political reasons," implying that the material heard on the speakers is these recordings. For example, over a sizzling sound I say: "this is the sound of Heather frying a tofu schnitzel,"; over the noise of cans rubbing against each other I say "recycling". The present tense format of the text ("Eva is booking train tickets") creates a tension between the narration and what we see on stage; Eva is clearly not booking any tickets, she is playing the accordion. Thus, the piece presents the performers as existing in two realms: the physical, where we see and hear them playing their instruments; and the virtual, which is purely audible and is constructed of the samples and the narrative.

Jennifer Walshe argues that the inclusion of "extra-musical" actions focus new music works on the performers' physical bodies, in her text "The New Discipline".<sup>246</sup> In his response, Shlomowitz points out that many new music pieces, including his own, expand the musician's role by adding simple, automatic, 'task based' actions. He argues that while such actions are powerful, their limit is that because they are simple and automatic, they do not involve the subjectivity of the player. He goes on to write that the "denial of subjectivity is also a denial of the particularity of individual bodies," and ends by calling for future practices

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<sup>245</sup> Jennifer Walshe, "The New Discipline," *Borealis Festival 2016*. Available online at <http://milker.org/the-new-discipline/> (accessed 30/06/2023)

<sup>246</sup> Jennifer Walshe, "The New Discipline," *Borealis Festival 2016*. Available online at <http://milker.org/the-new-discipline/> (accessed 30/06/2023).

to engage with the specificity of the performers on stage.<sup>247</sup> *What Can I Do?* does not ask the musicians to perform “extra-musical” actions on stage, but it draws our attention to both their extra-musical actions off stage (recorded and narrated) and to the physicality of their musical actions. The reference to the musician’s personal-political choices engages with their specific subjectivity, and expands the scope of actions beyond the automatic, and the ‘task based’. By using the performers’ names (Heather clearly refers to Heather Roche, and Eva to Eva Zöllner), and narrating actions that are clearly distinct from the musical actions that we see on stage, the ‘normal’ musical playing is slightly alienated, refocused, it becomes a New Discipline technique.

In these moments Heather and Eva function simultaneously as Brechtian actors and as reality television stars. The clash of narrated and on-stage behaviour makes the audience aware of their performance as performed, as physical, construed, and embodied. The interest in their ‘real’ actions off-stage that the recordings give us a glimpse into is driven by similar forces as the interest in reality television. The two ways of acting may seem contrasted; Brechtian acting breaks the illusion of naturalism and in reality television performance presents itself as authentic. In fact, though, they are both forms of non-acting, or anti-acting,<sup>248</sup> and both are aimed at the same effect: to allow the audience to relate the scenes they witness to their own life in a powerful way.

In *What Can I Do*, the contrast between what the audience sees on stage and the account that is narrated does not create a cognitive clash even if both are presented in present tense. The audience members themselves exist, as we all do, in both the physical, chronological realm, and the hyper-real virtual one: the Internet. The situation might be odd and the delivery humorous, but it remains plausible. As the piece unfolds the sounds become further and further detached from their narration. When the recorded text says, “Heather is making a smoothie with fruits the supermarket didn’t want,” we hear far-right politician Nigel Farage being hit in the face with a smoothie. Some audience members might recognise the audio from the viral clip it is taken from, but whether it is recognised or not, this is not the sound a smoothie regularly makes. The narration moves on a spectrum of plausibility: Heather first

<sup>247</sup> Matthew Shlomowitz, “The Automaton Approach,” *MusikTexte* 149 (2016). Online <https://musiktexte.de/WebRoot/Store22/Shops/dc91cfec-4fdc-41fe-82da-0c2b88528c1e/MediaGallery/Shlomowitz.pdf> (accessed 13/7/2023)

<sup>248</sup> In a postmodern culture in which the ‘real’ and its image are inseparable, Baudelaire argues that it is “anti-theatre” that proves that theatre is possible. Jean Baudelaire, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 28.

cooks with unwanted fruit and veg, and later moves on to dumpster-dive. Towards the end, the audience is told that what they are hearing is the sound of Eva burning a police car, at which point the illusion is decisively fractured; while burning a police car is in no way impossible, it will not strike the audience as something Eva would do, let alone confess to in this context. The piece first presents itself as engaging with the ‘real’ with the aura of authenticity that this implies. Only after the audience has created a relationship with it, when they trust it, do they discover that it is fictional. The narrative stretches a line from daily, easily relatable actions, recycling, purchasing surplus vegetables, choosing trains over flights - to actions outside the comfort zone of most - dumpster diving, smoothie-throwing and burning police vehicles. This invites the audience to question the boundaries we position around political agency, and consider what actions we deem unacceptable. The point of the piece is not to argue for or against any action, but to invite reflection. Could she do it? Could I? Where do I draw the line and why? Can I break it? Like Wishart’s transformations of sound, the piece transforms action and agency, it makes the implausible somehow almost plausible by placing it on a long, creative spectrum.

This arc is interrupted at three points with satirical adverts for fake music-making technologies, slicing the piece into episodes. The music in these adverts is based on a repetitive chord progression (C/G|Ab|Am|Bm7-E) played on the accordion and arpeggiated by the clarinet [example 3.3]. This music is faster and louder than most of the main musical material, and always inserted abruptly replicating online advertising rather than those on the television or radio. The adverts promote fake technological solutions to some of the political-musical problems discussed in this research (e.g., “care about the climate, but also about voice leading?”), humorously highlighting new music’s often capitalistic fascination with innovation.<sup>249</sup> In formal terms, the commercials are Brechtian, prompting the audience to engage critically with the material, and hinting that things may not be as they seem. The adverts tie the piece to questions of contemporary capitalism and its power to turn everything, even resistance, into a commodity. The commodification of agency is a crucial question at a time when so much of attention is being directed at politically correct consumerism: booking trains versus flights, cooking surplus vegetables, eating vegan. The adverts do not refute these as meaningful actions, but they open space for reflection. Can we think of action that is outside of capitalism? Finally, the adverts have an aesthetic role; they create a common

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<sup>249</sup> Marianna Ritchey, *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 54-57.

thematic thread. The normative state of the music outside these adverts is diverse, often enigmatic, and full of hidden allusions and quotations [example 3.4].<sup>250</sup> In contrast the advert music is simple, direct, repetitive and offers a common thread across its interpolations into the main arc.

The line that sets up the piece, "I've asked Heather and Eva to record the actions they make for political reasons", is not completely true nor completely false. Before I began work on the composition, I asked the performers Heather Roche and Eva Zöllner to keep a record of political actions they took in their daily life between 4<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> April 2021. Additionally, I asked them to take note of their feelings during these actions (thus "Eva is bored"). This log formed the basis of the piece, and many of the actions and feelings they wrote down appear in the work, although often in altered form. The sounds that are played during the piece were not recorded by the performers (as implied in the piece), but downloaded from the internet, and often what is actually heard is far removed from what is being narrated. The recordings are 'real' in the sense that they are samples, *musique concrète*, but they are not really what we are told they are. The actions listed in the piece are not identical to those the performers took, as becomes evident in the burning of the police car. The narration is 'lying' by presenting fiction in a way that tries to seem 'real', but it comes clean by pushing the fiction into absurdity.<sup>251</sup> The piece fits what art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty calls "parafiction": artistic works that depict fiction as fact.<sup>252</sup> In this way, the piece is inspired by the work of composers such as Jennifer Walshe (*Grúpat* [2007-2009])<sup>253</sup> and Johannes Kreidler (*Fremdarbeit* [2009])<sup>254</sup>, and the mischievous activism of groups such as The Yes Men.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> For example, the 1938 anti-Capitalist Bundist song "Arbeitsloze Marsch" by Mordechai Gebirtig.

<sup>251</sup> 'Lying' to the audience is a practice used frequently in 'antagonist art', which is a formulation of political art that I did not have scope to elaborate on in this chapter but which I hope to engage with in a future publication. See Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 2004; (110): 51-79; Jason Miller, "Activism vs. Antagonism: Socially Engaged Art from Bourriaud to Bishop and Beyond." *Field: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism* 3 (2016): 165-183.

<sup>252</sup> Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-believe: Parafiction and plausibility." *October* 129 (2009): 51-84.

<sup>253</sup> Only after a two-year residency program which was sponsored by the South Dublin County Council did composer Jennifer Walshe expose the fact that all nine members of the group are in fact her own alter-egos. Franziska Kloos, "Jennifer Walshe: A Retrospective," *Cultural Studies* 36, no 2 (2022): 770–779.

<sup>254</sup> At the beginning of *Fremdarbeit* (2009), composer Johannes Kreidler announces that the music the audience is about to hear was written by a Chinese composer and an Indian programmer who were (under)paid to imitate his style. However, in 2015, after the piece was played more than fifteen times and widely reviewed, Martin Iddon published an article exposing this as fiction and that Kreidler composed it himself. Martin Iddon "Outsourcing Progress: On Conceptual Music." *TEMPO*, 70, no. 275 (2015): 36-49.

<sup>255</sup> Maria Hynes, Scott Sharpe and Bob Fagan, "Laughing with the Yes Men: The Politics of Affirmation," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 21 no. 1 (2007): 107–121.

Unlike the recorded bombs in *Bombs of Beirut*, graphs in *Charts Music*, and legal texts in '*Absentee*' means-, *What Can I Do?* is not focused on a political *object* but on political *actions*. What the audience believes they are hearing is not directly related to an injustice, a conflict or a crisis, but to the actions that are taken, or not taken, to combat these issues. The focus of the piece is political agency, rather than the goals towards which this agency is directed, even if those are often implicit. The sounds of frying tofu, ordering train tickets, or throwing away rubbish are made interesting by being considered as political actions taken by the players. The piece is not a comment on climate change, food waste, war, or the patriarchy, but a reflection on the many actions we take daily, and the ones we choose not to take, to fight these issues. In this sense, rather than focusing on the 'real', the piece focuses on the 'actual'.

19 Clarinet in B $\flat$

Cl. *f*  
*optimistic*

Accord.

23 To B. Cl.

Example 3.3 *What Can I Do* mvm. I b. 19-26.



Example 3.4 Accordion part for *What Can I Do?* mvm. II b. 7-15; citation of “Arbesloze Marsch” by the Bundist composer Mordechai Gebirtig

### The Actual

The shift from the ‘real’ towards the ‘actual’ is a common thread that runs through this research. ‘Actual’ and ‘real’ may be seen as synonyms but they afford slightly different sensibilities. The actual focuses on the *acts* of reality rather than on truth and ontology. This shift indicates a refocusing of artistic practice from political issues towards political actions. I have started to outline this shift in *What Can I Do?* and it appears most clearly in *Or Never* discussed in Chapter Four, and *Custodian* discussed in Chapter Five. Another perspective into working with the ‘actual’ is found in *Put Your Hands Together [for late capitalism]*. This work attempts to *do* something in the world as it integrates the relationship between the real and the ‘real’, the physical and virtual realm, and political and musical agency. In a sense, the piece is on-the-nose, it is organised around a simple, naïve setup. In another sense, it is the most ambiguous of the pieces discussed in the portfolio; it does not relate to a struggle or express a solid position. Instead, the piece humorously and critically explores some approaches to the climate crisis, celebrating them *ad absurdum*.

*Put Your Hands Together* is a piece that *does* something. The piece is set up around a Max/MSP patch that inspects specific sounds (hand claps and finger snaps) and triggers searches on the search engine Ecosia, which uses advertising revenue to plant trees [figure 3.3]. These searches are then projected on a screen behind the performers for the audience to see. Due to Ecosia’s economic structure, the claps that trigger the searches create revenue which in turn is used to plant trees worldwide. It is in this simple sense that the piece acts: it

plants trees. More than it relates to the ‘real’, the piece relates to the ‘actual’: it is not organised around recordings, found texts, or statistics (though these do appear). Instead, the knowledge that trees are *actually* being planted due to the sounds we hear gives the piece the same kind of credence attributed above to the ‘real’. With this setup the piece suggests a simple answer to the question “how to do things with sounds?”: through technological gadgets that connect to advertisers, music can be part of the capitalist answer to the climate crisis. As the work unfolds this simple position is problematised.

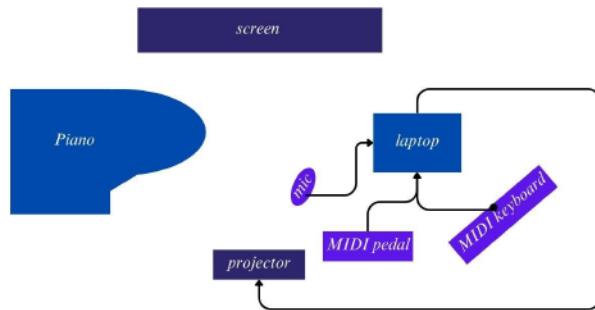


Figure 3.3 *Put Your Hands Together [for late capitalism]* signal routing

The piece’s setup is not a very direct way to plant trees, nor is it the most efficient way to do so. It is also unclear whether what the piece supposedly *does*, actually does anything, as the effectiveness of tree-planting schemes has been questioned in ecological circles.<sup>256</sup> These questions are projected in the piece on the screen. At key moments the piece projects search keywords that add up to sentences like “are trees a scam?”. The fragmented nature of the sentence, appearing one word at a time, means that not everyone will notice it, or pay it any mind, but the reappearance of the word “scam” on screen has an effect. The piece is constantly held at a tension, it both boasts about the number of trees being planted, and ironically asks does this make a *difference*? It is, then, a piece that does something, but what it is about is the question of whether this doing does anything.

The trees themselves feature in the work first and foremost as abstract knowledge. We do not see or hear these ‘real’ trees. The piece uses no field recordings or videos. Still, we have the knowledge that real trees are being planted and this knowledge has an effect. Pictures of trees

<sup>256</sup> Some have questioned the effectiveness of the current approach to tree planting, others questioned it as a strategy all together, and more still critically analyse the effects of offsetting on discourse, psychology and consumer behaviour. See for example: Heather Lovell, Harriet Bulkeley, and Diana Liverman, "Carbon Offsetting: Sustaining Consumption?", *Environment and Planning A* 41, no. 10 (2009): 2357 - 2379; Robert Watt, "The Fantasy of Carbon Offsetting," *Environmental Politics* 30, no. 7 (2021): 1069-1088; Lalisa A. Duguma, Peter A. Minang, B. E. Aynekulu, Sammy Carsan, Judith Nzyoka, Alagie Bah, and Ramni H. Jamnadass, "From Tree Planting to Tree Growing: Rethinking Ecosystem Restoration Through Tree," *World Agroforestry Working Paper* 304 (2020).

do appear on screen frequently; “tree” is the most prevalent word searched in the piece. These, however, are not the ‘real’ trees being planted but rather generic trees, cartoons of trees, and advertisements for Christmas trees [figure 3.4]. The audience is looking at kitsch images of trees, and by looking at them they generate profit for Ecosia; this revenue is translated into the planting of new, real, trees. The signifier *creates* the signified.

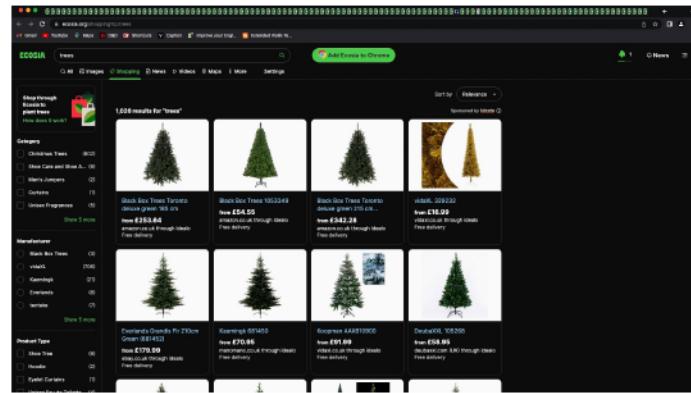


Figure 3.4 *Put Your Hands Together [for late capitalism]* screen projection of the search for ‘Trees’ in the ‘shopping’ setting of Ecosia

The performance nods towards this victory of signifier over signified when at bar 68 Performer Two stops clapping their hands, and instead connects a MIDI-keyboard to the computer. Since it is presented as another piece of technology, the audience may be disappointed by the sounds it produces: a sampled hand clap. The performer’s simple action is replaced by a clumsy mechanism offering a chunky representation. This clumsiness, however, allows for manipulation and as the piece unfolds the samples change. At rehearsal figure E, the clapping playback speed is gradually slowed down and is transformed, in a low-tech version of Wishartian processing, until the playing speed is sixteen times slower than the original. The resulting sound is completely unlike a hand clap, and instead resembles the sound of bomb explosions. The piece stretches the line between the sonic symbol - present and rich in potential meaning, and the real action it triggers - hypothetical and almost forgotten.

A reading of the piece as genuinely celebrating green capitalism would not be impossible, but there are many moments in the piece that make it implausible. A critical stance is evident from the keywords which include “greenwashing,” “tree planting scams,” “who owns Ecosia?” and negatively charged words such as “despair” and “wildfire” that produce hellish images on screen. In particular, a critical approach is foregrounded in the shift that occurs around the two-thirds mark of the piece, when ‘real’ numbers are sonified in a humorous

way. At rehearsal figure H Performer Two triggers the penultimate sample and the screen uploads the Ecosia home page. There, Ecosia has a live tree-counter that indicates the number of trees planted by the company. This number changes steadily before our eyes. Performer One is requested to use the live tree-counter as a metronome, playing a slow reminiscing melody over the sparse non-tonal chord progression from the piece's introduction. Then, at rehearsal figure I, the last sample is played and the screen switches to a website that live tracks Bill Gates' net-worth [figure 3.5]. The music's tempo, which is tied to the live counting on screen, jolts up violently as the performers must interpret every \$100 as a beat. The rate of planting trees is completely negligible when contrasted with the speed of accumulation that the very same systems create. This cheap gag misreads statistics to contrast two elements of the same system that are not often read together: the planting of trees by green-tech, and the accumulation of wealth by green-tech billionaires. This contrast asks under what conditions do we accept this discrepancy? Does the slow, questionable, planting of trees truly legitimise the unfathomable rate of wealth aggregation at a time of increased poverty and austerity worldwide?

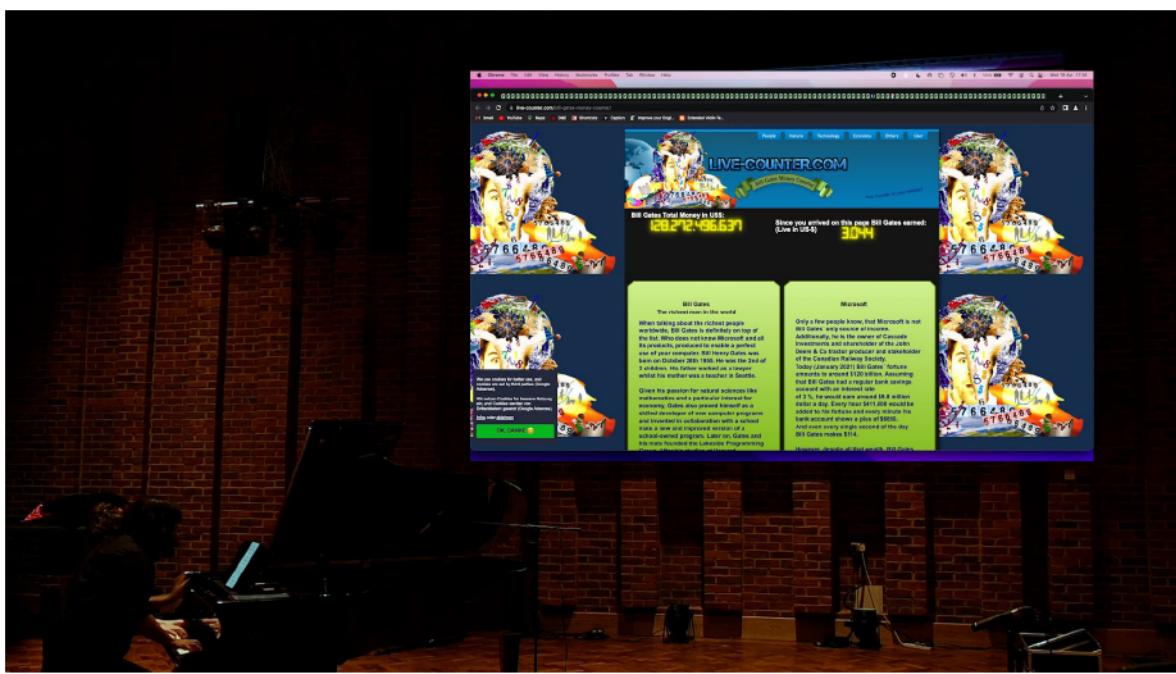


Figure 3.5 Yshani Perinpanayagam and Katherine Tinker perform *Put Your Hands Together [for late capitalism]* during a workshop at Turner Sims, 2023.

The piece is not intended only as a takedown of green capitalism. It *does* result in trees being planted, and the planted trees are important for the piece's power. Instead of trying to be outside of capitalism, an attempt that is often futile, it ironically highlights capitalism from

within. Some audience members may contemplate using Ecosia after watching the piece, even though the search engine is problematised. The critique in the piece goes beyond the question of whether one should or should not use Ecosia. Instead, it is directed at exposing some of capitalism's conditions of acceptability in the age of climate collapse. It reveals and challenges the logics and limits of trying to solve climate change within the system that has brought it on; and it points out that some of the figures masquerading as our saviours are profiting from this destruction (הרצחה וגם ירשת?). It is a playful, perhaps trolling, reflection on the way our actions are mitigated, and the profit that is extracted from us as we use our agency within their framework.

*Put Your Hands Together [for late capitalism]* employs most of the practices explored in this chapter to navigate the relationship between work, meaning, and reader. The piece avoids being 'on the nose', or at least tries to, in several ways: if on-the-noseness is a failure of Ngai's category the 'interesting', the piece uses the category of the 'zany' to offer an odd, non-linear, laborious, humorous spectacle. It can also be read as a fable of sorts; the piece is not taken to be *really* about planting trees by playing music, and this scene stands in for larger questions about political agency under late capitalism. The text is fragmented and abstracted among the different keywords. The music is abstract and opens up space for different meanings to mushroom. The piece relates to the 'real' by sonifying the live counters, and to the 'actual' by misusing a capitalist tool in way that, to return to Butler, "make[s] use of it to produce certain effects but also at the same time [to] make reference to that very use, [...] making that use into an explicit discursive item to be reflected on rather than taken for granted".<sup>257</sup> Even though the piece is direct, almost naïve, it investigates meaning-making and the politics of its consequences in ways that are both allegorical and real.

None of the approaches discussed above, and the practices that relate to them, are foolproof methods for avoiding negative criticism. Pieces can engage with these practices and still be experienced as on-the-nose by different audiences. However, I argue that these diverse techniques help understand how the tensions of meaning-making are being managed. By engaging with them, the pieces in this portfolio attempt to be multifaceted and still direct; they have ambiguity, without being ambivalent. They try to be convincing as aesthetic

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<sup>257</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 99.

experiences, without being restricted to conservative formulation of art, to invite free thinking and never obey.

## Chapter four

### Shaping Unknowable Futures

No piece of music is fully in its composer's control. Every score invites interpretation, and even pieces performed by their composer will change depending on musical instruments, amplifying technologies and physical spaces. While in some contexts this might be seen as a nuisance, in indeterminate music this lack of control is celebrated. In such pieces, unpredictability is treated as musical material, and agency becomes a main theme. Indeterminacy frames pieces not as sounding objects, but as the processes of making such objects sound. This focus on the process rather than the product has led some to suggest that music can be political not only in its explicit content, as explored in Chapters One-Three, but also in its model of music making. The idea that the process of creating a piece can be read in political terms is not limited to indeterminate music, and similar positions appear in conversations of diverse musics, from atonality to punk.<sup>258</sup> While some of my arguments might be relevant for other discourses, I will focus here on indeterminacy, where this line of argument is prevalent.<sup>259</sup> As I outline below, such positions see the human relations created within the rehearsal studio or concert hall, between composers, performers and the audience, as politically significant, offering new models for social relations.

Indeterminacy is often linked to the New York School of composition, a group of composers who worked in New York from the middle of the twentieth century, and in which John Cage was a central figure. In this chapter I will go beyond this genealogy and the definitions of indeterminacy that it offers, suggesting that indeterminacy should neither be seen as a singular tradition nor as a category of pieces. In the first part of this chapter, I offer an alternative reading of indeterminacy as a lens through which diverse musical practices can be understood. The chapter's second part will be dedicated to charting the different ways in which indeterminate practices engage with the political. In this section I will look at the limits of a common framing of indeterminate music as a metaphor, a blueprint or a laboratory for

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<sup>258</sup> See for example Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 139–43; Dawson Barrett, "DIY democracy: The direct action politics of US punk collectives," *American Studies* 52, no. 2 (2013): 23–42.

<sup>259</sup> It is a notion that appears in the writings of many musicians and musicologists of the field. See for example Christian Wolff, "Author's Preface," in *Occasional Pieces: Writings and Interviews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xix.

social relations. Finally, I will discuss my own pieces and show how I use indeterminacy to explore political agency in music.

Four Meditations for Orchestra

## IV

### Approaches and Departures (1995)

Each player selects independently one pitch (or sound) to be used for the entire piece.



Each player invents unique stylistic musical approaches and departures to and from their selected pitch (or sound) using the following options. Options may be selected in any order. All options are repeatable:

- Just play the pitch (or sound) with a clean attack and release. Duration, dynamics and articulations are free
- Approach the selected pitch (or sound)
- Depart from the selected pitch (or sound)
- Play an approach without sounding the selected pitch (or sound)
- Play a departure without sounding the selected pitch (or sound)
- Play or sing a quotation from some other piece of music at a very soft threshold dynamic level
- Just listen

#### **Commentary**

Whatever pitch (or sound) is selected by the player stays the same for all options for the duration of the piece. The duration of the pitch (or sound) is a value selected from a range of the shortest to the longest possible value — each time the pitch (or sound) is played or heard internally express a different value than before. The duration of the piece is arbitrary.

Each performer selects options and plays independently.

Each approach or departure should be unique — distinctly different in style and all elements (rhythm, timbre, articulation, dynamics etc.). For example an approach or a departure could be a single grace note, a melismatic group of notes, disjunct leaps etc. all using different styles.

#### **For Keyboard players:**

Each hand is independent. Chords may be substituted for the single pitch.

#### **For vocalists**

Use the following repeatable options in any order:

- Using a variety of vowel sounds sing long tones tuning to and merging with the instrumental sounds.

Example 4.1 Pauline Oliveros, "IV," *Four Meditations for Orchestra* (New York: Deep Listening Publications, 1996), 5.

In indeterminate works, artistic decisions that are traditionally made by a composer are passed on to other factors: to performers, to the audience, or to chance. Examples include

Terry Riley's *In C* (1964), a list of 53 short phrases which are each repeated by every performer as many times as they decide, creating ever-changing counterpoint and leaderless movement; John Cage's *Music of Changes* (1951), in which compositional decisions were made in consultation with *I Ching*, a chance based Chinese divination text; and Allison Knowles's *Bean Garden*, where the audience is invited to walk on an amplified stage covered with beans, their steps creating an unpredictable soundscape. In each of these pieces the structure of the music and its content rely on factors outside the composer's control.

Such compositions often combine staff-notation with additional graphical and textural information, and some eschew staff-notation altogether [example 4.1]. Pauline Oliverous's *Four Meditations For Orchestra* (1996), for example, consists of four short textual instructions, beginning with: "This is an invitation to create and play single independent sounds — no melodies. One unique sound at a time."<sup>260</sup> Another example is Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise* (1963-67), a graphic notation piece whose score is a series of 193 abstract images, lines and shapes that performers can interpret however they see fit.

*HPSCHD* (1969) by John Cage and Lejaren Hiller provides a useful example of a work that is indeterminate in many senses. The score for the piece was created with a computer software that randomly processed pieces by famous composers and outputted keyboard solos. This material is played on one to seven amplified harpsichords, alongside tapes for one to fifty-two amplified machines. Performers are free to choose what they play, and the audience is free to move around in the space. The premiere's duration was over five hours, but performers can play for any length of time.

The unconventional relationships that these pieces produce between composer, performers and audience are often read as being politically meaningful. Cage stated that *HPSCHD* is "political art which is not about politics but political itself."<sup>261</sup> The piece, he argued, shows that just as the ensemble has no need for a conductor, society has no need for one either. Rzewski, another prominent composer of indeterminate music, claimed that the emphasis on improvisation in music of the 1960s was "more or less linked with the revolutionary and anarchist ideas current at the time."<sup>262</sup> Video blogger John Rogers recently described

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<sup>260</sup> Pauline Oliveros, "I," *Four Meditations for Orchestra* (New York: Deep Listening Publications, 1996), 2.

<sup>261</sup> As quoted in Sara Heimbecker, "HPSCHD, gesamtkunstwerk, and utopia," *American Music* (2008): 478.

<sup>262</sup> Frederic Rzewski, "Little bangs: A nihilist theory of improvisation," *Current musicology* 67 (1999): 377.

Cardew's graphic scores as "liberating" the performers,<sup>263</sup> while musicologist Barbara Rose Lange wrote that the pieces of Pauline Oliveros "perform egalitarianism".<sup>264</sup> These positions share a view that music can be politically charged not only in its subject matter but in the model of music-making used to create it. In other words, the process of making a piece of music has political significance which reaches outside of the piece's boundaries, and is not dependent on *what* the piece conveys, but *how* it is constructed.<sup>265</sup> Indeterminacy is seen, in such positions, as an inherently political approach to musical works regardless of their topics, constituting new, equal, and free relationships between composers, performers, and the audience.

Not everyone, however, accepts this image. Cardew himself famously (or infamously) grew suspicious of avant-garde composition, criticising it for being embedded in bourgeois ideals. He wrote that *HSPCHD* "glorifies randomness" and that this randomness is "an oppressive chaos resulting from the lack of planning that is characteristic of capitalist system in decay (a rot of greed and exploitation)"<sup>266</sup>. George Lewis has argued that the theorisation of music created by American experimental composers in the European tradition works to deny its African American predecessors, creating a discourse based on whiteness. Cage's New York School began to experiment with performer agency right after the Bebop revolution of the nineteen-forties and fifties, in which Jazz musicians radically reshaped the nature of improvisation. Cage's attempts to distance himself from improvisation, often voicing diminutive positions about Jazz, are conspicuous in this context.<sup>267</sup>

My aim in this chapter is not to directly engage with these meaningful discourses on race and class in new music. However, such critiques express a sentiment that is central to my argument, which is that one cannot explore the inner-relationships of a piece without examining its context. I argue that in order to meaningfully claim that *freedom* or *equality* lie

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<sup>263</sup> John Rogers, *King Harold in Leyton & the Knights Templar*, YouTube, 20/05/2015: 7:23. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1biee3rfXU> (Accessed 15/09/2021).

<sup>264</sup> Barbara Rose Lang, "The Politics of Collaborative Performance in the Music of Pauline Oliveros," *Perspectives of New Music* 46, no 1 (2008): 40.

<sup>265</sup> Daniel Belgrad, "Improvisation, Democracy and Feedback," in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* ed. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 289-306.

<sup>266</sup> Cornelius Cardew, "Cage Ghost or Monster," in *Stockhausen serves Imperialism and other articles* (California: Latimer New Dimensions, 1974), 36. FULL PAGE NUMBERS FOR BIBLIOGRAPHY

<sup>267</sup> George E. Lewis, "Improvised music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological perspectives," *Black music research journal*, (1996): 98; Rebecca Y. Kim, "John Cage in Separate Togetherness with Jazz," *Contemporary Music Review* 31 no. 1 (2012): 63-89.

within a work one must understand how they correspond with politics, the operation of which is different within and beyond music. As Claire Bishop stressed, while writing on performance art, “models of democracy in art don’t have an intrinsic relationship to models of democracy in society”.<sup>268</sup>

Looked at from an activist perspective, the freedoms given in an indeterminate musical performance, as important as they may be, are of low stakes. What does “liberating” the performers mean in a world in which slavery persists? Whether or not a performer can choose the length of an Eb is not, in and of itself, a politically urgent question. Some scholars and musicians hold the position that such musical choices embody, represent, express or connect to choices made outside the concert hall. Rzewski, for instance, suggested that we see improvisation as a laboratory in which musicians try out new ways of being in society that can later be translated to the political world, but how this translation is made remains unclear.<sup>269</sup>

I am not criticising a free improvisation piece for not ending slavery. Sadly, no piece has the power to single-handedly do this. Rather, I am seeking to question whether any connection exists between struggles for freedom and the restricted sense in which free improvisation is “free”? As a practitioner I am tempted by the political possibilities of these practices, yet I am simultaneously sceptical. While critical approaches towards the process of music-making, and the idea that this can create “temporary autonomous zones,”<sup>270</sup> are exciting, I remain sceptical of the politicisation of these zones and their ability to impact issues outside of the field of music practice. In what follows I will chart some of the ways in which indeterminate music pieces engage with the political, and suggest two new ways of relating indeterminate music not just to the political in abstract but to activism. In order to do this, however, a better understanding of indeterminacy in music should first be established.

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<sup>268</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells - Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012): 279.

<sup>269</sup> Rzewski, “Little Bangs,” 380.

<sup>270</sup> Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991).

## Defining Indeterminate

The term ‘Indeterminate music’ is used by scholars and musicians in a range of ways. In what follows, I will present some of the different formulations of the term which, I argue, are illuminating, but limited. They are simultaneously too vague, offering loose definitions, and too restrictive, excluding works of music that could be meaningfully read as indeterminate. As such, this section will conclude with a suggestion of a new way to understand the term, not as a category but as a *way of thinking*.

Cline suggests that there are two separate yet connected types of indeterminacy, and traces this duality traced back to an article by Christian Wolff from the 1950s. In his article, Wolff identified two ways in which composers in his milieu were creating indeterminate music. The first, *indeterminacy in regards to composition*, relates to composers’ employment of chance-based decision-making while composing. For example, Cage’s use of the *i Ching*. The second, *indeterminacy in regards to performance*, relates to pieces in which performers’ agency exceeds the scope of interpretation in classical music practices. In such pieces, performers are called on to make choices regarding instrumentation, pitch, duration, articulation and form. Wolff’s unpublished 1957 text, a reduced version of which was published in 1958,<sup>271</sup> influenced Cage’s famous indeterminacy talks at Darmstadt that year,<sup>272</sup> and has had a crucial impact on our understanding and deployment of the term.

According to Wolff, the reason these seemingly separate forms of music-making should be understood under the same term, indeterminacy, is that in both cases the composer cannot know in advance what a piece will sound like.<sup>273</sup> Indeterminate pieces, then, are pieces in which the sonic realisation of the composition is unpredictable to the composer. Cline does not accept this umbrella definition of indeterminacy, arguing that a composer cannot ever know the outcome of any piece; if unpredictability is the defining criteria of a piece, he argues, then all music must be categorised as indeterminate. The author suggests a variation on Wolff as an alternative: “a composition is indeterminate if, and only if, by one means or other, the composer relinquished control over the sonic outcome to an unpredictable force [...] to a greater than normal extent”. The slight difference here is the focus on the relinquishing

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<sup>271</sup> Christian Wolff, “New and Electronic Music,” in *Occasional Pieces: Writings and Interviews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017 [1958]), 11–17.

<sup>272</sup> David Cline, “Two Concepts of Indeterminacy in Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 102, no. 1, (2019): 82–110.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid, 85–88.

of control (as opposed to control a composer could never have in the first place), and the ambiguous quantitative addition “to a greater than normal extent”. Cline recognises that this is not a perfect definition, being ambiguous and “unscientific”, however he argues that there is no need for a scientific definition.<sup>274</sup>

These two definitions frame indeterminacy as relating to two interconnected yet oppositional elements: unpredictability and control. While they are illuminating in their framing of the focus of indeterminacy they both emphasise the point of view of the composer. Considering performers' perspectives on this matter affords a more expansive understanding of the term, the practices tied to it and what is at stake. Contemporary pianist and musicologist Catherine Laws has highlighted the irony in having a composer-centric discourse on a musical practice that supposedly endeavours to foreground performer agency and to undo musical hierarchies.<sup>275</sup> To correct the balance, she has written about the experience of playing three indeterminate pieces, two of which would not fall either under Wolff's or Cline's definitions. For example, she writes about Morton Feldman's late piano work *Palais de Mari* (1986). While many of Feldman's earlier compositions utilise practices often associated with indeterminacy, such as graphic notation, his late works are fully notated. Nonetheless, Laws argues that the nature of the musical language in *Palais de Mari* places an emphasis on the performer's agency and on the unique materiality of every specific piano on which it is played. The piece is a chain of slow almost-repeats, where choices of tone, dynamics, and articulation are uncommonly exposed. The sound envelope of each piano is spotlighted as we listen to how the sound sustains and disappears. In this piece the composer does not relinquish powers “to a greater extent than normal”, especially if we take Feldman's previous work as a benchmark. The piece's notation is standard, with the performer being instructed precisely about pitch, rhythm and form. However, the areas to which the piece draws attention are those that are uncontrolled and unforeseeable for the composer. This means that, at least for the performer, the experience of playing it is similar to other indeterminate performances.

Not everyone will be convinced by this account and see Feldman's late sonatas as an indeterminate piece. Critics might argue that following this line might lead to an even more

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 95-96

<sup>275</sup> Catherine Laws, “Experiencing Indeterminacy in Performance,” *Contemporary Music Review* 41, no. 2-3 (2022): 136.

ambiguous definition than Cline's, as 'the areas to which the piece draws attention' is a subjective notion. Rather than focusing on different definitions of indeterminacy and their discrepancies, and in so doing treating it as a musical category, I suggest that we interpret this concept as a lens through which to approach music. Every piece has unforeseeable aspects and, in every piece (authored by a composer), the composer passes on musical decisions; indeterminacy is the sense in which this becomes meaningful, it is the creative exploration and celebration of such elements. Rather than a category with defining criteria, indeterminacy is an aspect of all music that can be seen as meaningful for composers, performers, scholars, and audience members. Sometimes performers' agency is experienced as functional, a fundamental part of music making, indeterminacy will not be especially useful for reflecting on such music. At other times it is a foundational meaningful lens through which to read the work. The role of indeterminacy can change from one piece to another, from one measure to the following, from one performance to the next, and between different accounts of the same performance. Indeterminacy is not the relinquishing of power, but its creative exploration. This approach suggests a move from quantitative to qualitative thinking, focusing not on the 'amount' of agency that is distributed, but at how it is distributed and for what ends.

Consider Jennifer Walshe's *THIS IS WHY PEOPLE OD ON PILLS AND JUMP OFF THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE* (2004). The piece's text score begins with the unorthodox instruction to the performer to "learn to skateboard". It continues with a list of directions that are to be done away from any musical instrument, and that all relate to skating: going to skateparks, looking at others skate and learning from them, watching videos, and composing an imagined skating path. Only at the very end of this process does the performer musically employ the experience and knowledge acquired in these tasks by choosing a pitch and "skating" their imagined path through it. This piece can be categorised as indeterminate by any definition, but such categorisation tells us little about its nature. The piece's artistic exploration is not evident in the sheer "amount" of musical properties chosen by the performer, being "greater than normal". Rather it focuses on how these choices are made. We gain little knowledge of this piece by noting that it is of the same category as *In C*, but if we use 'indeterminacy' as a way to investigate the *different* ways these two pieces manage performer agency their deeper aspects can be illuminated. *In C* asks musicians to make choices based on two considerations: how the music sounds, and a sense of ensemble (making sure too big a gap is not opened between players). Music is experienced as sound and produced through the relations between players. In *THIS IS WHY PEOPLE OD*, on the

other hand, the music is shaped by physical bodily experiences outside the concert hall. Sound is linked to other functions of the body,<sup>276</sup> and the relationship foregrounded in this piece is not between different players but between a performer and a subculture. Music appears as embodied and spatial, connecting audible aesthetics to bodily actions and imagined speciality.

Understanding indeterminacy as a lens rather than a category does not only address the problem that every piece is, to some degree, indeterminate; it also focuses our use of the term to illuminate the ways in which every piece engages with ‘control’ and ‘unpredictability’. By asking *how* and not *if* agency is given, we gain an insight on the function of agency, which already brings us closer to understanding a piece’s political exploration.

### Performers as audience

The curation of social interactions between musicians is where many commentators locate the political in indeterminate music. This line of thinking seems to chime with how Graeber understands radical creativity as the improvisational formation of social relations which, he argues, should always be directed toward unpredictable ends.<sup>277</sup> However, it is worthwhile to examine just what sort of power creativity and improvisation in the musical realm can have on larger social formulations and their ends. Indeterminacy’s experimentation in forming new relationships between players is seen as a site of political critique. Terry Riley’s *In C* (1964), for example, has been described as “democratic” because of its leader-less character.<sup>278</sup> Theorising this distribution of agency as a form of democracy highlights the way indeterminacy challenges composer-performer power relations. This sense of democracy can be expanded to not only include how performers interact, but also who the performers are, allowing musicians of different backgrounds (including non-professional) to play together. It is these properties that have prompted Barbara Rose Lange to argue that Pauline Oliveros’s pieces “perform egalitarianism.”<sup>279</sup> Lange’s ethnographic research of two ensembles working

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<sup>276</sup> Stefanou suggests using Conceptual Blending Theory to illuminate the way the piece merges music and physicality. Danae Stefanou, “The way we blend: Rethinking conceptual integration through intermedial and open-form scores,” *Musicae Scientiae* 22, no. 1 (2018): 108-118.

<sup>277</sup> David Graeber, “Fetishism as Social Creativity: or fetishes are gods in the process of construction”, *Anthropological Theory*, 5, 4, (2005): 432.

<sup>278</sup> Larry Austin, Douglas Kahn, and Nilendra Gurusinghe, “Is new music being used for political or social ends?,” *Source: Music of the Avant-garde, 1966–1973* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2011), 216.

<sup>279</sup> Lange, “The Politics of Collaborative Performance,” 40-41.

together to realise Oliveros's *Four Meditations for Orchestra* is useful in both understanding this claim and recognising its limits.

Lange relays the story of a collaboration between two groups of musicians with differing understandings of *Four Meditations for Orchestra* and of music-making in general. This text-score piece for an unfixed number of musicians playing undetermined instruments is formed of four movements, each consisting of a short paragraph with instructions. The instructions are open and the ensemble must make choices not only pertaining to pitch, duration, dynamics and form, but also to how such decisions are made. The central point of disagreement between the two ensembles arose around the number of rehearsals they should undertake before the concert. One group took the piece's openness as a call for a non-rehearsed performance, seeking to have a few conversations about the piece but not to 'ruin' the spontaneity and 'purity' of their interpretation. The other group saw this same feature as requiring even more preparation than would be needed on a fully notated work. They wished to discuss decisions, try out approaches and make sure that the choices each performer makes complement those of their colleagues, so that no one remains unheard.<sup>280</sup> Lange analyses their correspondence and work process, showing how each group frames and supports their positions, and how compromises are ultimately reached.

Lange has described the piece as "performing egalitarianism", yet her narrative exposes the piece's ambiguity towards the political positions that are supposedly embedded within it. Each ensemble saw *Four Meditations* as manifesting freedom and equality, but their perception of these terms differed. For one group, freedom constituted the complete lack of constrictions on individual expression, while the other saw it as an invitation to participate in decision making. In the first group's understanding, equality should be sought by not rehearsing the piece and refusing to inflict a pre-planned aesthetics on it; the second wanted to carefully rehearse to make sure all voices are given an equal chance to be heard. Regardless of the participants' political positions beyond music, their approaches to the piece can be understood in political terms. The first group channelled something of a libertarian understanding of freedom and equality by believing that an unplanned spontaneity will best embody them, while the second group suggested more of a socialist position on these values. Thus, the redistribution of agency within the groups and the insistence on free interpretation

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid, 48-52.

only dictate the most obscure notions of freedom and equality, and the participants' varied understanding of these aspects of the piece depend on their musical and/or political tendencies.<sup>281</sup> The piece is so open it allows almost opposing readings of the democratic values that it supposedly performs.

The fact that the piece does not advance a specific reading of political values does not mean it holds no political value.<sup>282</sup> One could argue that the negotiation of these differences is crucial in its own right, and that in essence the piece is an invitation for people to think, discuss, and find a way to agree on what freedom and equality are, albeit in a low-stakes situation. The piece itself does not dictate what freedom or equality are, but rather cultivates an environment among the performers that allows them to engage critically with social and political matters. Seen from this angle, the people who gain new insight thanks to the piece into how social relations can be construed are the performers who are called upon to engage with them critically. I suggest the term “performers as audience” for this aspect of the politics of indeterminacy, highlighting that in such a reading of indeterminate work, the audience for the exploration of political ideals is the very people who execute it, rather than the spectators.<sup>283</sup>

Lange’s account of the performance of *Four Meditations for Orchestra* exposes the ways in which politics can manifest in indeterminate musical work more generally. Many pieces engage with democratic values such as freedom and equality in a nonspecific manner, and in many pieces the performers are the most meaningful audience members. Indeterminacy constantly calls upon performers to engage critically and creatively with questions of hierarchy and control, and therefore to explore different political arrangements. Nevertheless, when thinking in terms of “performers as audience”, one might ask: what is left for the non-performing audience? The idea that the political content is found in the rehearsal space rather than the concert hall is in keeping with the experimental approach that emphasises process rather than result.<sup>284</sup> However, the fact that these pieces are still publicly performed,

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<sup>281</sup> Uri Agnon, “Between Critique and Judgment” forthcoming.

<sup>282</sup> See for example Gopinath’s account of the conflicting political readings of Steve Reich’s *Come Out* (1966): Sumanth Gopinath, “The problem of the political in Steve Reich’s come out,” in *Sound Commitments: Avant-garde music and the sixties* ed. Robert Edlington, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 121-144.

<sup>283</sup> This brings to mind Wishart’s account of performing with the Scratch Orchestra to a single audience member, who left before the show was over. Wishart was unhappy with the ensemble’s failure at communicating though he did not think this worry was widely shared. Trevor Wishart, “Review of Stockhausen Serves Imperialism by Cornelius Cardew,” *Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1990)* 11 (1975): 44-45.

<sup>284</sup> Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4.

programmed and commissioned suggests that an audience (in the conventional sense) can find them meaningful also. How, then, is this audience politically impacted?

### Political idioms

George E. Lewis argued that Afro-diasporic indeterminate music practices are deeply tied to political expression. Citing a host of Bebop musicians, Lewis suggests that the way these musical traditions engage with politics is through their use of personality, idiom and memory. Unlike the New York School composers, who use indeterminacy as a way to put distance between the composer's identity (and taste) and the produced work, Jazz improvisation provides a way for musicians to put their personality front and centre. The fact that this personality is tied up with the reality of oppression foregrounds it as a political position in and of itself. While New York School composers often do not explicitly dictate the styles and idioms in which their pieces should be realised (even if these are implied), in Jazz, references to idioms and traditions of music-making are key. Unlike white experimental music, which often tries to avoid both subjectivity and narrative,<sup>285</sup> personality and storytelling are central to Black improvisation traditions.<sup>286</sup>

In Afro-diasporic music, from Jazz to hip-hop, improvisation serves as a tool for the disenfranchised to create a sound and a style that breaks free from the binary of 'artwork' vs. 'entertainment'.<sup>287</sup> In such a political project, performing styles which are understood in both individual and collective terms is an attempt at taking control over one's voice and fighting the oppressive powers of censorship on the one hand, and of cultural appropriation on the other. History and idiom are central for any such attempt. Afro-diasporic improvisation is tied to musical traditions because, to quote Lewis, "from an ex-slave's point of view an insistence on being free from memory might be regarded with some suspicion – as either a form of denial or of disinformation."<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Jennie Gottschalk *Experimental Music Since 1970* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 16.

<sup>286</sup> Lewis, "Improvisation Since 1950", 117-119.

<sup>287</sup> Lewis, "Improvisation Since 1950," 95.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid, 109.

The political significance of considering improvisation in relation to musical and extra-musical histories can be further discerned from Fredrick Douglass' 1845 descriptions of group improvisations by enslaved people. He writes:

“[T]hey would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;—and as frequently in the one as in the other.”

This expression, according to Douglass, had a crucial impact on his own politicisation, and could similarly affect others:

“To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul.”<sup>289</sup>

Improvisation, therefore, was an important political music making model in the USA for at least a hundred years before the emergence of the New York School. While the two traditions share some practices and conceptual prepositions, most importantly relating to unpredictability, their way of registering political meaning are profoundly different. While democratisation for Oliverous’s *Four Meditations for Orchestra* is gained through the refusal to specify which musical instruments, idioms and traditions should be used to realise it, for most Afro-diasporic music, precision with these very factors is crucial for expressing a political message.

Max Roach’s *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* (1960) not only exemplifies this approach but explicitly engages with it. Considered as the first explicitly political long-form Jazz piece, it uses musical idioms, songs, and improvisation to chart a critical narrative of slavery and the struggle against it.<sup>290</sup> It was composed and recorded at a revolutionary period in the history of Jazz improvisation, just as musicians were moving away from the stylistic constraints of Bebop and experimenting in even more radical forms of freedom.<sup>291</sup> The piece combines

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<sup>289</sup> Fredrick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1845]), 23.

<sup>290</sup> Bridget R. Cooks and Graham Eng-Wilmot, "Sound of the Break: Jazz and the Failures of Emancipation," *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2016): 319.

<sup>291</sup> George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 37-38.

these novel approaches with traditional improvisatory techniques which played a key part in the Black freedom movement for decades.

The opening track, “Driva’ Man”, clearly references a work-song: it begins with Abby Lincoln singing a chilling description of a slave-driver. Interpreting time freely, she is accompanied only by a single tambourine stroke for every sung line. This work-song is then transformed into a 5/4 hard-bop tune with a consistent double bass pattern over which wind instruments improvise. The track ends with Lincoln singing again the opening text, however this time over the 5/4 bassline. The next track, “Freedom Day”, is a forward-pushing song about emancipation and sounds like a hard-bop track from start to end. It is the first time we hear the band leader, Max Roach, playing a conventional solo. Next, at the composition’s centre, lies a text-less free improvisation triptych for singer and drumset that follows a ternary shape which is reflected in its title: “Prayer/Protest/Peace”. Improvisation here strays far from the bebop tradition, with a flexible, swelling sense of time; all aspects of rhythm and pitch are free and expressive.

These first three tracks portray the history of Black people in the USA, from the horrors of slavery, through the ambivalence of de jure freedom (which is commemorated with much uncertainty in the second track), to the twentieth century era of protest and struggle, which is often tied to peaceful and spiritual resistance. The two final tracks turn their gaze towards Africa: “All Africa” is a percussion improvisation that combines African and afro-Cuban rhythms, instruments and practices. It starts with the sentence “The beat has a rich and magnificent history,” again signalling the piece’s interest in narrative, tradition, and history. The final track, resonating with contemporary free-Jazz albums such as Ornette Coleman’s *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959), is named “Tears for Johannesburg”, and thus brings “the rich and mysterious history” all the way to the Apartheid regime in 1960.

Improvisation is at the heart of this piece, in which instrumental freedom occurs within a changing context of idioms, styles and topics. By tying stylistic idioms of improvisation to the different stages of the narrative, the piece creates a complex relationship between freedom and expression. Freedom in this piece is not constructed as an abstract or metaphorical property. Rather, the piece explores concrete and limited freedoms, always relating them to the struggles that must be fought for their achievement.

A similar relationship to improvisation, narrative, and tradition can be found in contemporary pieces such as *SWEET TOOTH* (2017) by Elaine Mitchener. This piece, too, explicitly engages with the history of slavery, in a “seminal creative statement of resistance and defiance”.<sup>292</sup> The piece is a devised music theatre work for four improvisers: a singer (Mitchener), violinist, saxophonist, and drummer. The show tells the bloody history of the sugar industry and its relationship to the transatlantic slave trade. It was created collaboratively, under Mitchener’s leadership, and it interweaves improvised music, movement, and the singing of found-text. The artistic practices that make this performance so “visceral” (as it is often described)<sup>293</sup> could not be effectively mapped onto a score, and the improvised nature of the music is integral to the piece’s language. *SWEET TOOTH* is not a Bebop piece, but the music is clearly rooted in the kind of expressionist, embodied improvisation that can be heard most clearly on the third track of the *Freedom Suite*, and the piece sounds as though it was inspired by that work.<sup>294</sup>

A main aspect of the piece is the blurring of boundaries between music and movement. The players move around the space with their instruments, and their sounds are experienced as integrated with their physicality—one that could not be expressed on a staff. The work’s impact is both in the storytelling, where we are exposed to rattling texts about the prices of human beings deemed other, and in Mitchener’s virtuosic personification of enslaved people and their oppressors. This personification is accomplished by a combination of musical, theatrical, and dance techniques in which the freedom of devised improvisational art embodies the very opposition of freedom.

### Political themes

When asked if his music engages with politics, Riley responded “You mean the big politics in the Sky? No, I don’t think so”. However, when probed about the structure of *In C* and what it

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<sup>292</sup> Robert Wyatt, “Breaking the chains: Elaine Mitchener on the British Empire’s legacy of cruelty,” *The Wire*, February 2018, online at <https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/interviews/elaine-mitchener-sweet-tooth-interview> (Accessed 15/07/2023); Kevin Le Gendre, “Elaine Mitchener Delivers Dramas Of Defiance At St. George’s, London”, *Jazzwise*, 23/02/2018, online at <https://www.jazzwise.com/news/article/elaine-mitchener-delivers-dramas-of-defiance-at-st-george-s-london> (accessed 15/07/2023).

<sup>293</sup> Ibid

<sup>294</sup> Le Gendre also draws this connection, calling Lincoln’s performance on that piece a predecessor to Mitchener’s work. Ibid.

offers performers, he answered “Yes, I was conscious of the fact that it was very democratic [...] In that sense, I guess, it’s political”.<sup>295</sup> Unlike Afro-diasporic music, where content (musical or extra-musical) plays a role in the political positioning of a piece, in Euro-American indeterminate music it is the *how* not the *what* that is foregrounded. The limits of the political reading of this approach were discussed above, including the ambiguity of abstract ideals such as ‘freedom’, ‘egalitarianism’ and ‘democracy’, and the challenge of implicating the audience in these ideals. Some pieces, however, attempt to tie indeterminate practices to more concrete political subject matters.

In Rzewski’s *Coming Together* (1971), a vocalist recites a letter written by political prisoner Sam Malliville, sent from Attica prison shortly before the uprising in which law enforcement killed him. The text is an upbeat philosophical celebration of life which becomes politically charged through the knowledge of its context. This political text is accompanied by “any number of instruments, although it is usually done by a group of 8-10”. The score is a single relentless line of semiquavers coupled with a “performance procedure” that explains players’ choices in engaging with the notes: playing together or in groups, all or some of the notes, playing different pitches with the same rhythm, etc [example 4.2]. Christian Asplund has described playing the piece as “literally” experiencing the “socio-political phenomena in the course of performing,” thus highlighting the ‘performers as audience’ element of the piece.<sup>296</sup> David Metzer argues that the “elements of freedom and equality” that are found in Rzewski’s collective music pieces take on a new meaning in this work. Metzer suggests that the ‘coming together’ of the members of the ensemble while playing the work represents “people uniting and building upon ideas through collaboration like the inmates did in the uprising.”<sup>297</sup> While we experience the piece as a single unit, the music and the lyrics amplifying each other, without prior knowledge I believe most audience members will not know that the piece has an indeterminate aspect to it. The political significance of this piece for the audience can therefore be better understood through the perspectives discussed in the first chapters of this research.

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<sup>295</sup> Austin, Kahn, and Gurusinghe, “Is new music being used for political or social ends?,” 216.

<sup>296</sup> Christian Asplund, “Frederic Rzewski and spontaneous political music,” *Perspectives of New Music* (1995): 418.

<sup>297</sup> David, Metzer, “Prisoners’ Voices: Frederic Rzewski’s Coming Together and Attica,” *The Journal of Musicology* 38, no. 1 (2021): 124.

*Workers Union* by Louis Andriessen suggests a different approach. The piece is written for “any loud-sounding group”, and the score indicates rhythms and melody contours to be played in rhythmic unison but without specifying the pitches [example 4.3]. This contour is formed of short phrases, each to be looped an indeterminate number of times. The exact pitches are decided by each player, but unlike *In C*, the ensemble decides together the number of repetitions each phrase is played, performing a collective agency rather than a purely individual one. Similarly to *Four Meditations for Orchestra*, this piece highlights the rehearsal process as a time for political thinking which facilitates a political experience for the performers and thus treats them as an “audience” of sorts.<sup>298</sup> The score states: “Only in the case of every player playing with such an intention that their part is an essential one, the work will succeed; just as in the political work”.<sup>299</sup>

While its relationship to politics is allegorical, compared to *In C* and *Four Meditations*, *Workers Union* creates a more specific political image in two meaningful regards. Firstly, it constructs a specific relationship between freedom and equality by indicating that in some respects (pitch) performers have freedom as individuals, and in others (form) they must take decisions as a group and use their agency collectively (in rhythmic unison). Secondly, it implicates the audience in its politics by creating a very clear mechanism - it is easy to understand that the players are playing different melodies of the same contour at the same time, even if one is unfamiliar with the score; and by giving the piece a concrete title. These help frame the audience's experience of the piece in regards to a specific political idea. The metaphor at the heart of the work is specific. While still being open to provoking abstract political thoughts, the piece's rhythmic, passionate, dissonant, and at times aggressive unisons are immediately read as a celebration of the power of unionisation.

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<sup>298</sup> Adlington quotes Andriessen stressing “I saw ever more clearly: for me the acoustic result no longer has any value in an aesthetic respect, only the musical process”, Robert Adlington, *Composing Dissent: avant-garde music in 1960s Amsterdam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 268.

<sup>299</sup> Whether or not in “the political work” every person plays their part “as if it is essential” is a question that I do not address here, but would be important for any in depth analysis of *Workers’ Union*.

### Frederic Rzewski: Performance Procedure for Coming Together

**Voice:** The first fragment of text ("I think") should be spoken as an upbeat to the beginning. Thereafter every fragment of text is spoken at the beginning of each measure. The speaker should try to suggest a different expressive character with each repetition of a sentence.

**Instruments:** *Coming Together* can be performed by any number of instrumentalists, although it is usually done with a group of 8 to 10 players. At least one of the players, usually an electric bass or bass guitar, plays the entire bass line as written. This may be reinforced by using also piano or synthesizer. For the remainder of the ensemble, there is a single basic playing technique which appears in a somewhat different form in each of the eight sections (letters A through H). In this technique, each player follows the written bass line without playing all of the notes, but only some of them, sometimes at random, sometimes in accordance with a given scheme, sometimes sustaining them and sometimes not. Whether a note is short or long, it must be played together with the bass line, either at unison or some octave doubling, depending on the instrument.

**A:** All instruments attack the first low G together *f f*, sustaining it (*diminuendo to pp*) for two to three measures, after which only the bass line is heard. Gradually, after a few measures of silence the instruments begin to enter in staggered fashion, very softly, with long sustained sounds *p p*. Each note should last at least a measure, and should be followed by a few measures of silence. This last depends on the number of instruments playing, but the general effect should be that of individual isolated sounds of different instruments fading in and out of each other.

**B:** Divide the ensemble into two groups, high and low. The higher instruments play only the notes with accents, the low instruments only the low G's, somewhat sustained.

**C:** Somewhat similar in character to A, but with more activity. Instead of playing single sustained notes of one or two measures' duration, as in A, each player plays short chains of two or three notes, *legato*, each note lasting two to four beats. Each chain should be separated by a silence of a few measures. As in A, let only one or two instruments play at a time.

**D:** Similar to B, but with the rôles reversed. High instruments play only the high B-flats, low instruments only the notes marked *staccato*.

**E:** Each player constructs short melodies by choosing notes *ad libitum* (but without ever playing two sixteenth-notes in succession), about three or four per measure, and playing them *legato* and *p p*. A melody may consist of five to ten notes. After each melodic phrase a player should rest for a measure or two, then play another melody. This is a rather difficult technique to master. It is important that not all instruments play at periodic intervals (e.g. on the beat). A player should choose beforehand what note he/she wants to play, wait for it to come up, then play exactly together with the bass line. At the end of E all the players drop out gradually with the exception of the bass line.

**F:** This section resembles E, but has a virtuoso character. Each player chooses notes at random and plays them *staccato sforzato*, as fast as he/she can play without ever playing two sixteenth-notes in succession, and taking care to be precisely together with the bass-line. The combined should be of a continuous rapid alternation of instrumental colors, without ever having more than one pitch sounding at the same time.

**G:** Continue the hocketing effect of F, except that now each player plays short groups of sixteenth-notes rather than individual notes. These groups are chosen at random by each player: short at first (3-4 notes) and separated by longer silences (a few beats), then becoming longer, with shorter silences between them, as H is approached.

**H:** Each player plays all of the notes, or as many as possible given the limitations of breathing, etc. The sound should be very full and all notes executed precisely together up to the end, which should be in strict tempo with a sharp cut-off.

Example 4.2 Frederic Rzewski Performance Procedures for *Coming Together* (Brussels: Sound Pool Music, 1971).

## Workers Union

Louis Andriessen

Example 4.3 Louis Andriessen *Workers Union* (Amsterdam: MuzicGroup, 1977), 2.

## Precarious Music

As a lens rather than a category, indeterminacy can be meaningfully applied to three pieces in this portfolio: *Workers Union (gig version)*, *BP Fiddles as the World Burns* and *Or Never*.<sup>300</sup> Each of these pieces engages differently with indeterminacy's central aspects—agency, control, unpredictability—and each offers a different approach to politicising them. In what follows, I will first show how *Workers Union (gig version)* elaborates on some of the political formulations discussed above, before exploring how the two other pieces suggest new ways of politically implicating indeterminacy, moving from metaphor to action.

The concept of a solo version of Andriessen's *Workers Union* is counterintuitive. The unification of a group of individuals is at the heart of the piece, both sonically and conceptually. The absurdity of this idea, however, is what drew me to it, as it strikes me as a potent site for the examination of current forms of labour exploitation in an anti-union late-capitalist context. The politics of labour have meaningfully changed since Andriessen composed his piece in the 1970s and workers are now faced with different challenges, such as the precarious conditions of work in the twenty first century, an era of zero-hour contracts, gig economy and anti-union practices.<sup>301</sup> This reworking of Andriessen is a piece by, for, and about the 'precariat' - the growing class that includes delivery drivers, academics, musicians and many other workers across diverse fields. There are, of course, crucial differences between the experiences of driving for an exploitative company such as Uber and playing percussion, but there are also crucial unifying aspects. Even the name 'gig economy' is taken from the work conditions of the world of music. While Andriessen's piece celebrates the power of unionised work, this reimagination both critically highlights new challenges to unionisation, and explores the unifying experiences that tie many of us to each other. It does so via its negotiation of agency and indeterminacy, and the ways in which it directs the audience's experiences using musical references, a clear mechanism, and its title.

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<sup>300</sup> *BP Must Fall* also has an indeterminate aspect to it, the song "Madness" contains pitches that are freely chosen by the protesters, but I will not discuss this here.

<sup>301</sup> Standing traces the history of 'the precariat' to the 1980s, but argues that it is still a 'class in the making', and that the 2010s are a pivotal time for it. Guy Standing, "The precariat: Today's transformative class?," *Development* 61, no. 1-4 (2018): 115-121.

The piece is indeterminate with regards to both performer freedom and the application of chance operations. It echoes Andriessen in the kind of agency given to the performer: the percussionist must choose the instruments being played, as the score only refers to them as percussion 1-6, and the player decides how many times they repeat each phrase before moving onto the next. The score, therefore, functions similarly to Andriessen's, indicating the rhythm, contour and order of phrases, but leaving the number of iterations and exact sounds up to the performer. The similarity is highlighted by the piece's opening rhythms that cite *Workers Union* [example 4.4]. Unlike *Workers Union*, the piece incorporates chance as central to its mechanism: the musicalised metronome changes tempo randomly. Since the performer must follow these tempi, the speeds of the piece are unpredictable. The sight of the performer adjusting their rhythm to a changing beat makes the indeterminate aspect of the piece apparent, clarifying to the audience that there is something uncontrollable in the performance.



Example 4.4 *Workers Union (gig economy)* b. 1-5. Compare to example 4.3

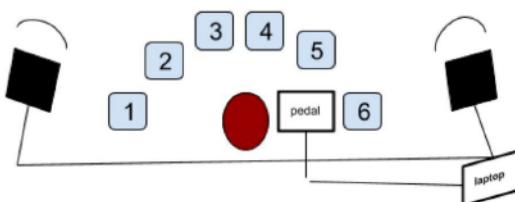
In terms of political function, too, the piece echoes *Workers' Union*. The title and the clear mechanism frame the audience's perception of the music as an allegory concerning labour politics within the gig economy. Whether or not an audience member is familiar with the original piece should not meaningfully impact their experience of the piece as commenting on precarious work. Performer agency is read here as commenting, through metaphor, on the politics of labour as it exists outside the concert hall. The two pieces share a pro-worker stance, but while Andriessen optimistically highlights the power of unions, this piece takes the challenges of modern-day economics as its starting point and presents a less buoyant position. The set up creates an impossible situation for the performer, constructing a power imbalance between a random, disembodied, powerful force and a performer strainingly attempting to satisfy it.

The sounds used for the musicalised metronome – phone notifications and chopped up Deliveroo adverts – inform the allegory and help position the piece in relation to its subject matter. The 'power' in the piece lies with the disembodied, technologised sounds we all have

in our pockets; it is these sporadically changing sounds that control the performer, and, through the use of extreme tempos, push them to extremes. The piece stages the logic of on-demand phone-app fetishism, a term relating, as Graeber summarises, to the process whereby “We create things, and then, because we don’t understand how we did it, we end up treating our own creations as if they have power over us.”<sup>302</sup> The piece therefore dramatises performer agency in order to paint a critical picture of power relations in the contemporary workforce. In *Workers’ Union*, personal freedom is effectively combined with group decision making, whereas here personal freedom is subjugated to the whims of an invisible hand.

The piece’s ending is less conclusive and allows at least for the possibility of optimism. Towards the end the performer disengages from the metronome, first slowing down to a near-stop, then accelerating as fast as they can and finally stopping abruptly. The end could be either read as the worker being defeated by the mechanism, or as refusing to participate within the system which created it. In a switch of power relations, the tape part for this final section is triggered by the performer, the music reinforcing the semantic ambiguity. This music, a slowed down, re-harmonised version of De Geyter’s “L’internationale” (1888) on a low-tech synth sound, gives the piece a new emotional colour. For those who recognise it, the citation also inserts a relevant yet anachronistic political context into the piece’s last moments.

Choose any six percussion instruments/objects and organise them in a semicircle according to a spectrum of your choice (low to high, dry to wet, small to big etc.)



It should be physically on the edge of possibility to play instruments 1 and 6 simultaneously.

Example 4.5 *Workers Union (gig economy)* detail from performance instructions.

Following pieces such as Tom Johnson’s *Failing* (1975), *Workers Union (gig version)* places the notion of ‘failure’ at its centre, and uses it as another site to investigate indeterminacy. It is impossible to play this piece seamlessly, since any performer will always take time in shifting their tempo to that of a randomly changing metronome. The score indicates that the

<sup>302</sup> Graeber, “Fetishism as Social Creativity,” 411.

distances between instruments should make playing them at the same time “almost impossible”, adding another layer of complication [example 4.5]. The unplayable nature of the music means that a successful performance will be impressive yet will never be perfectly in time. It will feature a failure—one which is central to the piece’s political positioning and critical approach to the gig economy. Each performer, however, will ‘fail’ differently, as is evident from percussionist Eugene Ughetti’s remarks during the workshop on this piece: “you always want to fail well”.<sup>303</sup> Failure becomes a success of sorts, an expression, a way of playing. Exposure to the sort of ‘failure’ that takes place in any performance resonates with the indeterminacy that Laws describes in Feldman’s sonata: a foregrounding of the types of agency that exist in all musical performances. A centering of the indeterminate aspects of any human action.

Indeterminacy helps focus the piece on failure as an aspect of human nature, and as a form of self-expression. The political meaning of ‘failing well’, whether in work, music, or activism, is an area the piece leaves open. However, both the open-ended and conclusive elements of the piece’s allegorical nature are driven by agency, unpredictability and control, by indeterminacy and precariousness. The ending, ambiguous as it may be, hints at a way forward, utilising self-expression, citation, agency and even failure towards new political possibilities.

### Indeterminate music in activism

In May 2021, BP sponsored an exhibition at the British Museum focused on the Roman emperor Nero. The activist group BP or Not BP? responded by organising a protest performance inside the museum, in which BP was staged as the emperor playing the fiddle while Rome burns. The protest was performed as a surprise action-piece inside the museum by BP or not BP?. It was formed of two parts: a music theatre piece, followed by a recorded testimony of an Australian firefighter. The musical element included three layers: violinists dressed as Roman emperors, a textless choir dressed in red, and a tape piece playing fire sounds. All three layers had meaningful indeterminate aspects, but I focus here on the violin music, as this aspect was under my direct responsibility.

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<sup>303</sup> Said at a workshop of the piece, Turner Sims, the University of Southampton, April 2023.

We wanted to create a rich violin sound that could fill the great hall, fashion a sense of ‘Romanness’ and express both the urgency of the situation and the idleness with which it is being handled. This is a complex musical message to create at the best of times, but the performance’s context posed some unique challenges:

1. The British museum bans the entrance of musical instruments. The violins had to be smuggled in, and we couldn’t know in advance if all three would make it. Security could block the entry of instruments or musicians, making the number of choir members, violinists, and violin was unknown.
2. It was impossible to predict how long the piece would last. The British Museum could succeed in shutting the performance down after 45 seconds or not at all.
3. As is often the case with artistic actions, we had little rehearsal time (two hours).
4. Music had to be memorised to avoid smuggling stands, and scores, and to create a powerful image.

Michael Nyman notes that a central feature of indeterminate music is that unpredictable difficulties are encountered in performance.<sup>304</sup> This piece raised the stakes for such unpredictability by engaging with circumstances that were well beyond our control. Instead of trying to compensate for these elements or overcome them, we took unpredictability as imbued with creative potential and utilised indeterminate music-making practices. The piece had to be flexible and adjustable. The performers would be the people in charge of adjusting it, and they needed tools that allow them to make decisions on the spot. Agency was given to the performers, both out of an ideological position invested in decentralised activism, and for pragmatic reasons that respond to the piece’s setting.

The violin part is formed of three phrases labelled A, B and C [example 4.6]. The performers begin by playing A in unison. Then each performer can either come back to the beginning or move on to B, which can also be looped as many times as a performer wishes. After a performer has played A, they can repeat any phrase or sub-phrase, of any length, within A and B, as many times as they wish. After having played both A and B they can choose to move to the last, shortest section, C. The piece ends with all three looping section C in unison. This mechanism which falls under what Nyman calls “people processes”,<sup>305</sup> was

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<sup>304</sup> Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 15.

<sup>305</sup> Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 6.

inspired by Terry Riley's *In C* (1964), and it allows for the kind of indeterminate counterpoint and structure that is at the heart of that piece. The musical language of sections A and B is baroque like, a style that breaks with section C which uses a rhythmic cry at the top of the violin's register.

The musical score for the violin part of Nero consists of three sections: A, B, and C. Section A is labeled 'A' with a tempo of 180 BPM and a bright, optimistic character. The score shows a series of eighth-note patterns with grace notes. A performance instruction below the staff reads: 'Play A as written once, then repeat allowing any bar as many times as you see fit.' Section B is labeled 'B' and features a more complex counterpoint with sixteenth-note patterns. A performance instruction below the staff reads: 'Loop any bar as many times as you see fit. At the end of B go to the beginning of A, B or C.' Section C is labeled 'C' and consists of a rhythmic cry on a single note. A performance instruction below the staff reads: 'Loop any bar as many times as you see fit. At the end of C go to the beginning of A or C, not B.'

Example 4.6 *Nero* violin part.

Nero definitely did not play baroque music while Rome burned. It is unlikely he played anything, and the Baroque era only arrived two thousand years after his death. However, the musicians of the baroque were invested in Greek and Roman cultures and created an aesthetic link that the piece exploits. The reference to the baroque in the musical language makes the piece sound ancient and the dance-like nature of the first two phrases expresses a carelessness. Yet the exceedingly dense counterpoint that is caused by phrases of different lengths being overlaid creates a frantic and urgent feeling that reaches a climax with the unison on section C. A tension is created from the playing of carefree music in the 'wrong' place, both musically (in clashing counterpoint) and literally (in the museum's great hall). The emotional contrast between the carelessness of the musical material and the distress of its setting is magnified by it being played over a choir which solemnly repeats segments of a lamenting bass figure. This emotional contrast attempts to capture both the cavalier attitude of BP-Nero-British Museum, and the urgency of the crisis which they are ignoring and creating.

It is not uncommon for protests to include indeterminate music; the sounds of chants, drums and shattering glass are all unpredictable to an extent. In this example, however, an indeterminate practice is used purposefully for both activist and aesthetic reasons. Indeterminacy is not an unfortunate fact but a site for creativity. Composer Michael Parsons observed that giving a group of musicians the same music and asking them to each interact

with it differently creates a ‘multiplicity’ with a “very economical form of notation”, saying that it makes use of music’s “hidden resources”.<sup>306</sup> This economy was instrumental in creating intricate and expressive violin music in an easily memorable manner, and the hidden resources were mobilised for activist ends. Riley’s organising principles prove effective for distributing agency and for creating complex sound. However, the musical material used for this process is not “without memory”, in the way Lewis describes the work of the New York School, but rather utilises idiom and style (baroque-like dance) to create links to an imagined past and to comment on the present day. This material is shaped by players who are making choices based both on their aesthetic preferences, and on their reading of uncertain circumstances.

One sense in which indeterminacy is political in this piece is that it reflects the ideals and work ethics of a non-hierarchical group. Yet it is not this non-hierarchy that makes it political in the audience’s perspective, but rather its context and setting, tackling a specific issue head on. The piece combines the type of politicised indeterminacy discussed in relation to *Workers’ Union* and employs them within an activist intervention. It moves beyond both allegory and critique, as they are discussed in the first chapters of this research, to use music not only as a means of highlighting the artificial nature of a political situation that is being presented as natural (that big oil should support culture), but also as a way to creatively interrupt this situation. This example highlights indeterminacy not only as a way of celebrating a metaphorical aspect of music making, but as a powerful and flexible toolkit for artistic activism.

### Activism in indeterminate music

According to Gottschalk, indeterminate music often seeks to “bring the outside in”.<sup>307</sup> This is achieved by incorporating everyday actions and objects within performances, for example playing radios on stage. This is another aspect in which indeterminacy can be seen as interacting with the political: the “outside” can often be loaded with political meanings, and by bringing the outside “in” pieces can engage with the ‘real’, as explored in Chapter Three. The orchestral piece *Or Never* “brings the outside” into both the rehearsal space and the concert hall in a different manner to the use of objects and radios, and suggests another

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<sup>306</sup> As quoted in Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 5.

<sup>307</sup> Gottschalk, *Experimental Music Since 1970*, 18.

approach to politicising indeterminacy. In *BP Fiddles as the World Burns*, indeterminacy is used within an activist context, whereas in *Or Never* activism is explored within indeterminate music making. As a concert hall piece *Or Never* is in some ways closer to the examples discussed at the beginning of the chapter, yet, whereas performers' decisions in indeterminate pieces usually depend on their personal taste or on pure chance, in *Or Never* it is their actions outside the concert hall that shape the piece.

In the score, questions are placed above musical sections [example 4.7]. Performers are asked to strictly answer 'yes' or 'no' to these questions, and their decisions inform the performance: if they answer 'yes' to a question, they play the section below it, if they answer 'no' they do not. This basic schema can be complicated at specific moments, for example when players are asked to hold a note unless they ever feel despair, as well as by the percussion section which always play their parts 'as written'. The questions relate to the musicians' feelings (e.g. "are you hopeful?"), thoughts (e.g. "is it moral to eat an avocado?") and actions (e.g. "have you ever participated in a protest?") in response to climate change, bringing into discussion a wide range of issues, from mundane everyday choices, to complex political dilemmas. The questions are also projected behind the orchestra in real time, appearing on the screen just as the ensemble answers them.

12

19. Should we protest about the climate crisis?

20. Will you?

101

Picc. Fl. Ob. Cl.

Example 4.7 *Or Never* b. 101-107, flutes, oboes and clarinets. Questions above the staff: (19) Should we protest about the climate crisis? (20) Will you?

The piece begins with a succession of instruments playing sforzando on notes in the higher part of their registers, accumulating to a quartal chord. Then, in free time, each player makes

their way down, creating a slow orchestral glissando with ever-changing intervals [example 4.8-4.9]. This gesture, which adds a dramatic grandeur to the work, reappears in the piece and is a main means of punctuation, marking the beginnings and endings of musical ideas. It is also the only music in the piece that creates the kind of textures and sonic moments that sound like indeterminate music in the conventional sense. The rest of the musical material moves between a rock inspired, forward-pushing counterpoint with frequent unprepared modulations and post-romantic over-the-top kitsch moments. However, a key feature of indeterminate pieces is that they yield different sonic performances.<sup>308</sup> Due to the nature of its structure, *Or Never* will change not only with each orchestra that performs it, but also between rehearsals and performances. The piece is shaped by the musicians' lives outside the rehearsal room and the concert hall. Most notes on the page might not look like indeterminate music, but the way they translate into music is both unpredictable and reliant on performer agency.



Example 4.8 *Or Never* b 14-17, strings.



Example 4.9 *Or Never* b 14-17, brass.

One could argue that *Or Never* does not actually give performers any agency. The score is very precise, and if performers answer the questions truthfully, they cannot choose whether they do or do not play a section, and therefore they have no freedom whatsoever. Speaking to the musicians reveals a different picture. While filming a trailer for the piece, I interviewed members of Southampton University Symphony Orchestra, who commissioned and premiered *Or Never*. In these conversations I was told again and again not only that their answers changed between one week and the next, but also that the piece inspired them to

<sup>308</sup> Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 10.

rethink some of the issues in question, sparked conversations and prompted them to act differently. As Tally comments in the piece's trailer, she made an effort to speak about the climate every week so that she can play the relevant section and live up to her self-image as a climate activist. During one of the rehearsals, I learned that some members of the viola section were considering tying themselves to an oil rig so that they could finally have a viola solo. While this, sadly, has yet to materialise, it highlights the fact that the performers have agency in responding to every question. In fact, their agency is at the very heart of the piece. Similarly to Walshe's instruction to learn to skateboard, agency in this piece exceeds the rehearsal space. This does not mean that it is completely unrelated to the music, as the musicians' testimonies show, their choices outside rehearsals were impacted by the piece, and so agency inside and outside of the piece remain connected.

Undoubtedly, I had much greater control over the sound of the work, writing both the questions and the notes below them, not to mention long parts that are fully notated. The relationship between composer and performers is not completely reimagined as it might seem to be in the classic examples of indeterminate pieces. Perhaps it does not "perform egalitarianism", yet still I was surprised every single time it was played. When choosing the questions, I tried to estimate how many players would answer affirmatively in order to have some, limited, control over the piece's shape and dynamics. This worked for creating quasi-tutti moments ('have you ever recycled a can of tomatoes?') and silences ('have you ever slept on top of a gas tanker'), however the spectrum in between proved impossible to predict. Not only was I routinely wrong about their answers (for example many more answered 'yes' to 'will we beat climate change?' than I had anticipated), the unbalanced nature of the orchestra means that estimations are of meagre use. If five people answer 'yes', it matters a great deal to the sound of the work if they are violinists or brass players. My failures, however, are the piece's successes: the way it sometimes builds up and at other times falls apart gives it an experimental power. The uncertainties and the inconsistencies in orchestration are the aspects that make its indeterminacy revealing. After all, it is not only in an orchestra that players have different levels of output and influence on the outcome.

The idea of "performers as audience" is potent for this piece; *Or Never* facilitated conversations and inspired performers to be aware of, and even alter, their engagement with the climate and with activism. At our first rehearsal of *Or Never*, the section below "Have you ever participated in a protest?" sounded like a snare and piccolo duet. Towards the end of that

rehearsal one of the musicians stood up and told her colleagues that a protest was scheduled for the following Saturday and that they were all welcome to join if they wanted to change their answer. By the day of the performance, roughly half of the ensemble were playing this section. I am not claiming that performers changed their behaviour only so that they could play more music, but I do believe that the piece was in their hands and heads as they used their agency inside and outside the rehearsal space.

While thinking of the orchestra as the piece's audience is exciting, leaving the non-performers out of its political exploration felt to me like a missed opportunity. The projection of the questions behind the orchestra allows the audience to follow the questions and frames their experience in two ways: they hear (and see) who answers which question, thus giving meaning to the inconsistent orchestration, and they are provoked to reflect on the questions themselves. The music therefore is coloured by knowledge (everyone thinks we should protest, but not all do), and at the same time it underscores a relentless list of provocative questions that inspire an activist positioning towards the climate. The range of topics and stakes brought up by the questions allow insight into the orchestra. How many perform “have you ever recycled a can of tomatoes?” and how many “have you had a meaningful conversation with someone about the climate this week?”? The binary ‘yes’/‘no’ format and the quick pace, especially of the ‘is it moral to X?’ questions, raise the feeling that, as one viola player puts it in the trailer, “you can’t really hide away”.

As the piece progresses the visual element afforded by the slides expands. Over the last appearance of the downward glissading chord theme, the screen reads: “melting icebergs, don’t sound like this,” ironically commenting on the documentary trends in climate music described in Chapter Three. In the last movement, the screen helps amplify the feeling of saturation that reflects a cautious optimism toward the prospect of an accumulation of climate actions. In *Or Never*, the *how* and the *what* are entangled, not only through metaphors, but in a way that is experienceable to the audience. The indeterminate nature of the piece is visible and audible to the audience and the unforeseeable outcomes are readable. The audience knows that a shift in tone is created because more players think ‘we should protest’ than actually have protested, or because different players believe that it is moral to “Buy new clothes”, to “Have new children”, or to “Eat the rich”. Finally, the audience is included in the piece’s politics by being invited to ask themselves the same questions and imagine themselves as part of the musical collective in the concert hall.

For some, the limited sense in which performers have agency in this work will be seen as a failure to live up to the ideals of indeterminate music. However, performers' agency, and the complications around it, directly connect to the piece's political exploration. Questions of individual and group agency, and of the consequences of performer choices, relate to the ongoing debate in ecological circles on the importance of our personal choices. The discourse around the climate has long been dominated by calls to change personal habits: what we eat, how we travel, what we wear, what we throw out and into which bin.<sup>309</sup> In new music, pieces that engage with the climate crisis often centre such personal consumer-type questions.<sup>310</sup> However many campaigners and activists see this discourse as a diversion, a waste of time and energy, or as George Monbiot labelled it “pathetic micro consumerist bollocks”.<sup>311</sup> The argument is that we are policing ourselves while those who are truly responsible for destroying the world, oil companies, governments, food chains, meat and fashion industries continue unchallenged.<sup>312</sup>

This realisation, however, may leave us feeling helpless and passive. It is only through our everyday choices that we act in and upon the world, and if they are seen as unimportant it is not clear what we can do to make a difference. A way out of this dead-end of guilt and powerlessness is offered only by a different understanding of agency, one that is not restricted to consumerism. An agency in which the choices we make are able to challenge the power relations in which they take place, rather than being only the aesthetic afterthought of a power structure that acts through us (choosing which fast-fashion chain to shop in or choosing how

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<sup>309</sup> See for example the UK government's COP16 speaker suggesting 'not rinsing dishes before putting them in the dishwasher' as a meaningful step towards net zero carbon. Allegra Stratton, "Each of us can take small steps toward achieving net zero carbon," *The Telegraph*, July 26th 2021. Online at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/07/26/us-can-take-small-steps-toward-achieving-net-zero-carbon/> (accessed 14/12/2022).

<sup>310</sup> See for example my discussion of Gregor Mayrhofer's *Recycling Concerto* (2021) in Uri Agnon, "Klangspuren 2022," *Tempo* 77, no. 304 (2023): 89.

<sup>311</sup> George Monbiot, "Capitalism is killing the planet – it's time to stop buying into our own destruction," *The Guardian* October 30th, 2021. Online at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/30/capitalism-is-killing-the-planet-its-time-to-stop-buying-into-our-own-destruction> (accessed 14/12/2022).

<sup>312</sup> For more on this debate see Jennifer L. Rice, "The everyday choices we make matter": urban climate politics and the postpolitics of responsibility and action," in *Towards a Cultural Politics of Climate Change: Devices, Desires, and Dissent*, ed Harriet Bulkeley, Matthew Paterson, Johannes Stripple (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 110-126; Michael Brownstein, Daniel Kelly, and Alex Madva. "Individualism, structuralism, and climate change," *Environmental Communication* 16, no. 2 (2022): 269-288.

many times to repeat a musical phrase). An understanding of agency that sees our personal and the political actions as bound up with each other in our interaction with the world.<sup>313</sup>

The piece asks to widen the scope of climate choices to include what we eat and wear, but also, if we protest, where and how. By shedding light on the multiplicity of choices we make, the piece explores how our actions, from mundane to dramatic, relate to climate degradation. The piece is therefore tied to *What Can I Do?*, and interprets political agency as a spectrum of possibilities while attempting to inspire the audience to move along that spectrum. At some points in this piece, like the section starting at figure A and accompanying moral questions, whether each performer plays is almost statistical. At other moments a single instrument can have a crucial impact, for example at the orchestral build up 132-133 that asks performers to commit to protesting. Recognising the intimate nature of dismantling pipelines, a performer of the piece who has done so will play a solo over bars 110-115 (if such a musician ever performs the piece). The orchestral setting highlights the ways these choices also form links between us, suggesting cooperation and accumulating force. The piece tries to hold both truths at the same time: that our personal actions are insignificant within themselves and that only through such choices as they are combined with the choices of the people around us can we hope for a better future. As the Mishah says “it is not on you to complete the work, but neither are you free to neglect it”.<sup>314</sup>

These three works all engage with the question of agency in ways that go beyond a generalised analogy. They do not suggest seeing musical and political agencies as one and the same, nor as completely unrelated. In *Workers Union Gig (economy)*, artistic performance is still analogised, but to a concrete form of political action. In *BP Fiddles as Rome Burns* and *Or Never*, it is an embodiment of political choice. The link that is created between decisions inside and outside the concert hall is a result of a contextualisation that raises the stakes on these decisions and blurs the boundaries between music making, and other forms of political action.

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<sup>313</sup> Agency in this piece is understood in Butlerian terms as unpacked in the introduction. See Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” in *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993, 223-244; Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015) and elsewhere.

<sup>314</sup> Mishna, Pirkei Avot 3:1. Translation mine. In the original: לא עליך המלאכה לגמר ולא אתה בן חורין להבטל ממנה.

Activism and indeterminate music share an interest in questions of control, agency and engagement with the unforeseeable.<sup>315</sup> They are forms of reaching out towards the future. This makes them useful for one another, each offering the other practices and perspectives. While it might not seem as open-ended as indeterminate music wishes to be perceived, activism is inherently a rejection of a singular determinist notion of the future and an opening up towards the multiplicity of possible aftermaths. *BP Fiddles as the World Burns* and *Or Never* are distinctly different from what is usually thought of as indeterminate music, in terms of where they are performed, why, how they function and what they sound like. What I am arguing for is a more expansive understanding of what indeterminate is, and for a reclaiming of it in radical ways, for radical ends.

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<sup>315</sup> Graeber understands radical creativity as the improvisational formation of social relations, which he argues, should always be directed toward unpredictable ends. David Graeber, “Fetishism and Social Creativity”, 432.

## Chapter Five

### Preaching to the choir<sup>316</sup>

A common critique of politically engaged art is that gallery-dwellers, concert-goers and theatre-lovers share the same political inclination as the artists. Often formulated as ‘preaching to the choir,’ the critique holds that art’s power to challenge and persuade is rendered valueless when it is experienced only by people who already hold the same (typically leftist) ideas. After having discussed in this research the challenges of political meaning-making and the activist potential of experimental practices, this chapter turns its attention to the relationship between an artwork and its audience. I suggest three distinct yet interconnected responses to this critique: ‘expanding’, ‘galvanising’ and ‘activating’ the choir. In the first part I explore ‘expanding’ and ‘galvanising’ through works by Stefan Prins, Sarah Nicolls, Pamela Z. and Soosan Lolavar. In the second half I discuss how I ‘activate’ the choir in my own work.

To critique an artwork as ‘preaching to the choir’ is to say the work has no political value as it only reaches an audience that already agrees with its political message. Such scepticism has a long history, dating back at least to Rousseau’s *Letter To M. D’Alembert* in 1758.<sup>317</sup> The text makes philosophical and sociological arguments against the idea that theatre can improve the moral standing of its audience. Its philosophical argument is that theatre involves passions but not reason. Theatre can depict the different moral natures of characters, but it cannot influence its audience to sympathise with the characters who hold the better morals. Rousseau asserts that we can only see the virtues and vices in theatre in the same way that we would see them in life. If, for example, an audience member is not offended by greediness when they meet it in everyday life, they will have the same reaction to it when they see it on stage. He writes: “an ugly face does not seem ugly to him who wears it”.<sup>318</sup> Art is always perceived from within a political disposition and cannot change minds. This argument falls within the realms of what was discussed in the first chapters of this research; relating to the challenges of critical meaning-making. However, Rousseau claims further that even if a writer “shocks

<sup>316</sup> A version of this chapter has been published as an academic article, see Uri Agnon, "On Political Audiences: An Argument in Favour of Preaching to the Choir," *Tempo* 75, no. 296 (2021): 57-70.

<sup>317</sup> Plato already famously criticises the political relationship between theatre and audience in *The Republic*, but Rousseau’s critique, which owes a lot to Plato, is more closely related to the discussion here. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: A letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theatre* tran. Allan Bloom, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959).

<sup>318</sup> Rousseau, *Politics*, 26.

these maxims [of morals] he [sic] would write a very fine play to which no one will come".<sup>319</sup> That is, even if art had the capacity to change minds, audiences do not want this and would avoid or reject such a play. According to Rousseau this is because audiences go to the theatre to be entertained, not to be taught a lesson. The 'preaching to the choir' critique often follows these lines, arguing that leftist art is encountered in an echo chamber by liberal, progressive, or radical, middle-class audiences. Such perspectives have been developed by critics of politically engaged art such as Sartre, Adorno,<sup>320</sup> and Rancière,<sup>321</sup> as well as by sociologists such as Bourdieu,<sup>322</sup> Denisoff<sup>323</sup> and Peterson,<sup>324</sup> and have been the cause of some of my late night panic attacks, and perhaps yours as well.

These arguments have been addressed, formed, questioned and defended for centuries.<sup>325</sup> The debate has been had on both theoretical and sociological terms.<sup>326</sup> One could argue both with the assumption that audiences of art are like-minded, and with the claim that it is unimportant to target politically engaged art at them if they are like-minded. I have already outlined these positions in the introduction and the preceding chapters and my aim in this final chapter is not to review this discourse. I consider the choir critique not as the end of the conversation but as its beginning. My objective is to think through the critique and draw out some of the ways in which it can inform the practice and theorisation of politically engaged music.

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<sup>319</sup> Rousseau, *Letter*, 21.

<sup>320</sup> Adorno writes "Sartre's frank doubt whether Guernica 'won a single supporter for the Spanish cause' certainly also applies to Brecht's didactic drama. Scarcely anyone needs to be taught the *fabula docet* to be extracted from it - that there is injustice in the world; [...] epic drama recall the American phrase 'preaching to the converted'" Theodor Adorno, "On Commitment," in *Aesthetics and Politics* trans. Francis McDonagh, ed. Frederic Jameson (London: Verso, 2007 [1961]), 185.

<sup>321</sup> Rancière begins his most direct objection to politically engaged art by citing Rousseau's letter. Jacques Rancière, "The Paradoxes of Political Art", in *Dissensus - on Politics and Esthetics* trans. Steven Corocan (London: Continuum, 2010), 136.

<sup>322</sup> Most notably in Pierre Bourdieu *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984 [1979]).

<sup>323</sup> Serge Denisoff, "Protest Songs: Those of the Top Forty and Those of the Street," *American Quarterly* 22 no. 4 (1970): 807-823.

<sup>324</sup> Richard A. Peterson, "Understanding Audience Segmentation: From Elite and Mass to Omnivore and Univore," *Poetics* 21 (1992): 243-258.

<sup>325</sup> Elsewhere Rancière discusses the long history of the passive/active audience showing how it impacts theatre theory from Plato through to Brecht and up to the present day. These issues have always been tied to the political ramifications of pieces of art, though they often regard the audience in quite abstract terms. I will return to audience activity later in the chapter. Jacques Rancière, *The emancipated spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso Books, 2021).

<sup>326</sup> John Street, Sanna Inthorn, and Martin Scott. "Playing at politics? Popular culture as political engagement," *Parliamentary Affairs* 65, no. 2 (2012): 338-358; Liesbet van Zoonen, "Audience reactions to Hollywood politics," *Media, Culture & Society* 29, no. 4 (2007): 531-547; Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2005); See also Michael Schudson, "Politics as cultural practice," *Political Communication* 18, no. 4 (2001): 421-431.

### ‘Expanding’ and ‘Galvanising’ the choir

One response to the critique that politically engaged art is valueless, because it only reaches a convinced audience, is to change the audience, expanding the reach of the artwork beyond the like-minded, ‘expanding the choir’. In her *Thoughts on the Audience* Martha Rosler suggests artists have the agency to influence the constitution of their audience, but that unfortunately most artists are passive on this front.<sup>327</sup> This passivity, Rosler argues, is built into an artworld system that values commodification and does not motivate artists to communicate with diverse audiences.

According to Rosler, the audience is not simply a function of ‘who is out there’ but should be paired with ‘whom you want to reach’.<sup>328</sup> She calls for interventions into the artworld structure; challenging how, why, when, by whom and where art is created and exhibited. Rosler points out that the capitalist framework in which art is produced, viewed and commodified has a huge impact on the formation of the audience, and she argues for alternatives to mainstream exhibition spaces, run by artists and communities. Artists’ agency over their audience, however, is not limited to the context in which their art is viewed but also resides in artists’ choice of content, form and type of piece.<sup>329</sup>

Rosler’s focus is on visual art but these points ring true for new music. In many new music concerts in the UK a large portion of the audience will be musicians themselves, will be acquainted with other members of the audience and/or the performers, and will come from a similar background. While such an audienceship is perhaps not without merits some attempts are made to try and change this. Arts Council England, for one, prioritises funding projects that have outreach aspects, but it also prioritises projects with a clear sense of audienceship, and on both fronts their criteria has often been criticised.<sup>330</sup> Some institutions and spaces within the UK new music scene attempt to ‘expand the choir’, and follow the advice outlined by Rosler above. These include Contemporary Music for All (CoMA), a network of ensembles consisting of both amateur and professional musicians, the music label and concert promoter nonclassical, that aims at “bringing new music to new audiences,” and the

<sup>327</sup> Martha Rosler, “Lookers, Buyers, Dealers and Makers: Thoughts on Audience,” in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings* (Cambridge Mass.: Cambridge Press, 2004), 9-52.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory art and the politics of spectatorship* (London: Verso books, 2012), 13-18.

Eavesdropping series, an artist run festival, forum, and podcast motivated by intersectional feminism, and many others.<sup>331</sup> ‘Expanding’ the choir as a compositional tactic within individual works might include a decision about genre – calling a piece an opera or a musical for example – as well as choices of subject matter, themes, styles, forms, accessibility, and location.

The second response to the ‘preaching to the choir’ critique is to see art as ‘galvanising’ the choir. The critique holds that politically engaged art has no value because its audience already agrees with the political message. But anyone who has worked in a choir knows that a choir actually needs some preaching in order to sing powerfully and harmoniously: in the same way, a political artwork can have value when it serves to galvanise a like-minded community. In a TV interview Dr. Martin Luther King Junior said of civil rights movement freedom songs that they:

“[S]erve to give unity to a movement, and there have been those moments when disunity could have occurred if it had not been for the unifying force of freedom songs and the great spirituals. The Movement has also been carried on by these songs because they have a tendency to give courage and vigor to carry on. There are so many difficult moments when individuals falter and would almost give up in despair. These freedom songs have a way of giving new courage and new vigor to face the problems and difficulties ahead.”<sup>332</sup>

The role music played in the civil rights movement has been well documented and theorised.<sup>333</sup> Similarly, protest songs were central to the American anti-Vietnam war movement in the 1960s,<sup>334</sup> and there are countless other more recent examples, from the contemporary Palestinian alternative pop scene,<sup>335</sup> to Mexican rap.<sup>336</sup> While protest and freedom songs are obvious examples,<sup>337</sup> works from other art forms can also galvanise communities. When asked about the purpose of his films in a Q&A session, documentary filmmaker Avi Mughrabi replied that while he does not think his movies will change minds,

<sup>331</sup> “About Us,” Contemporary Music for All, <http://www.coma.org/about/> (accessed 18/7/2023) “About Us,” nonclassical website, <https://www.nonclassical.co.uk/about-us> (accessed 18/7/2023); “About Us,” eavesdropping, <https://www.eavesdropping.london/about-us/> (accessed 18/7/2023)

<sup>332</sup> As quoted in Denisoff, “Protest Songs,” 243.

<sup>333</sup> See for example Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Let the Church Sing ‘Freedom’,” *Black Music Research Journal* 7 (1987): 105-118; Kerran L. Sanger, ‘*When the Spirit Says Sing!': The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995).

<sup>334</sup> Richard A. Lee, “Protest Music as Alternative Media During the Vietnam War Era,” in *War and the Media: Essays on News Reporting, Propaganda and Popular Culture*, ed Paul M. Haridakis, Barbara S. Hugenberg, Stanley T. Wearden (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2009), 24-40.

<sup>335</sup> Nadeem Karkabi, “Staging Particular Difference: Politics of Space in the Palestinian Alternative Music Scene,” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 6 no. 3 (2013): 308-328.

<sup>336</sup> Hettie Malcomson, “Contesting Resistance, Protesting Violence: Women, War and Hip Hop in Mexico,” *Music and Arts in Action*, 7 no.1 (2019): 46-63.

<sup>337</sup> John Street, “‘Fight the Power’: The Politics of Music and the Music of Politics,” *Government and Opposition* 38, no. 1 (2003): 113-130.

he believes they serve a purpose by strengthening the spirit of the community of people who share his views.<sup>338</sup> Every community, including a political one, needs its art.

Artworks can galvanise political communities in different forms and also in different ways.<sup>339</sup> Some artworks unify and strengthen a political community by lifting spirits, others by educating and questioning assumptions. Some lead the group to cry together and others to laugh. In a musical context participatory singing is a common device, as with protest songs, but it is not the only one. Pieces that highlight a specific political issue in order to stimulate reflections and discussions can also be seen as ‘galvanising’ and will be discussed below. ‘Galvanising the choir’ is used in a wide sense to indicate a piece’s political potential in acting within a political community to reinforce it. ‘Galvanising’ then, is not an attempt to attract new participants to the cause but rather serves to consolidate, inform and strengthen the resolve of a community or movement.

### In Practice

The concepts of ‘expanding’ and ‘galvanising’ provide useful frameworks for speculating on the political nature and value of politically engaged new music pieces. While it is impossible to calculate a piece’s impact, reading artworks through the political relationship they construct with their audience can shed light on almost all aspects of these pieces: from musical language and dramatic structure, to the spaces where they are performed, and their receptions. I begin with Stefan Prins’s *Generation Kill* (2012) and Sarah Nicoll’s *12 Years* (2019), arguing that the former ‘galvanises’ whereas the latter ‘expands’. I then look at other pieces that fall between these poles, arguing that the application of these concepts is nonetheless useful. Like many concert-works of the past decade, all of these pieces also have a strong visual and/or theatrical dimension.

*Generation Kill* takes its name from a 2004 bestseller non-fiction book by *Rolling Stone* journalist Evan Wright, who was an embedded reporter with the US army during the invasion

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<sup>338</sup> Avi Mughrabi, Screening of *Between Fences* (2016) at Imbala - activist community centre, 20/03/2018.

<sup>339</sup> Denisoff’s division of protest songs to magnetic and rhetorical is an interesting starting point. It is limited both in its specificity to songs, and in a loyalty to a Leninist approach that understands political community only in organisational and class consciousness terms. Desinoff argues that songs from the ‘New Left’ are “reflective of individual rather than collective consciousness,” ignoring collectiveness on the basis of political action, ideology, and race. This in turn misses the variety of ways art can strengthen and construct communities. Sergai Denisoff, “Protest Movements: Class Consciousness and the Propaganda Song,” *Sociology Quarterly* 9, no 2 (1968): 228-247.

of Iraq in the Second Gulf War.<sup>340</sup> Prins' piece features four musicians who play traditional classical instruments seated behind four semi-transparent screens, and four musicians who play video-game controllers that trigger both sound and video projections on these screens. Two political devices deployed in the work have received particular attention in reviews. One is the allegorical set-up of the piece, which explores the idea of controlling a dehumanised body via technology. Echoing the piece's name, *Generation Kill*, this set-up problematises the novel ways in which killing takes place, particularly drone warfare, and connects it to a generation raised on video games.<sup>341</sup> The second is the piece's dramatic climax, where drone footage is projected on all screens in silence; this occurs two-thirds of the way into the piece, the typical moment for a climax in a musical work. The effectiveness of both these political devices has been praised by reviewers of the piece,<sup>342</sup> but I would argue that their effectiveness is reliant on the audience agreeing in advance with the points made by the use of these devices. If one is not already critical of the US invasion of Iraq and to the use of drones, these political devices are not going to change their mind.

The first device criticises the dehumanising effect of technology in both drone warfare and video games. But the embedded use of technology in the piece is not in itself a criticism of this technology, especially given technology's centrality in new music today, and in Prins' work.<sup>343</sup> The piece simulates and misplaces that which it criticises rather than spelling out a critical position:<sup>344</sup> It engages with both *allegory* and *critique* as they were formalised in the first part of this research. It is an allegorical work in its setting of a musical allegory at its heart, staging political questions of control technology and agency in a theatrical way. As a critical piece it engages with the 'real' by manipulating found material - drone footage - but it does so in a way that is relatively open-ended. The piece does not avoid the possibility of a

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<sup>340</sup> Evan Wright, *Generation Kill* (New York: Putnam Adult, 2004).

<sup>341</sup> Tomasz Biernacki, "Alien Bodies, Stefan Prins' Aesthetics of Music," *Dissonance* 125 (2014): 38. [https://www.dissonance.ch/upload/pdf/125\\_34\\_hb\\_bie\\_prins.pdf](https://www.dissonance.ch/upload/pdf/125_34_hb_bie_prins.pdf) (accessed 27.7.2020).

<sup>342</sup> For example Alex Ross, "Blunt Instruments," *New Yorker* November 12th 2012, <https://www.therestisnoise.com/2012/11/donaueschingen-review.html> (accessed 27.7.2020); Biernacki, "Alien Bodies," 38-39; Max Erwin, "Stefan Prins - Stefan Prins: Augmented. Nadar Ensemble, Klangforum Wien, Yaron Deutsch, Stephane Ginsburgh. Kairos, 0015044 KAI," *Tempo*, 73 no. 290 (2019): 81-83.

<sup>343</sup> Celeste Oram claims Prins's approach to technology in this piece is paradoxical: showing technological scepticism through pointing the critical gaze at technology (rather than those who use it), while simultaneously engaging positively with it as a composer and programmer. Celeste Oram, "Darmstadt's New Wave Modernism," *Tempo* 69 issue 271 (2015): 60-62.

<sup>344</sup> Martin Iddon examines the relation between critiquing and repeating politics in new conceptualism pieces. While his article focuses on Kreidler's *Fremdarbeit* and mentions *Generation Kill* only in passing, it still has relevance to this debate. Martin Iddon, "Outsourcing Progress: On Conceptual Music," *Tempo* 70, no. 275 (2015): 36-49.

status-quo reading. If one is not already distressed by remote-controlled killing, one is unlikely to be impacted by remote-controlled video projections in a musical context.

The second device, presenting the drone moment in almost complete silence, can be read in two apparently contradictory ways: as a moral decision not to ‘compose’ such difficult materials, to avoid making entertainment of the horrific realities of people’s lives or,<sup>345</sup> on the contrary, as an intensely composed silence that functions as a heightening effect in a similar way to the use of silence in film.<sup>346</sup> In either case the silence’s effectiveness is based on the belief that this footage speaks for itself. With a different audience, however, the footage might be received more neutrally, or even positively. This drone footage was, after all, shot and watched by US army personnel, many of whom probably saw it as morally justifiable. Similar footage has also been broadcast on television, not necessarily in a critical way. This misreading of the material, placing it in a musical context, does not, necessarily, put it in a critical light. The piece assumes the audience’s critical stance and only an audience that has the ‘correct’ political inclination will experience the piece’s political intention. An audience member with a different political inclination may understand the piece, but there is nothing in the piece that will lead them to a critical position in regards to its subject matter.

Following Rousseau’s logic, it seems unlikely that *Generation Kill* will change the mind of an audience member who is supportive of the US invasion of Iraq and the use of drone warfare. This does not mean the piece is politically valueless, but rather that it ‘galvanises’ rather than ‘expands’ its audience. It does so by giving artistic shape to thoughts and concerns that are shared by its audience. It is difficult to assess the success of a piece in ‘galvanising’, but the *Generation Kill*’s positive reviews can attest to its impact.

*12 Years* (2018), a solo piece by composer and performer Sarah Nicolls, is a prime example of a piece that wishes to ‘extend the choir’. Taking its name from the 2018 IPCC Special Report that predicted that we only have a twelve-year window to change our environmental behaviour before the climate passes the point of no return,<sup>347</sup> *12 Years* consists of a prepared

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<sup>345</sup> This brings to mind Adorno’s critique of Joan Baez, discussed in Chapter One. Ricardo Brown, *Theodor Adorno on Popular Music and Protest*, Arte (196?),

<https://archive.org/details/RicBrownTheodorAdornoonPopularMusicandProtest> (accessed 11/7/2023).

<sup>346</sup> For silence as a compositional and dramatic device in film see Danijela Kulezic-Wilson, “The Music of Film Silence,” *Music and the Moving Image* 2, no. 3 (2009): 1-10.

<sup>347</sup> Valery Masson-Delmotte et al., “IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers.” In: *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate*

piano part, live speaking, and recorded speech. It centres on several fictional phone conversations between two characters, a climate activist and her sister, debating their respective life choices. Recordings of climate scientists, activists, and survivors of climate catastrophes are interspersed around these conversations, breaking up the narrative and contextualising it. The conversations between the sisters do not construct a conventional sense of plot. Instead, the logic structuring the piece is that of conversion: the non-activist sister slowly changes her mind, accepting the legitimacy and urgency of her sister's activism, and reflecting on her own carbon footprint and political passivity. Presentations have featured a Q&A discussion with Nicolls and other climate activists or scientists.

Unlike *Generation Kill*, *12 Years* unapologetically attempts to change the minds of its audience. It is not that the piece is aimed at converting climate change deniers and bringing them to the side of the movement. Rather, the non-activist sister is a personification of that large group of the audience who worry about climate change but are not fully committed to stopping it. The arguments and defences of the non-activist sister are the ones such an audience member might make, and the argumentation of the activist sister aimed at changing their mind.<sup>348</sup> The music, the fictional set-up, and the staging make the audience experience affective and emotional, but it is clear the work is a form of oratory designed to persuade. A feedback questionnaire circulated after the premiere shows that many found this effective:<sup>349</sup> None of the 22 audience members who replied reported that they were not aware of climate change before the concert, but thirteen reported explicitly that the piece helped them connect to the matter emotionally, persuaded them of its urgency, or provoked them to think about their own actions. Only one person echoed Rousseau's argument that audiences go to the theatre to be entertained, not educated, writing "Important issues – not sure if this experience best way to get action although raises feelings [sic]". This questionnaire does not provide quantitative evidence for the effectiveness of *12 Years*, but it does provide qualitative reinforcements for a reading of the piece as an attempt at 'expanding the choir'.

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*change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty* World Meteorological Organization, Geneva, Switzerland, 32 (2018). <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/> (accessed 28.7.2020)

<sup>348</sup> Nicolls writes: "My two main characters, sisters, could be informal, offhand and spiky and this combination gave me a good range for teasing out some of the stickier personal issues for people. Should you really be flying on that mini-break? As an audience member, listening to the one-sided conversations, you are not only filling in the gaps of what is not being said, you're also placing yourself on a spectrum and hopefully questioning, empathising with other viewpoints". See Sarah Nicolls, "12 Years and a Piano," *Dark Mountain*, April 2020. <https://dark-mountain.net/12-years-and-a-piano/> (accessed 28.7.2020)

<sup>349</sup> Received in private communication, 15/07/2020.

These two works do politics in different ways. While *Generation Kill* has agreement between work and the audience at its heart, *12 Years* is centred on a disagreement that it wishes to resolve by creating movement in the audience's perspective. Whereas Nicolls identifies as an environmental activist and *12 Years* tries to inspire conversion to that cause, Prins' labels *Generation Kill* a "musical reflection".<sup>350</sup> This difference should not be overstated: in both cases the pieces are directed at audiences that are at least somewhat politically close to their composers, and both pieces attempt to impact the cognitive and emotional relation between the audience and the subject matter. Nonetheless, within this common framework the pieces represent contrasting strategies that go beyond the internal political devices within the works. Fittingly the works' relationships with their audience are echoed more broadly in their relationships with the new music scene, *Generation Kill* firmly situated within it, *12 Years* attempting to reach beyond it.

Prins' work is distinguished by its dense, fragmented, grindy and pitch-elusive soundscape. It can be clearly situated within continental European new music, with Lachenmann and Glitch Art as obvious reference points.<sup>351</sup> The work has enjoyed a great deal of attention within the new music scene but it is difficult to imagine it being accessible to wider audiences. In contrast, the diatonic, triadic and rhythmic nature of the music in *12 Years*, as well as its theatrical construct (conversations between sisters), gives Nicoll's work a potentially broader reach. Comparing the works' use of extended instrumental techniques is instructive: radically distorting 'natural' instrumental sound is central to *Generation Kill*, whereas extended techniques are used in *12 Years* to expand the palate of, rather than interfere with, the largely consonant piano part. The Glitch aesthetic is part of Prins' reflection on the politics of analog-digital relations that are at the piece's heart; for Nicolls the musical aesthetic is a tool intended to inspire the audience to emotionally reflect on the political content of the piece, located in the spoken and recorded speech, as well as the Q&A sessions that follow it.<sup>352</sup>

Whereas *Generation Kill* involves eight-musicians and a tech-heavy set-up, *12 Years* is a slim one-person project that can travel easily. *Generation Kill* has only been performed on new music stages, first at the Donaueschingen Musiktage with subsequent performances at venues

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<sup>350</sup> Composer's website [https://www.stefanprins.be/eng/composesChrono/comp\\_2012\\_03.html](https://www.stefanprins.be/eng/composesChrono/comp_2012_03.html) (Accessed 19/7/2023); Nicolls's podcast "The Musical Activist" <https://themusicalactivist.podbean.com/> (accessed 28.7.2020).

<sup>351</sup> Oram, "Darmstadt's New Wave Modernism," 61.

<sup>352</sup> "The audience's responses explained how they felt it useful and powerful to experience this narrative with the emotional exploration of music, rather than just the more intellectual reading the news by itself." Nicolls, "12 Years and a Piano".

such as the Darmstadt Summer Course and Gaudeamus Festival. It has been released on DVD by the exclusively new music label KAIROS. Its stature within the scene is also reflected in the many articles and reviews about it referenced in this chapter. *12 Years* was first presented within the London new music scene at City University and has gone on to be performed in diverse contexts such as Kings Place in London, Galway Jazz Festival, St George's Bristol, the Exeter Phoenix in Exeter and Cardiff Royal College of Music and Drama.

‘Galvanising’ and ‘expanding’ the audience are not mutually exclusive. While the target of *12 Years* is to expand through conversion, it is also likely to galvanise audience members aligned with the activist sister.<sup>353</sup> Similarly *Generation Kill* galvanises a like-minded audience but the work certainly has the capacity to effect and influence audience members who have not given drone warfare much thought. Other pieces are more clearly situated between these poles. Pamela Z.’s *Carbon Song Cycle* (2014) is a multimedia piece for five musicians, including the composer, a visual artist, and multiple projectors. The fifty-minute-long work consists of ten stylistically different movements, each loosely focused on one aspect of global warming. One of its main rhetorical tools is to blur the boundaries between ‘reason’ and ‘passions’, constantly shifting between scientific discourse and intimate emotional utterances, as well as between comprehensible speech and sound. By tying scientific knowledge about the climate to the intimate and universal act of breathing, the piece places itself between ‘galvanising’ and ‘expanding’. In the third movement, for example, the sentence “I am/was breathing” is repeated tirelessly until it finally fades into a long list of creatures who breathe, broadening the sympathy we felt towards the human voice to cats, dogs, fish and bacteria and so articulating the magnitude of the climate crisis.

The piece has similarities to the Prins and Nicolls works: it deploys spoken and prerecorded texts to convey a message, as does *12 Years*, and, like *Generation Kill* uses fragmentation to defy any perceived didacticism. Its sound language is close to that of *12 Years*, with an emphasis on consonants and diatonic scales, but it also foregrounds manipulation and distortion of sound. Unlike *Generation Kill*, which allegorically simulates that which it critiques but does not attempt to convince the audience in its critical stance, *Carbon Song*

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<sup>353</sup> This is reflected in the responses to the questionnaire, with one audience member writing: “I’m currently putting together a workshop series based around the idea of climate change – so this performance resonated with all of the emotions I have.” Private correspondence.

*Cycle* makes a more explicit case for its positions with the use of text and juxtapositions. However, it does not go as far as *12 Years* in its ‘expanding’ attempts: the information it provides is fragmented, and only understandable by an audience that is at least somewhat aware of the issues at play. The piece also does not explicitly invite its audience to rethink their personal actions. Although the piece’s wide stylistic palette includes non-new-music genres such as punk, it is clearly written for a contemporary art audience, and is situated in an art-gallery scene.<sup>354</sup> *Carbon Song Cycle* functions between the two poles of ‘expanding’ and ‘galvanising’ the audience: it wishes to give those who are more or less concerned with the climate crisis some time to reflect about its importance, and feel how it relates to them and their breathing bodies.

Soosan Lolavar’s chamber opera *ID Please* (2017) is set in the security and passport control section of a terminal, where the relations between states and people, security and privacy, power and dignity are exposed. The characters portrayed by the three singers change between and sometimes within scenes. These shifts allow Lolavar to explore how power relations shift depending on the gender, race, class, and the personal history of the people being policed. The target of the work is not the security personnel, but the underpinning political structures. The piece does not advance a concrete solution for how borders should be managed, nor explicitly suggest there should not be borders at all, but rather makes the ‘political’ in a given situation visible and audible.<sup>355</sup> It exposes how a seemingly banal security protocol creates hierarchies between people and how this results in terror and humiliation for some who go through it. Border control is not the sole issue at stake, rather it is a site that lays bare the ways in which states use questioning to enforce hierarchical power relations.

Lolavar’s decision to highlight the seemingly sterile space of border control resonates with other contemporary pieces, especially by other non-white composers. In her discussion of *Airport Symphony* (2007) by Lawrence English and Chino Amobi’s *Airport Music For Black Folk* (2016), Marie Thompson argues that the racialised experience of airports is mirrored in the differences between pieces about airports by white and Black composers.<sup>356</sup> While *Airport*

<sup>354</sup> Although Z. has worked both within and outside the new music scene. See George E. Lewis, “The Visual Discourses of Pamela Z.,” *Journal of Society for American Music* 1, no. 1 (2007): 57-77.

<sup>355</sup> This resonates with Rancière’s understanding of politics as “a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience”. Politics is that which makes things visible, audible and so on. Jacques Rancière “The Politics of Literature,” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010 [2004]), 152.

<sup>356</sup> Marie Thompson, “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies,” *Parallax* 23 no.3 (2017): 275-278.

*Symphony*, which English created with contributions from a number of other white composers, features an “abstract and depersonalised soundscape” with plenty of ambience and almost no human voices, *Airport Music For Black Folk* starts off with the same ambience, but repeatedly subverts it with disorienting, violent, noise, robotic announcements, sirens and poetry. English refers to the airport as “the best seat in the theatre”; Amobi’s piece “makes audible [...] the general, racialised, violence” of air travel.

This distinction helps illuminate *ID Please*’s relationship with its audience. Lolavar’s work ‘galvanises’, giving voice to members of the audience who have experienced anxiety and humiliation under the cloak of national and international security. The work ‘expands’ through making such security practices visible, confronting those who pass easily through border controls with another reality. Finally, it invites all sections of the audience to reflect on the structures of power at play. As is true for most politically engaged pieces, *ID Please* exemplifies that ‘expanding’ and ‘galvanising’ is not a dichotomy. A ‘choir’ does not have clear boundaries; people are not either of a political position or against it; each person has their own specific history, and will therefore relate differently to the content of a piece, in a relationship that is perhaps also changing.

Many of the works in this portfolio can be placed within the poles of ‘galvanising’ and ‘expanding’ the choir. *Workers Union (gig version)* might invite an audience to see gig economy practices in a negative light, but this is a critique that many audience members will be familiar with. The piece tries, however, to dramatise and musicalise this critique in pushing the performer to extremes before our eyes, and it wishes to draw a connection, and inspire solidarity, between diverse precarious workers. *What Can I Do?* does not even have a topic that it can be said to clearly critique, instead it provokes its audience to reflect on their behaviour. It seeks to ‘expand’ not the number of people who agree on an issue, but the actions that they take. In this it follows a similar path to that of *12 Years* albeit using a different set of rhetorical and artistic tools. On at least one level *Or Never* is aimed quite literally at the ‘choir’, the performers who play it. Like *What Can I Do?* it wishes to test the limits of the actions both the performers and the audience are willing to take, but it is also a galvanising piece in that it only proposes different choices and does not argue for some over others. Furthermore the piece centres the feeling of ‘togetherness’, by spotlighting the orchestra as a collective.

Both *I HATE EGGPLANT* and *Put Your Hands Together [for late capitalism]* are ‘expanding’ pieces in the sense that they promote a point of view that is different to that of many of their audiences. In both cases the audience will not be hostile towards this point of view - one assumes that most new music lovers are not supporters of the Jan 6 insurrection or enthusiasts of climate destruction. However, in both cases the piece suggests a point of view that is not as widely expressed. *I HATE EGGPLANT* asks to focus the attention not on the newspaper selling scandals of congress, but on the fears of marginalised people, expressing, more broadly, feelings that relate to the experience of being Jewish in an anglo-white society. Similarly *Put Your Hands Together* is not simply critical towards climate change, it more specifically problematises green capitalism and consumer-focused technology as solutions. Within the new music world which is heavily veered towards innovation, technology and individualism, this might not be an obvious position.<sup>357</sup> Finally, ‘Absentee’ means- is exhibited in Tel Aviv, which is considered by some as a left haven in Israel, but its critique of the Absentee Property Law (legislated by the Israeli Labour party) goes well beyond the centre-left, or Zionist-left positions that are likely to be held by the museum goers.<sup>358</sup> Furthermore it deals with a plight that most Israelis will simply not know anything about, the specific case of a family in Silwan.

### ‘Activating’ the choir

The premise of the choir critique is that politically engaged art is a form of persuasion, trying to move people from one political point of view to another. A political artwork is then dismissed as useless if from the outset the audience shares the works’ disposition. This is, however, too narrow a reading of politically engaged art. Art can subvert, distort, distract,

<sup>357</sup> See the first two chapters of Ritchey’s *Composing Capital* “Innovation in Classical Music” and “Indie Individualism” Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 21-89.

<sup>358</sup> For example in the 2020 General Election, Tel Aviv voted firmly towards parties that ended up forming the opposition to Netanyahu’s far-right government. However, the party that received the most votes was the soft right Yesh Atid (33%), followed by Netanyahu’s Likud (17%) and the right wing HaMakhane HaTzioni (11%). Non-Zionist parties received only 5% of the votes, and mostly in the Palestinian city of Jaffa which Israel includes as part of Tel Aviv. Voting is a poor indication of politics, and of course museum goers will not proportionally reflect the city, but it still gives a sense of the distance between the piece and many audiences that might see it.

המרכז למחקר חברתי וככללי, “דףוי ההצבעה של תושבי תל אביב-יפו בבחירות לכנסת ה-25,” (תל אביב: עיריית תל אביב, דצמבר 2022).

<https://www.tel-aviv.gov.il/Transparency/DocLib6/%D7%AA%D7%95%D7%A6%D7%90%D7%95%D7%AA%20%D7%94%D7%91%D7%97%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA%20%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%A0%D7%A1%D7%AA%20%D7%94-25.%201.11.2022.pdf> (accessed 17/7/2023)

elevate, mobilise, jam and crash; it can speak, and it can also act. In what follows I will discuss my own work in relation to the remaining response to the choir, ‘activating’.

Discourse on artistic activism is much less developed than that of ‘political art’, although it has been receiving more theoretical attention in the last decade. Yates McKee’s *Strike Art*, for example, theorises art and artists’ role in the Occupy Wall Street movement.<sup>359</sup> Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, he writes of the ‘Artist as Organizer’, immersed in activist movements and using their skills for activist ends.<sup>360</sup> McKee argues that Occupy “reinvented art as a force of radical imagination and direct action”.<sup>361</sup> While this is an overstatement of Occupy’s importance, and the innovation of our time, activist art does seem to be on the rise.<sup>362</sup>

*Strike Art* focuses on visual art, but there are many examples of musical artistic activism. The early 2000s saw the formalisation of the international activist drumming network *Rhythms of Resistance* which now include dozens of bands, mostly in Europe,<sup>363</sup> as well as the revival of radical brass bands, who continue a tradition of activist brass bands that dates back to the nineteenth century.<sup>364</sup> These groups, and others like them, play music at protests, picket lines, direct actions, flash mobs, and other political actions. *Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping* perform ‘spirituals’ in chain retail stores to persuade shoppers to stop their shopping, and NGOs such as Greenpeace have for years been using music for some of their interventions.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (London: Verso, 2017).

<sup>360</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid, 237.

<sup>362</sup> While some artist activist groups started after the international political unrest of 2011, many others date back to the early 2000s and earlier. Reviewing McKee’s book, Paloma Checa-Gismero writes that its “risky account of Occupy Wall Street’s centrality in enacting a change of paradigm in contemporary art practice is an enthusiastic and New York-centric attempt to expand the historical canon of Western avant-garde art from one of its centers.” Paloma Checa-Gismero, “Strike Art,” *Filled: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, 4 (2016). <http://field-journal.com/issue-4/review-yates-mckee-strike-art> (Viewed 31/7/2020)

<sup>363</sup> “Bands,” Rhythms of Resistance, <https://www.rhythms-of-resistance.org/about-us/bands/> (accessed 13/08/2020).

<sup>364</sup> See for example Reebee Garofalo, Erin T. Allen, and Andrew Snyder, eds. *HONK!: A Street Band Renaissance of Music and Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2019); for the history of the Brass Band see Trevor Herbert, *The British Brass Band a Musical and Social History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>365</sup> Carmen L. McClish, “Activism Based in Embarrassment: The Anti-Consumption Spirituality of the Reverend Billy,” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 5, no. 2, (2009): 1-20, <http://liminalities.net/5-2/mcclish.pdf> (accessed 17/7/2023); Max Ritts, “Environmentalists Abide: Listening to Whale Music – 1965–1985,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35, no. 6 (December 2017): 1096-1114; Damian Gayle, “Greenpeace Performs Arctic Requiem in Effort to Touch Hearts Over Shell Drilling,” *The Guardian*, 3 August 2015

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/aug/03/greenpeace-adds-a-new-string-to-its-bow-with-musical-protest-at-shell> (accessed 17/08/2020)

In February 2020, I participated in the *BP Must Fall* protest performance staged by *BP or not BP?* at the British Museum in London. The action was a three-day artistic occupation of the museum in response to the BP-sponsored exhibition ‘Troy: Myth or Reality?’. The action began with the early morning sneaking of a four-metre-tall mock Trojan Horse (full of people) into the museum grounds. The next day saw a mass action of 1,500 participants who took part in creative workshops and talks led by artists and activists, many of whom were from frontline communities suffering both from climate change and colonialism. My role within the collective was to coordinate and participate in a musicians’ group. This group co-composed the lyrics, music, and choreography, for three protest songs, which were then taught to small assemblies across the occupation. The event’s musical part reached its climax when, on the second afternoon, one of the songs was sung in chorus by approximately 1,500 participants at the museum’s Great Hall [example 5.1 and figure 5.1]. Dozens of participants then stayed in the Great Hall for an unauthorised, overnight, body-casting session.

BP Must Fall (mass moment song)

BP Must Fall

Moderato

It's time to take it down to tear a-way that lo - go this horse is not a gift It  
on - ly leads to so - rrow B - P must fall B - P must fall!  
rip legal!

Example 5.1 “Mass moment song” *BP Must Fall*.



Figure 5.1 the “Mass moment” in the British Museum.

*BP Must Fall* is an extreme example of the first two attitudes to the audience discussed earlier: it is a participatory performance that galvanises a convinced audience, the protesters, while at the same time reaching a very wide audience of people who could be convinced: the museum attendees, staff, and trustees. These two audiences, the ‘galvanised’ and the ‘expanded’ were then extended by the interest the action drew from mainstream press, such as *The Guardian*, *The Evening Standard*, and *ArtForum*, and a social media engagement that reached millions.<sup>366</sup> The audience is a much larger, shapeless, body of people who interact

<sup>366</sup> Damien Gayle, “Climate Activists Bring Trojan Horse to British Museum in BP Protest,” *The Guardian*, February 7, 2020; Aaron Walawalkar, “Activists Try to Occupy British Museum in Protest Against BP Ties,” *The Guardian*, February 8 2020; Rebecca Speare-Cole, “Climate activists leave British Museum after three-day protest over BP sponsorship,” *The Evening Standard*, February 9 2020; “Climate Activists Stage British

with the piece's documentation. This was the first of the three artistic-intervention pieces included in my portfolio, the other two also working to both galvanise and expand audiences.

One might ask if such actions can be understood as works of art.<sup>367</sup> Or one might more fruitfully ask, what is gained from thinking of these actions as pieces of art? What is afforded to an activist action from the perspectives of the organisers, participants, public and media, if it is framed as art?<sup>368</sup> With *BP Must Fall*, as with many such pieces, I think the answer is creativity.<sup>369</sup> I believe every protest is creative (just as every artwork is political) and so every action could be meaningfully read by considering the part creativity plays in it. Framing an action in artistic terms centralises and instrumentalises this. The application of creative skills helps the action to achieve its goals through reimagining what an action looks and sounds like, creating memorable communicative images and moments, and engaging audiences through creative play and participation. Thinking of protest in artistic terms affords a kind of message building that is more symbolic, metaphorical, surprising and, at times, inspirational. Throughout this commentary I have shown how artistic, and at times experimental, tools were central to the devising of these actions: from the use of found text to the mobilisation of indeterminacy.

*BP Must Fall* ties in many of the threads explored in this research. An allegory lies at its core, as it draws a connection between BP's financial support and the Trojan horse. The sponsorship deal might seem like a gift, but destruction lies within. This allegory is not meant to make the message any less clear, but rather to strengthen it rendering it simultaneously more light hearted and more substantial. The piece functions less like *Toothache* where details are smudged out to appear more universal and more like '*Absentee*' means - where a contemporary issue is allegorised to a mythological fable.

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Museum Protest with Trojan Horse," *ArtForum*, February 7 2020; Marine Vazzoler, "Des employés du British Museum soutiennent les protestations contre BP," *Le Quotidien De L'art*, February 11 2020.

<sup>367</sup> McKee includes in his study anything that interacts with what he understands as the 'art system' (12). This then means for him that any action which includes artists can be considered as art. He argues for this approach by claiming that the merging of 'art' and 'non-art' is 'recurring and essential' in the history of modern art. McKee, *Strike Art*, 12, 26-27. While this approach is not without merit, it is also limited. The book analyses cardboard signs gallery exhibitions with exactly the same tools. To me the objects of discussion can at times seem arbitrary, especially as my experience has taught me that non-artists can sometimes be much better at designing signs than professional artists.

<sup>368</sup> I return here to Levine's understanding of affordance. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, (New Jersey, Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2015). 6-11.

<sup>369</sup> On the relations between art and creativity see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, (London: Verso 2012), 16.

The piece also explores indeterminacy, the music at times acting to determine the what and when of participants actions, and at others opening up space for personal choice. The songs have varying levels of complexity. We wanted to have an image of hundreds of people simultaneously ripping BP logos, and the original idea was to count down from ten and have everyone rip when the count reaches zero. The music team wanted to aspire to a more creative climax and believed it would be possible to use music to coordinate the action, and so "Mass moment song" was composed around the task of coordinating hundreds of people to act as one and with the consideration that almost anyone should be able to participate in it. We published a video with the lyrics and a recording in the days leading up to the action, and the song was taught around the museum, but it still had to be simple enough for people to immediately pick it up. It is, therefore, a symmetrical, repetitive, syllabic melody utilising only the first five steps of the scale and consisting of steps and leaps of a third at most. The last two bars have a slightly more syncopated rhythm, building up to the song's climax when after the second "BP must fall" the participants all simultaneously rip paper slips with the BP logo on them (an action alluded to in the second line "tear away this logo").<sup>370</sup>

The stakes for "Missions song", however, were lower. This song was taught and then sung in twenty minute long workshops. Attended by groups of about two hundred, each workshop began with quickly learning the 'Mass moment song'; how to sing it and when to rip, and then most of the time was dedicated to experimenting with "Missions song". This is still a simple song, as it had to be accessible to people of all levels of singing experience, but it was a site where these people could experiment a little more. Its rhythm is slightly more syncopated than "Mass moment song", and the melody a bit more adventurous (although the flat second cadence was more often than not turned into the tonic). The experimentation in this song doesn't happen in the melody, but rather in the counterpoint, and similarly to *Nero* it uses indeterminacy as a way of easily achieving exciting textures. By allowing the participants to choose whichever note they wished to end on, the performance featured chords that would be difficult to replicate even with an experienced choir. Some stuck to one of the standard possibilities, singing the first, third or fifth of the scale, but many others tried a different pitch every time, stretching their voice and ear, and the result was always different and always exciting.

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<sup>370</sup> The rhythm in the last two bars was not always kept as written, and some recordings from people singing it around the museum it is sung instead as a quaver, crochet, quaver, which is nonetheless still more syncopated than the rest of the song.

Missions song

*♩ = 85*

1 Oh un - ha - ppy ci + ti - zens what mad - ness...

3 do you think the cri - sis sailed a - way?

5 do you think this gift is free from trea - che - ry?

7 *Whisper*  
we know B - Ps re - pu - ta - tion we know B - Ps re - pu - ta - tion

9 Call and response:  
Tro - jans don't trust that horse Art - ists don't trust that horse

11 Main-stream me dia don't trust that horse Lon - don don't trust that horse

Example 5.2 "Missions song" *BP Must Fall*



Figure 5.2 Activists teaching the songs to participants.

In a sense *BP Must Fall* also utilises a 'found text': the text of "Mission song" is closely based on the warning Laocoön gives the Trojans in Virgil's *Aeneid* [figure 5.3]. A poetic text from thousands of years ago, however, does not act similarly to dry legal documents. The text was useful to show how well the allegory tracks, and to give the piece an 'authentic' flair. The participants could step into the shoes of the prophet of apocalypse, and hope that our pleas will be better received than Laocoön's. The piece does, however, engage with the 'real' and the 'actual' in its site-specificity. Staged at any other location the could still have the same set of meanings, but a radically different impact, and it is through this element of it that we can discuss it as activist art.

*"O unhappy citizens, what madness?  
Do you think the enemy's sailed away? Or do you think  
any Greek gift's free of treachery? Is that Ulysses's reputation?"*

Figure 5.3 *Aeneid* by Virgil translated by A. S. Kline and

*"O unhappy citizens, what madness?  
Do you think the crisis sailed away? Do you think this gift  
is free of treachery? We know BP's reputation!"*

"Mission Song" from *BP Must Fall*

### Direct actions

The protest pieces discussed in this research are not solely focused on the cognitive properties of any audience. Both in the sense that they attempt to reach people beyond their immediate spectators/participants, but more poignantly in that they aim to put pressure on decision makers not by ‘convincing’ them but by disrupting the ‘business as usual’ facade that is crucial for concealing the ramifications of the sponsorship deal. As Misgav writes “activists often prefer direct action to discourse because they oppose collaboration with the establishment, do not trust it and reject the power relations upon which it is based,” the goal not being reaching an agreement but influencing power relations.<sup>371</sup> While reading these actions in artistic terms is fruitful, it is also useful to read them through activist tactics. In one sense they can simply be called protests without drawing any attention to their artistic nature; a group of people voicing their concerns and opinions in creative ways. These actions, however, were done while breaking the museum’s rules (by smuggling instruments in, making noise, and staying well after closing time), and can therefore be seen as more militant than regulated, well-behaved protests. I would suggest that we can read these pieces as direct actions, and that this reading will also inform our understanding of them as pieces of art.

Direct action is a term that is not always employed in a precise manner, often used simply to mean ‘militant’, ‘edgy’, or ‘unapproved’ actions. As Graeber observes ironically, “[i]n this sense, if one is doing more than marching around with signs, but not yet ready to take to the hills with AK-47s, then one is a direct actionist.”<sup>372</sup> The term, however, has a rich history of theory and practice which is not at all focused on being ‘edgy’ or on getting arrested (though it may often have such results). While civil disobedience is the, often symbolic, act of resisting to submit to the authorities’ demand, signalling to them that their authority, on a specific matter or all together, is not legitimate, direct action is acting in a way that is not, foremost, aimed at convincing the authorities at all. Direct action happens when people go on and do something “without going to external authorities to please do the thing for them”, as Voltairine De Cleyre writes.<sup>373</sup> Examples include Palestinian farmers and their allies

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<sup>371</sup> Chen Misgav, "With the current, against the wind: Constructing spatial activism and radical politics in the Tel-Aviv Gay Center," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 14, no. 4 (2015): 1208-1234.

<sup>372</sup> David Graeber, *Direct action: An ethnography* (London: AK press, 2009), 204.

<sup>373</sup> Voltairine De Cleyre, *Direct action*, Online at The Anarchist Library (1912),

<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/voltairine-de-cleyre-direct-action> (accessed 23/06/2023)

working lands that have been confiscated by Israeli settlers or the state; opening a co-op; blocking pipelines; and setting up mutual-aid groups.

It might then seem odd to claim that *BP Must Fall* is a direct action, as it was intended at convincing the British Museum to drop the BP sponsorship, and therefore can be seen as a plea to authorities. One could surely think of actions that are *more* direct than this. Yet, there are two meaningful insights that are afforded from reading the action-piece through the lens of direct action. Firstly, it illuminates the piece-audience relationship. Even as the work both ‘expands’ and ‘galvanises’ audiences, it is not first and foremost, aimed at changing minds or strengthening feelings towards a cause. We did not think that the museum’s board of trustees would be convinced to change their decisions by the catchy melody of the main song, or by the clusters in the second [example 5.2]. Instead the piece was intended to put pressure on the museum, by bringing bad press, and by disrupting the neutrality that the sponsorship deal was meant to create. The sponsorship deal was created in order to artwash BP; to present them as a positive force contributing to the greater good. For the British Museum the goal was to secure some funds and put on exhibitions. Both these targets were directly affected by three days of chaos in the museum where hundreds of people sang of the vices of both institutions, and where it was made impossible to visit the museum ‘normally’. The goals of the sponsorship deal are therefore directly impacted by the action, even if the deal itself is not. If, as previously discussed, Benjamin, Brecht, Rancière and Mouffe all speak of art’s ability to challenge the perceived naturality of injustices, *BP Must Fall* quite literally bursts the bubble of neutrality, not only on a philosophical level, but by actively making it impossible to treat the sponsorship as natural and the museum space as neutral.

It is useful to contrast this action with Just Stop Oil’s paint on Van Gogh stunt, for example. In October 2022 two Just Stop Oil activists threw Heinz tomato soup toward Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* (1887), at the National Gallery, creating a huge media controversy, and leading to their arrest. As the activists were quick to point out, the painting was not harmed, as it was protected with a glass shield. The action highlighted the different reactions people (and institutions) have to the thought that someone may have harmed a representation of nature, versus the indifference towards the actual destruction of nature. This action was often described as a direct action,<sup>374</sup> but, as brave as it was, I do not think the label applies. The

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<sup>374</sup> See for example Oli Mould, “Three arguments why Just Stop Oil was right to target Van Gogh’s Sunflowers,” *The Conversation* October 17th, 2022, online at

stunt was always directed at public opinion, trying and succeeding, in bringing issues into public debate. The activists had no specific issues with Van Gogh, the National Gallery or Warhol, rather they used these symbolic places and artefacts as a stage and props for an action-piece that ‘expands’ the choir, in a way reminiscent of Bishop’s ‘Antagonist Art’.<sup>375</sup> This does not mean that it was not an effective action, only that it was not a direct one.<sup>376</sup> In *BP Must Fall*, in contrast, the target and the stage are one and the same, it mobilises art and symbols not solely towards public opinion, but also to effectively disrupt the injustice they take part in.

The second sense in which this piece can be meaningfully read as direct action is related to Graeber’s description of direct action as “the insistence, when faced with structures of unjust authorities, on acting as if one is already free.”<sup>377</sup> The action did not only spoil the British Museum’s bad practice, it also, for a short while, created a very different museum. The activists turned the museum into a different space, creating an alternative to what public art and culture institutes can be. For a few hours the British Museum was a space where artists, in the widest sense of the word, shared their art, knowledge and skills, reading poetry, leading workshops, singing and teaching songs, informed by their diverse heritages, focused on burning issues at hand and aimed at radically altering the world. The piece was an experiment in practising the old Wobbly imperative to build “a new world in the shell of the old.”<sup>378</sup>

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<https://theconversation.com/three-arguments-why-just-stop-oil-was-right-to-target-van-goghs-sunflowers-192661> (accessed 19/07/2023); Joe McCarthy, “Opinion: The Van Gogh-Soup Climate Protest Was Actually Effective Direct Action,” *Global Citizen* October 17th, 2022, online at <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/van-gogh-tomato-soup-climate-protest/> (accessed 19/07/2023).

<sup>375</sup> Whether or not the action is successful in ‘expanding’ the number of people concerned about the climate crisis is an issue of much debate. Much of the attention to the action was negative, however, supporters point out, the goal was not to win a popularity contest, but to raise awareness and the action saw a huge uptake in public discussions regarding the climate and activism. One research showed that negative perspectives of the activists did not lead to negative positions toward climate policies. Others remain unconvinced. Zion Lights for example notes that the public is already, largely, convinced and therefore: “Ultimately, concrete government policies are the metric to watch, rather than the number of likes on a viral video.” See James Ozden, and Sam Glover. “Disruptive climate protests in the UK didn’t lead to a loss of public support for climate policies,” *Effective Altruism Forum* (2022).

<https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/YDtsGHmDJMsAWB7Wt/disruptive-climate-protests-in-the-uk-didn-t-lead-to-a-loss>; Zion Lights, “Tomato soup, a famous painting and a viral clip. What makes a protest work?,” *OpenDemocracy* October 21, 2022,

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/just-stop-oil-extinction-rebellion-climate-protest/> (accessed: 19/07/2023)

<sup>376</sup> See Graeber’s discussion of suffragettes’ window smashing as a militant action, but an indirect one. Graeber, *Direct Action*, 205.

<sup>377</sup> Graeber, *Direct Action*, 203.

<sup>378</sup> Jeffery Shantz, “Anarchy Is Order: Creating the New World in the Shell of the Old,” *M/C Journal*, 7 no. 6 (2005).

### A choir that acts

I have already written about the struggle of the Sumreen family in the section on '*Absentee' means-*'. That piece was commissioned on the back of an earlier composition, *Custodia - an oratorio for a choir that acts* (2018), which was composed before I began this PhD research. The two pieces are similar in many respects, textual, musical, and the struggle they are devoted to. Their contexts, though, differ widely. One being a civil disobedience action piece and the other an installation for an art gallery. Both pieces were performed at crucial points in the family's struggle against the Jewish National Fund's attempt to displace them, and they were both formed with close consideration of the needs of the activist struggle at these points. *Custodian* is a music-theatre piece that combines the Israeli Absentee Property Law (1950), the biblical story of Naboth's vineyard [1 Kings, 21], letters written by state officials and settler leaders, protocols from court sessions and governmental inquiries, and original playwriting by me (only for spoken text, never for sung). It uses allegory and critique in similar ways to '*Absentee' means-*' though it is more theatrical in its language, and does not include footage from Silwan nor interviews with the family. In this sense 'the real' is more confined than in the later piece, consisting only of the composition of found texts. There is, however, another crucial way in which the piece explores the 'real', through its site-specific location. The piece was performed on the front steps of the headquarters of the Jewish National Fund, without their approval.

Knowing that the audience for a new music piece about the displacement of a Palestinian family was likely to be sympathetic to the cause from the start, I decided to mobilise their sympathy. The choice to stage the piece at JNF headquarters (first in Jerusalem, then in Tel Aviv) raised the stakes of that sympathy and changed the artistic and activist operation of the piece. The ensemble consisted of musicians who were interested in using their art for the struggle: a conductor and six singers, some from a professional, others from an amateur background, all of them volunteering their time.<sup>379</sup> Some were experienced activists, others not, and all were devoted to the cause. We then used the infrastructures of the activist group 'Free Jerusalem' and the culture hub 'Imbala' to spread the word about the performance in sympathetic circles, though the location of the show was only revealed two hours before it began, so that the JNF would not know we were coming. People from these groups also

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<sup>379</sup> A very similar lineup of performers was later paid to record '*Absentee' means-*'.

helped with technical aspects of the performance. Thus the performances were both artistic events and political protests. The very presence of the two hundred people who came to watch it was a protest.

*Custodian* was one moment within a long-lasting campaign. From an activist point of view, the piece was successful in drawing a larger crowd and more media attention than any of the previous rallies.<sup>380</sup> The performances also widened participation: while some of the audience were from the Jerusalem anti-apartheid activist scene, many were not. My sense is that many who attended had limited experience in political protest and especially civil disobedience. The audience included a large section of new music and classical music crowds that are rarely seen in such political activities. I attribute their decision to attend to both an interest in music and to a sense that being the audience of an oratorio performance was a safe way to form a defiant ‘mass’. It could be argued that *Custodian*’s relationship to its audience is more conservative than that of *BP Must Fall*: they only sit ‘passively’ and watch. But following Claire Bishop’s dismissal of the simple binary that an audience is either active or passive,<sup>381</sup> I suggest we consider the role that the audience is performing rather than their actions. Not only are the audience members participating in civil disobedience by watching the piece in a place where they’re not wanted, they actually play a crucial part in the piece’s political and aesthetic operation.

*Custodian* explicitly activates an ‘artistic’ context by presenting a staged work set within a historical music-theatre genre (the oratorio) for an audience. The oratorio form allowed me to explore the subject matter in ways that I hope strengthen understanding and feelings about the case; for example, by paralleling the biblical story of Naboth’s vineyard with the plight of the Sumreens, by drawing on liturgical melodies, and by creating choral textures. Staging it in front of the JNF buildings had its drawbacks – the acoustics were far from ideal for one – but it allowed the work to directly engage with the struggle. Much was afforded by conducting this piece as both art and action. Our performance in front of the JNF headquarters was not shut down in the way that a conventional protest would likely have been. The audience performing as an audience legitimised the action as an artwork rather than a ‘mere’ subversion. Art functions in this piece not only through creativity but also with what

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<sup>380</sup> For instance an article in *Haaretz* newspaper, Nir Hasson, “The Judge Said This Is Not The Theatre Nor The Circus, So What If She Said?” *Haaretz*, October 28, 2018. (Hebrew)

<sup>381</sup> Bishop discusses this in relation to participatory art, and is developing Rancière’s rejection of the binary. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 18. Rancière, *The emancipated spectator*, 12.

Benjamin refers to as art's 'aura' and 'cultic value': the social values that are attributed to something because it is perceived as art.<sup>382</sup> While these values are not stable, in general, art is considered as 'distinguished'; as speaking to 'essential' matters, and having a unique relationship to 'truth'. Art is also thought of as something that should not be silenced. This 'aura' then legitimised, reinforced and amplified our action as well as protected it from being closed down. It helped convey a message to a large crowd, to the press, to the JNF heads and staff on site, and to the case's judges as they read the news. This was made possible by the audience 'performing' the role of 'audience': by dressing as they want, sitting as they want, listening, laughing, judging, losing and finding interest, applauding, and so on, they contextualise the action as art, with all that that implies. The audience's apparent 'passivity' here was a direct action.

This emphasis on the role of the audience does not mean that the musicians play a lesser part. Performing the piece in the JNF headquarters is only one of the choices that mattered. In *BP Must Fall*, the function of the music was to raise participants' spirits and bring the message to a wider audience; stylistic preferences and artistic ambitions were secondary to the goal of writing an accessible tune that could be taught and remembered by hundreds of people in a short period of time. In *Custodian*, artistic ambitions were central, if only for creating the work's aura. It involved negotiating aesthetic questions that relate to the piece's music, visuality, form, that were all essential in shaping the messages, helping the audience to play their role (a laughing audience is different from a sleeping audience), and advancing the ties between the audience members, the artists, and the cause at stake. The decisions to use only voices, to have the singers dressed as a Greek chorus, to have the same performer portray different characters, the misusing of Jewish and Zionist rituals, contrasting them and blurring their boundaries, a modal but dissonant musical language; these were all decisions that shaped the piece, both as art and as action.

In considering the 'preaching to the choir' critique I have reflected on how artworks' relationship to their audiences' political disposition can be valuable, illuminating how artworks do politics. The terms I've put forward – 'expanding', 'galvanising' and 'activating'

<sup>382</sup> I am referencing these terms as they appear in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" as: "The 'one-of-a-kind' value of the 'genuine' work of art." Miriam Hansen argues that Benjamin's usage of the 'aura' in "The Work of Art" is narrower than elsewhere; in this essay he sees the 'aura' as a "fetishistic cult of beautiful semblance". Walter Benjamin "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* trans. J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin Books, 2008 [1936]), 11. Miriam Bratu Hasnen, "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Inquiry*, 34 no. 2 (2008): 355.

– are not intended as categories but as complementary capacities that can be deployed in diverse manners. As every artwork establishes its own, unique relation to its audience, the examples I have given are not templates but case studies that flesh out some of the tactics at play. I am sure some sceptics will not be convinced by any of these responses. Others might worry that art is degraded or simplified by being thought of in tactical terms. Yet the interaction of artists and audiences has always had a political and moral dimension. Nevertheless it seems to me that not only is the desire for artistic activism on the rise but also that our vocabulary for such art is still very limited. There is much to be done in unpacking and rewriting new music's relationship to power structures through race, gender, class, and geopolitics. This discussion should not be limited to the important questions of who participates and how in new music, but should also extend to understanding, perfecting and instrumentalising the tools we have within new music to fight for justice.

## Conclusion

In April 2023 the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Sumreen family, granting them the right to remain in their home and blocking the Jewish National Fund's attempts of displacing them.<sup>383</sup> Two months later, in June, The Guardian published an article titled "British Museum ends BP sponsorship deal after 27 years."<sup>384</sup> The two struggles in which pieces in this portfolio were directly involved, were successful. These were not complete victories: the British Museum is still full of looted art, and the 'BP Lecture Hall' is still named so; the Smureen family were given the right to live in their home, but the court left the ownership of the house in settler hands. These are nonetheless important milestones, and not achievements to take for granted. Challenging the sponsorship deal was at the heart of the campaign by BP or not BP?, and its cancellation calls for celebration. If nothing dramatic changes (and it may well happen) the Sumreens' victory means they can remain in their home for decades, and in Occupied East Jerusalem, Palestinians do not routinely win court cases, as the laws are inherently skewed to their disadvantage.

A few months before the British Museum changed its policy on accepting sponsorship from oil companies, the museum's chair, George Osborne told trustees that the museum wishes to "no longer [be] a destination for climate protest but instead an example of climate solution."<sup>385</sup> It is impossible to calculate the extent to which creative activism played a role in this change, let alone the impact of the specific musical actions discussed, nor the efficacy of the artistic tactics they used. Nonetheless, Osborne's statement suggests that the artistic activism to which I contributed musically, and which is discussed in this research, had some impact on the decision. I similarly believe that activism played a part in the Sumreen family case. Unpacking this is more complex because of the legal guise that many political struggles take in Jerusalem, presented as if they are 'property disputes' that are determined in court. I

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<sup>383</sup> The New Arab Staff, "Palestinian family in Jerusalem's Silwan win Israeli Supreme Court battle to save home," *The New Arab*, April 4, 2023.

<https://www.newarab.com/news/silwan-family-win-israeli-supreme-court-battle-save-home> (accessed 23/07/2023); Nir Hasson, "Israel's Supreme Court Rules Against Evicting Palestinian Family in East Jerusalem After 32-year Battle," *Haaretz*, April 3, 2023.

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-04-03/ty-article/.premium/israels-top-court-rules-against-evicting-palestinian-family-in-jlem-after-32-year-battle/00000187-46a5-d027-a7af-c7f78d880000> (accessed 23/07/2023).

<sup>384</sup> Esther Addley, "British Museum ends BP sponsorship deal after 27 years," *The Guardian*, June 2, 2023.

<sup>385</sup> Geraldine Kendall Adams, "British Museum seeks to no longer be a 'destination for climate protest,'" *Museums Association*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2022/12/british-museum-seeks-to-no-longer-be-a-destination-for-climate-protest/> (accessed 23/07/2023).

intend to write about the role of activism, and artistic activism, in this case in a future publication. Whatever role the pieces played in these victories, the victories themselves play a role in the story of the music. The choice to create within specific, concrete, political struggles has given the music a sense of success that is hard to achieve in politically-engaged new music. This sense of success has filled myself and other activists/artists with energy and hope that will be crucial for the continuation of these and other struggles.

The title of this PhD is a nod towards John L. Austin's book *How To Do Things With Words*.<sup>386</sup> In this book, Austin expands the understanding of what language does, showing that utterances are not restricted to only making true/false statements, utterances can *do* things. This research tries to make a similar argument, albeit in different terms, about political music. It argues that music does not only say things but can act as well. This is not to say that the pieces do not make statements about the world, but rather that the research has investigated how music can go beyond making statements and offering representations. By subverting meanings, mobilising experimental processes, and creating political relationships with their audiences, all pieces in this portfolio all attempt to *do* something.

Offhandish dismissals of politically engaged music were taken in this project as points of departure. Rather than attempting to refute claims that political art is 'on the nose' or 'preaches to the choir', I have argued that these notions can be useful considerations for both those creating, and those analysing politically engaged new music. I have suggested seeing such dismissals as the tensions that pieces negotiate, employing diverse tactics and practices to navigate the stormy waters that surround any artwork attempting to be effective as both art and action. One such challenge is that meaning-making in politically engaged music runs the risk of either being too restrictive or too open. Restrictive meaning-making might be experienced as an aesthetic failure. If meaning making is too abstract, on the other hand, the piece contracts the job of meaning making to the audience which are likely to read it in ways that reaffirm the very ideology the piece wishes to challenge. A risk that I have named the 'status quo reading'. Through examining both my work and the work of others, as well as the writings of theorists and practitioners, I proposed 'allegory' and 'critique' as two ways to navigate this tension. I have shown how works can either find ways to open up a gap between the piece and its meaning, through the use of symbols and redactions; or engage directly with

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<sup>386</sup> John Langshaw Austin, *How to do things with words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1975).

the topic at hand by manipulating the ‘real’ within the artwork, through practices such as ‘misuse’.

A key element of this project is to look at how artworks do politics, beyond their semiotic operation. I reject the view that simply using an open score, or including improvisation in a piece, is in itself an act of political defiance. The problem with such readings of indeterminate music is that similarly to the ‘status quo readings’ they are much too vague in their understanding of politics, and risk promoting opposing ideologies (similarly to ‘status quo readings’). Praising the ability to choose between several possibilities, without taking into consideration the stakes, consequences, and political implication of these choices, is at least compatible with capitalism’s glorification of fake choices. This does not mean that indeterminacy cannot be useful for political work. The focus on agency and the distribution of (often symbolic) power make indeterminate practises a meaningful site for politically engaged explorations. I have shown a myriad of ways indeterminate pieces can be implicated in politics by directing the meaning of their processes (e.g., the use of titles or referential music) or by combining them with explicitly activist frameworks and contexts (e.g., the implementation within an activist action). Finally, I suggest that instead of seeing the allegation of ‘preaching to the choir’ as a devastating critique, it can be taken as a useful metaphor for the relationship a piece creates with its audience. I have highlighted three such relationships; ‘expanding’, ‘galvanising’ and ‘activating’ the choir, and there may well be more. These show different ways of thinking about what music *does*, rather than focusing only on what it ‘tells’ its audience, drawing on activist strategies such as direct action and civil disobedience.

Pieces in this portfolio attempt to *act* politically in numerous ways. *BP Must Fall, Nero*, and *It Should Be in the Hands* are all pieces that were created within an activist movement, and use activist tactics such as ‘direct action’, ‘civil disobedience’, and ‘media stunt’ to achieve their goals. *What Can I Do* and *Or Never* shift their focus from political ‘issues’ to political agency and attempt to expand the realm of possible actions for their performers and audience. *Put Your Hands Together* plants trees (while also questioning the effectiveness of this form of ‘doing’). This is not to say that provoking thought and challenging perceptions, the act of critique, have not played a central role in this research. Most of the pieces engage with their subject matters through allegory and/or critique. *I HATE EGGPLANT* for example is a reflection on antisemitism from a personal perspective in a ‘standard’ new music form. In

choosing subject matters I have often opted towards more concrete and specific issues. Rather than discussing Israeli apartheid as a whole, '*Absentee*' means- focuses on one concrete struggle, and through it unpacks the moral contradictions at the heart of Zionism. This has allowed the piece to be more detailed, informative, and hopefully impactful. It has also meant that it was tied to a specific, successful, struggle. Both *Workers Union Gig (economy)* and *Put Your Hands Together* are critiques of late capitalism. They both use as their entry point specific applications of contemporary capitalism that can find echoes in the lives of new music listeners who will often work a precarious job, and who might hope for a neat technological solution for the world's problems. The pieces in this portfolio were written for diverse artistic and political contexts: an art gallery installation, protest performances, music theatre works and concert hall pieces. I have tried to develop a set of tactics that are useful for pieces anywhere on the spectrum from activist intervention to concert hall work, as long as they are invested in supporting political change through experimental creativity.

This set of tools is in no way complete, nor is the theorisation of the works discussed, my own or by other composers, exhaustive. The future of this practice-led research includes a more extensive look at the ways politically engaged pieces of new music engage with political questions using text, videos, musical references, and movement, as well as a more extensive exploration of the potential of activist tactics in new music, and new music practices in creative activism. Materialist perspectives and institutional critique have not played a major role in analysing the financial realities governing politically engaged new music, and that is another important area for later research. The combined output of academic writing and musical works seems to me to have been effective. In the near future I therefore intend to continue and explore these issues using similar methodologies. The year 2023 will see the premiere and two week run of my piece *Antisemitism - a (((musical)))* which uses humour and theatre to tackle an explosive topic in contemporary UK; the premiere and subsequent performances of *MARCH* a piece exploring the rhythms, dynamic, and psychology of protests, commissioned by Contemporary Music for All; *For People From Places* commissioned by the University of Southampton to celebrate their declaration as a 'University of Sanctuary', and which is written for an ensemble of university students and refugees. Through these and other works I hope to continue exploring how new music can do politics. From the activist perspective there is much more to be explored around the connection between direct action and music, through the different relationships music can create with an audience, and I intend to pursue these issues both in theory and in practice.

In this research I have argued for an expansive outlook on how new music pieces do politics. By building on discussions in musicology, art history, philosophy, cultural studies, social science, and other fields, and by drawing on practices from new music, theatre, visual arts and activism, I have tried to demarcate some of the considerations, limitations, and possibilities of politically engaged new music. As the crises under which we live intensify, the desire to find effective political tools will continue to grow. Art and creativity, I believe, will always play a part in this endeavour. I have argued that the sensibilities, practices, and tools of new music should not be seen as incompatible with activism, as I believe this shapeless field has the potential to play its own odd and wonderful roles in struggles for justice.

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University of Southampton

Faculty of Humanities  
Music department

**How to do Things With Sounds: New Music as Political Action**

Volume 2 of 10

By

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2024

# “Absentee” Means

*For piano(s), five singers and three screens*

*Lily Solomonov (conductor) Amit Biton (piano), Shira Z. Carmel, Tamar Cohen, Yael Schreiber, Michal Tamari and Lily Solomonov (singers)*

By Uri Agnon  
Commissioned by Tel-Aviv Museum of Art  
An installation piece for the exhibition *Descensus*<sup>1</sup>

February 2020

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<sup>1</sup> This score reflects the musical elements of the piece and does not include the visual content.

SUNG TEXT (translated from Hebrew) -

A vineyard belonged to Naboth the Jezreelite, which was in Jezreel, hard by the palace of Ahab, king of Samaria. And Ahab spoke unto Naboth, saying: 'Give me thy vineyard, that I may have it for a garden of herbs, because it is near unto my house;' And Naboth said to Ahab: 'Oh heavens no'.

And Ahab returned into his house sullen and displeased. And he laid him down upon his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no bread. But Jezebel his wife came to him, and said unto him: **Instilled Property is Property that is Instilled to the Custodian by this law.**

*Hast thou killed, and also taken possessions?*

So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, and sealed them with his seal, and sent the letters unto the elders and to the nobles that were in his city. And she wrote in the letters, saying: **The Treasurer will appoint, in a warren officially published, a Custodian Council for Absentee Property, and will declare one of its members as Chair of the Council, the Chair will be known as the Custodian.**

And the men of his city, the elders and the nobles who dwelt in his city, did as Jezebel wrote to them.

**If the Custodian has approved in writinting that an individual is an absentee, the individual shall be considered as an absentee as long as the contrary has not been established.**

And the two sons of wickedness, came in and sat before him; and the base fellows bore witness against him.

**If the Custodian has approved in writinting that a property is absentee property, the property shall be considered as absentee property as long as the contrary has not been established.**

A      R      I      S      E      A      R      I      S      E      A      R      I      S      E

And it came to pass, when Jezebel heard that Naboth was stoned, and was dead, that Jezebel said to Ahab: 'Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give thee for money; for **Any installed property is thus installed to the Custodian.**

**Any rights that the absentee had in the property are installed to the Custodian.**

*Hast thou killed, and also taken possessions?*

Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel And thou shalt speak unto him, saying:

O H H E A V E N S N O

O H H E A V E N S N O

Texts are taken from the Hebrew Bible 1 King 21, and from the Israeli Law of Absentee Property

# Nifkad

$\text{♩} = 105$

Lily

Tamar

Yael

Shira

Michal

$\text{♩} = 105$   
*Misterioso*

Piano

*mf*

*ertetz israel hayafa*

M.

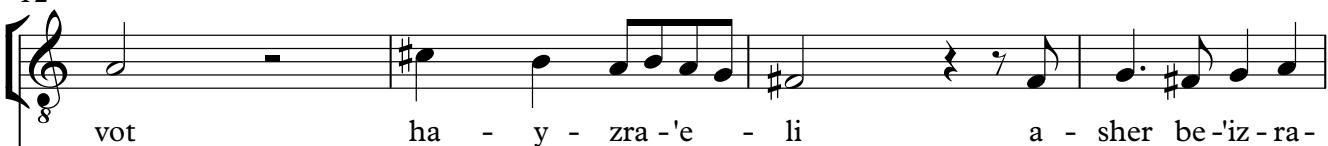
*mf*

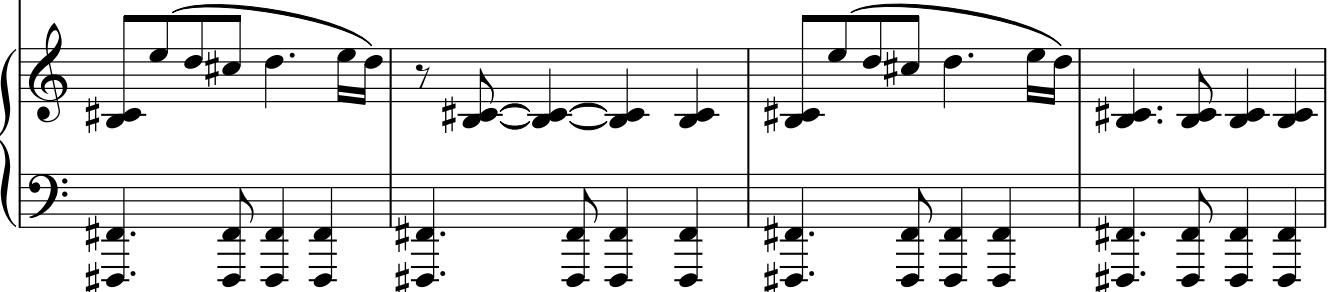
ke-re-m ha - ya le-ne

Pno.

*tr*

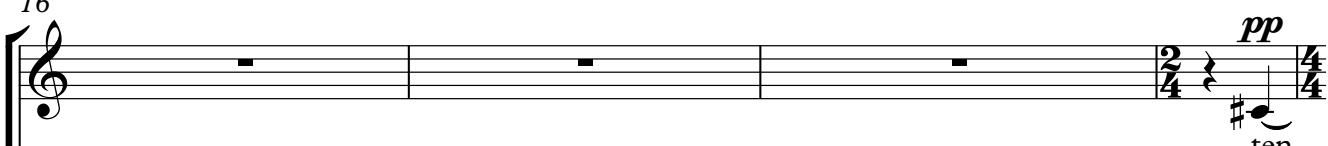
12

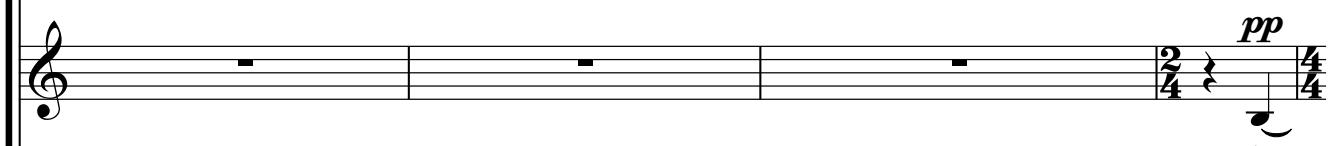
M. 

Pno. 

vot ha - y - zra - 'e - li a - sher be -'iz - ra -

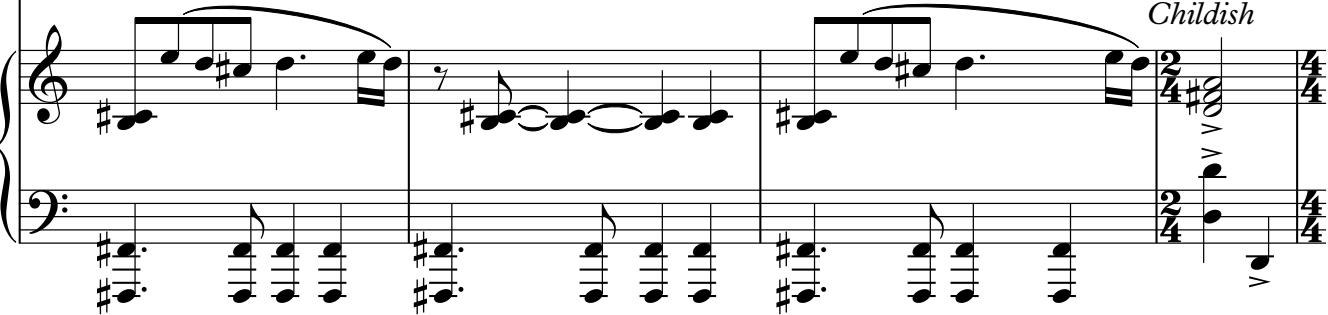
16

L. 

T. 

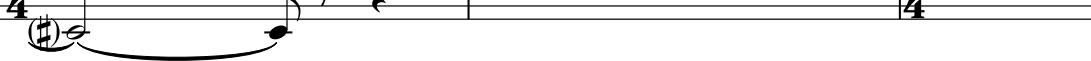
M. 

'el e - tzel hei-khal akh - 'av me-lekh shom - ron

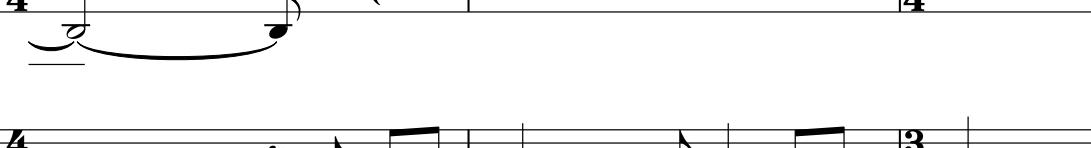
Pno. 

*Childish*

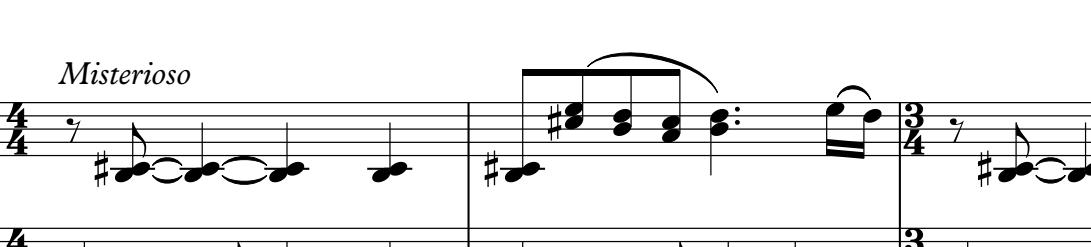
20

L. 

T. 

M. 

*Misterioso*

Pno. 

23

T. *fpp*  
Y. *fpp*  
S. *fpp*  
M. *fpp*  
Pno.

le - 'e - - - mor va - ye - da - ber Akh 'av le - ne -

26

L. *fpp*  $\text{♩} = 120$

T. *f*

Y. *f*

S. *f*

M.  $\text{♩} = 120$

Pno. *Childish* *Misterioso*  $\text{♩} = 120$

ten \_\_\_\_\_ te-na-li et kar-me - kha va-ye

vot le - 'e - mor le'e-mor

5

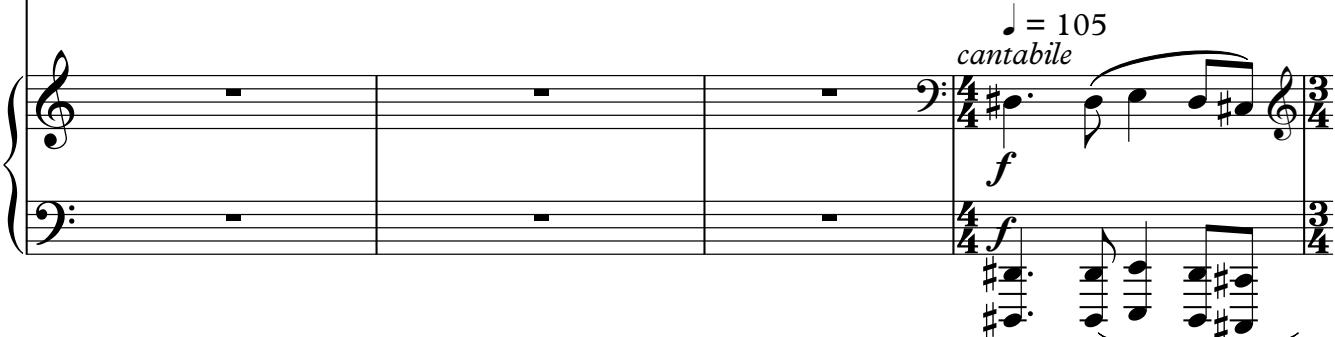
30

L. 

T. 

Y. 

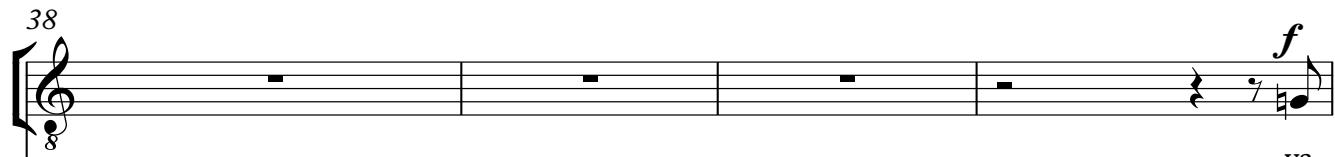
S. 

Pno. 

34

Pno. 

38

M. 

Pno. 

*Misterioso*

42

L. *p* *mf*

T. *p* *mf*

Y. *p* *mf*

S. *p* *mf*

M. yo mer\_ Ne vot le-'Akh - av va - yo mer\_ Ne-vot le-'Akh - av va-

Pno. *Childish* *Misterioso* *Childish*

46

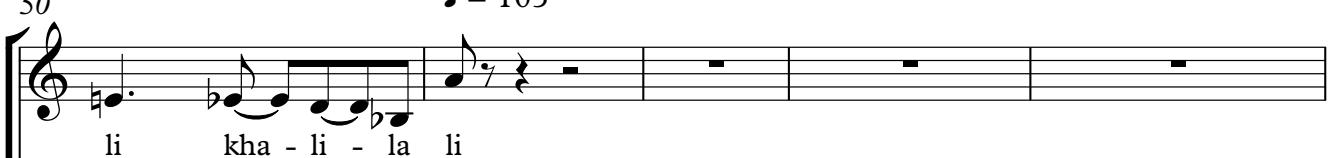
L. *f*  $\text{♩} = 120$   
 T. *f*  
 Y. *f*  
 S. *f*  
 M. *f*

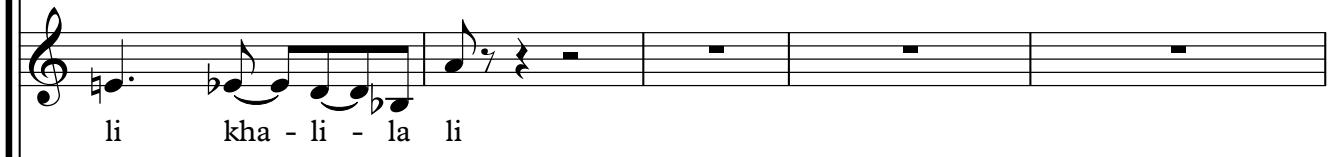
8  
 yo mer\_ ne-vot le-Akh 'av

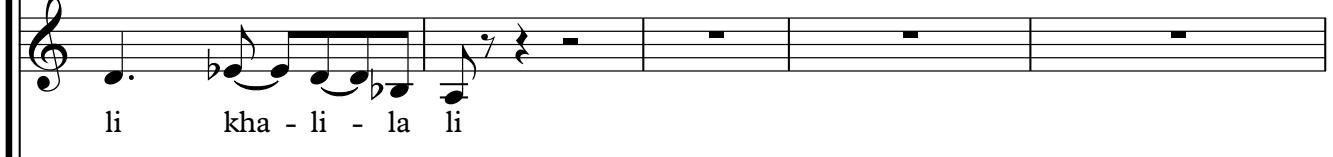
Pno. *Misterioso*  $\text{♩} = 120$

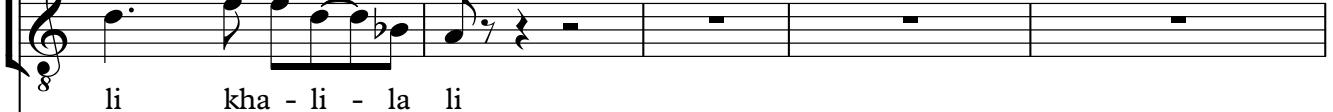
Text below piano: yo mer\_ ne-vot le-Akh 'av

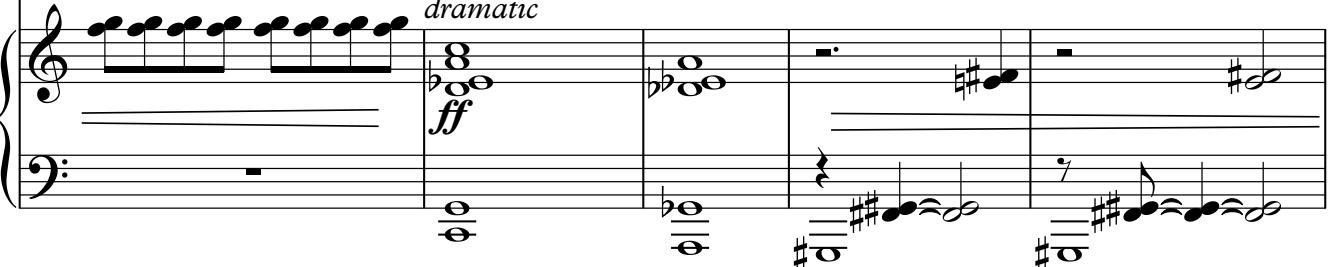
50  $\text{♩} = 105$

L. 

T. 

Y. 

S. 

Pno.  $\text{♩} = 105$  *dramatic* 

55

L. T. Y. S. M. Pno.

va-ya - vo Akh-av le-bei - to

*enigmatic* *Childish*

*mp* *mf*

9

59

M. Pno.

sar\_\_\_\_\_ ve - zo - 'ef va-yish - kav al mi-ta - to

*enigmatic* *Childish*

*tr*

63

L. *pp*

T. *pp*

Y. *pp*

S. *pp*

M. *va - ya - sev et-pa - nav ve-lo a-khal le - khem*

Pno. *enigmatic*

Detailed description: The musical score consists of five staves. The top four staves are vocal parts: L (soprano), T (alto), Y (tenor), and S (bass). The vocal parts sing words: 'ta', 'tza', 'ra', and 'ha'. The bottom staff is for the piano (Pno.). The piano part is labeled 'enigmatic' and shows a series of chords and rests. The vocal parts are in 4/4 time, and the piano part is in 4/4 time. The vocal parts have a key signature of one sharp, while the piano part has a key signature of one sharp. The piano part includes a dynamic instruction 'enigmatic' and a tempo instruction '63'.

L. *f* ve ta

T. *f* ve ga

Y. *f* ve ra

S. *f* ve mya

M. - va - ta - vo e - lav I - ze - vel 'ish - to va - ta -

Pno. *Misterioso* *Childish*

69

L. *f* *ff* *5* *4*

T. *f* *ff* *5* *4*

Y. *f* *ff* *5* *4*

S. *f* *ff* *5* *4*

M. *8* vo 'e - lav I - ze - vel 'ish - to va - te - da - ber e -

Pno. *Misterioso*

71

S. *8* -

M. *8* - lav

Pno. *Childish*

"נכש מוקנה" פירושו - נכס המוקנה לאפואטופוס לפי חוק זה

### HaRaTza(kh)Ta

The total duration of this movement should range between 1:00 and 1:30. It has three submovements and the passage from one to the other is lead by **Lily**.

#### Submovement A - 70 bpm - 35"-45"

Starting soft with a slight crescendo, after all have entered there should be a block of sound without rests thought this submovement. The word haratzakhta (הרצקה) should slowly become preseaveable without becoming too literal.

**Michal:** Start singing first, sing the consonant Kh (n). Start piano until all others join. Create small dynamic peaks everytime you hear **Tamar** singing a new “Tza” sound.

**Lily:** Start after **Michal**, together with **Yael** and before the other singers. Alternate between the two melodic options. Wherever a note ends with a tie that is attached to nothing, it should last until the next “ta”. Start with long notes. After singing “ta” three times continue while listening to **Tamar** and **Michal**, and only start a new “ta” after **Tamar** starts a new “tza” and **Michal**’s Kha intensifies.

**Yael:** Start after **Michal**, together with **Lily** and before the other singers. Alternate between the two melodic options. Wherever a note ends with a tie that is attached to nothing, it should last until the next “ha”. Start with long notes. After singing “ha” three times continue while listening to **Lily**, and only start a new “ha” after **Lily** starts a new “ta”.

**Tamar:** Start together with **Shira** and after the other singers. Alternate between the three melodic options. Wherever a note ends with a tie that is attached to nothing, it should last until the next “tza”. Start with long notes. After singing “tza” three times continue while listening to **Shira**, and only start a new “tza” after **Shira** starts a new “ra”.

**Shira:** Start together with **Tamar** and after the other singers. Alternate between the two melodic options. Wherever a note ends with a tie that is attached to nothing, it should last until the next "ra". Start with long notes. After singing "ra" three times continue while listening to **Yael**, and only start a new "ra" after **Yael** starts a new "ha".

Shira

ra      ra

Submovement B 10"-15"

**Yael:** Sing melody very slowly and totally free of time. After returning to D let your voice slowly fade into a pitchless airy sound.

Yael

ve

Submovement C - 100 bpm - 20"-35"

As in submovement A there should be sound throughout. Take breaths before every note, but no rests. The words "gam yarashta" (גַם יָרַשְׁתָּא) should appear and disappear.

**Michal:** Begin after **Yael** has finished Submovement B, and before the rest have started. Sing "sh" (ψ) staticky on mezzo piano. Finish with the rest of the singers.

**Everyone else:** All begin together with a forte piano, singing the note in the first of the two measures below. Then sing your note, trying *not* to start a note at the same time as the person you were listening to at A (it is fine to fail at this!). Try to have the speed of attacks increase through the submovement, alongside a crescendo. When **Lily** gives a sign sing the note from your second measure together.

Lily

ta      ta

Tamar

ra      ra

Yael

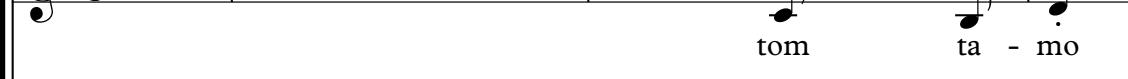
ga      ga

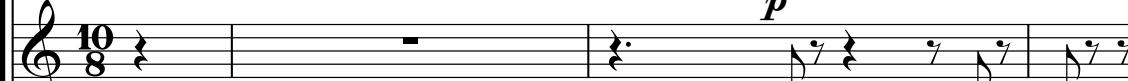
Shira

mya      mya

Izevel

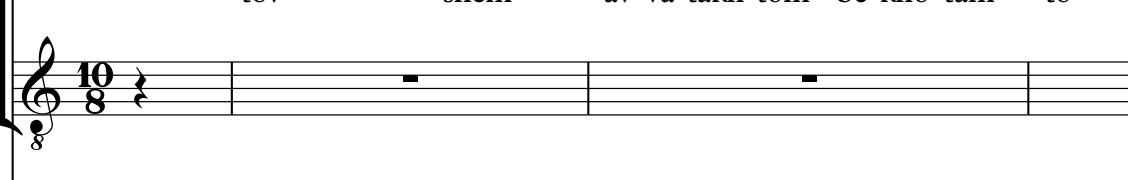
$\text{♪} = 340$

Lily  $10/8$  

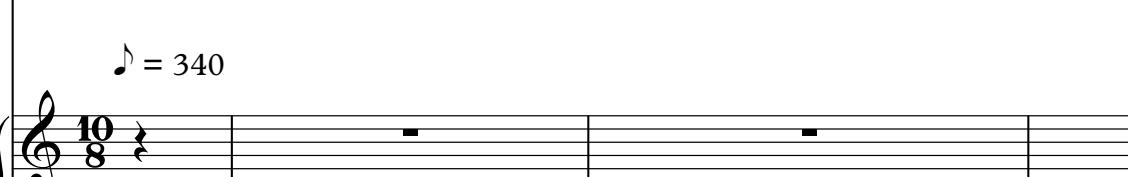
Tamr  $10/8$  

Yael  $10/8$  

Shira  $10/8$  

Michal  $10/8$  

$\text{♪} = 340$

Amit  $10/8$  

7

L. - - - - -

T. - - - - - *mf* va-takh-tov sfa - rim be -

Y. *f* - - - - - - - - - - -

mo

S. *f* - - - - - *mf* va-tikh - tov sfa - rim be - shem Akh - 'av va-takh - tom be - kho

mo

M. *f* - - - - - *mf* va-tikh - tov sfa - rim be - shem Akh - 'av va-takh - tom be - kho

mo

10

L. *mf*  
va - takh - tom be - kho - ta - mo va - takh -

T. shem Akh - av va - tikh - tov sfa - rim be

Y. *mf*  
va - tikh - tov sfa - rim be

S. *mf*  
8 ta - mo va - tikh - tov sfa - rim be - shem Akh -

M. ta - mo va - tikh - tov sfa - rim be - shem Akh -

12

L. tom be - kho - ta - mo

T. shem Akh - av va - tish lackh ha - sfa - fim 'el ha - zke - nim ve - ha - kho - rim

Y. shem Akh - av va - tish lackh ha - sfa - fim 'el ha - zke - nim ve - ha - kho - rim

S. *mf*  
8 'av va - takh - tom

M. *mf*  
8 'av va - takh - tom

Pno. *f*

15

L. 
 va tikh-tov ba - sfa - rim le - 'e - mor

T. 
 va tikh-tov ba - sfa - rim le - 'e - mor

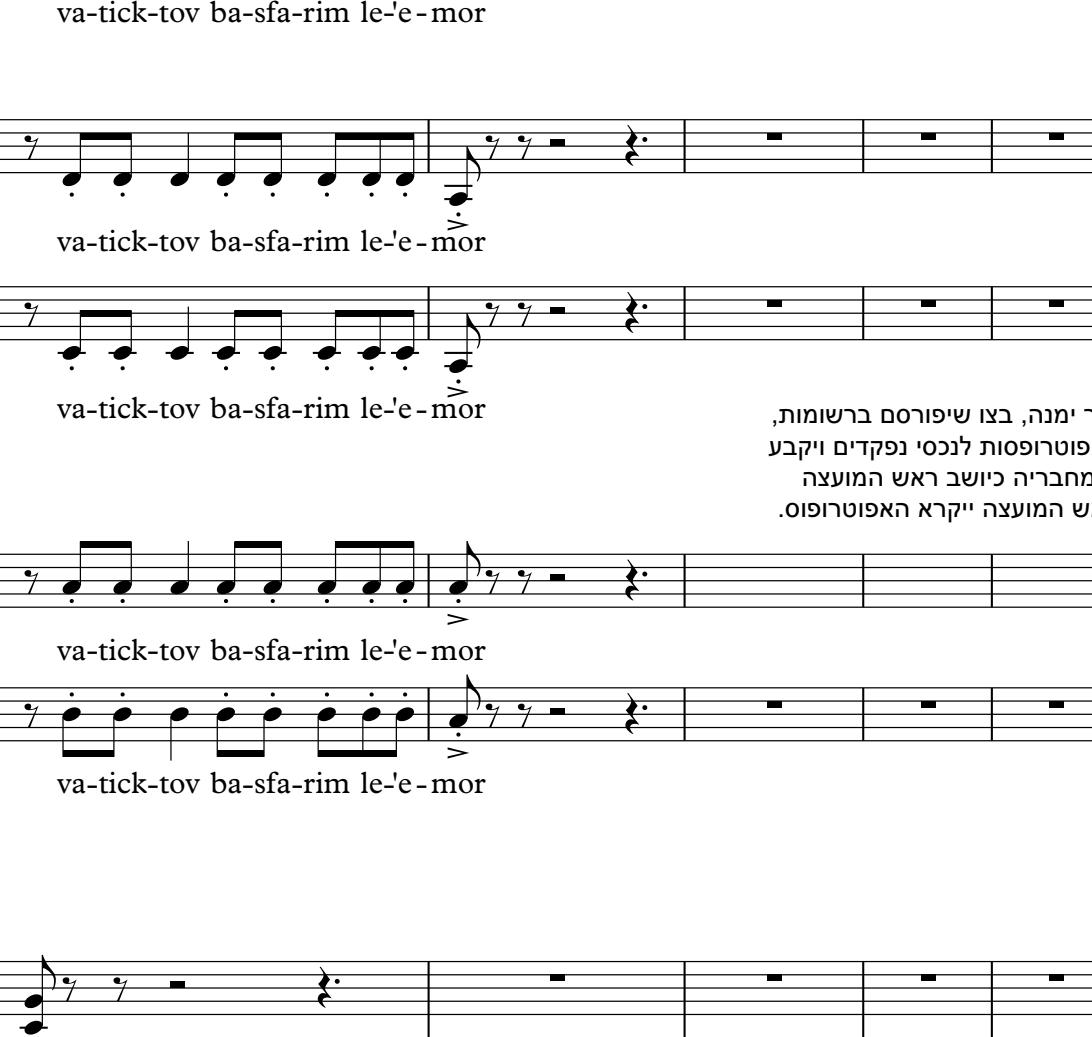
Y. 
 va tikh-tov ba - sfa - rim le - 'e - mor

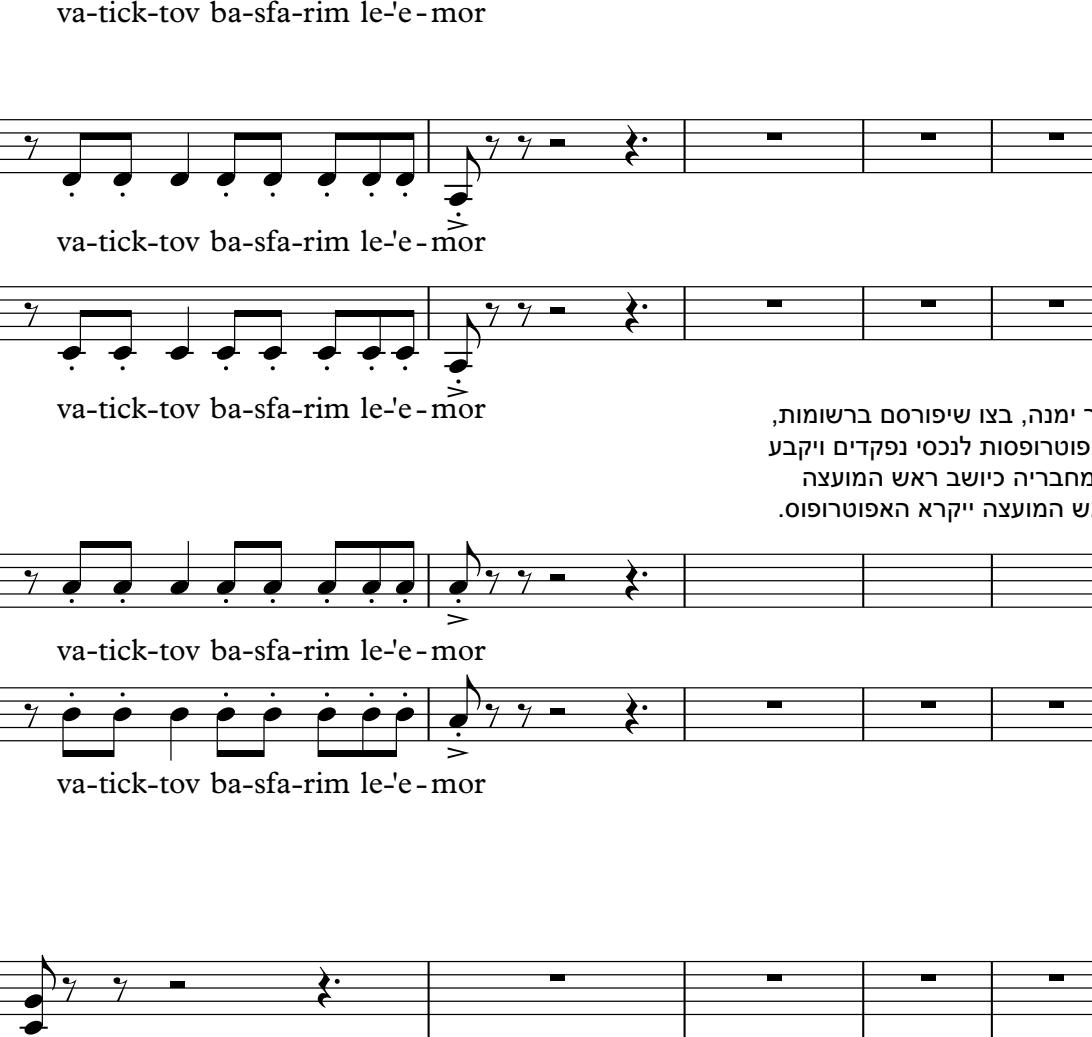
S. 
 va tikh-tov ba - sfa - rim le - 'e - mor

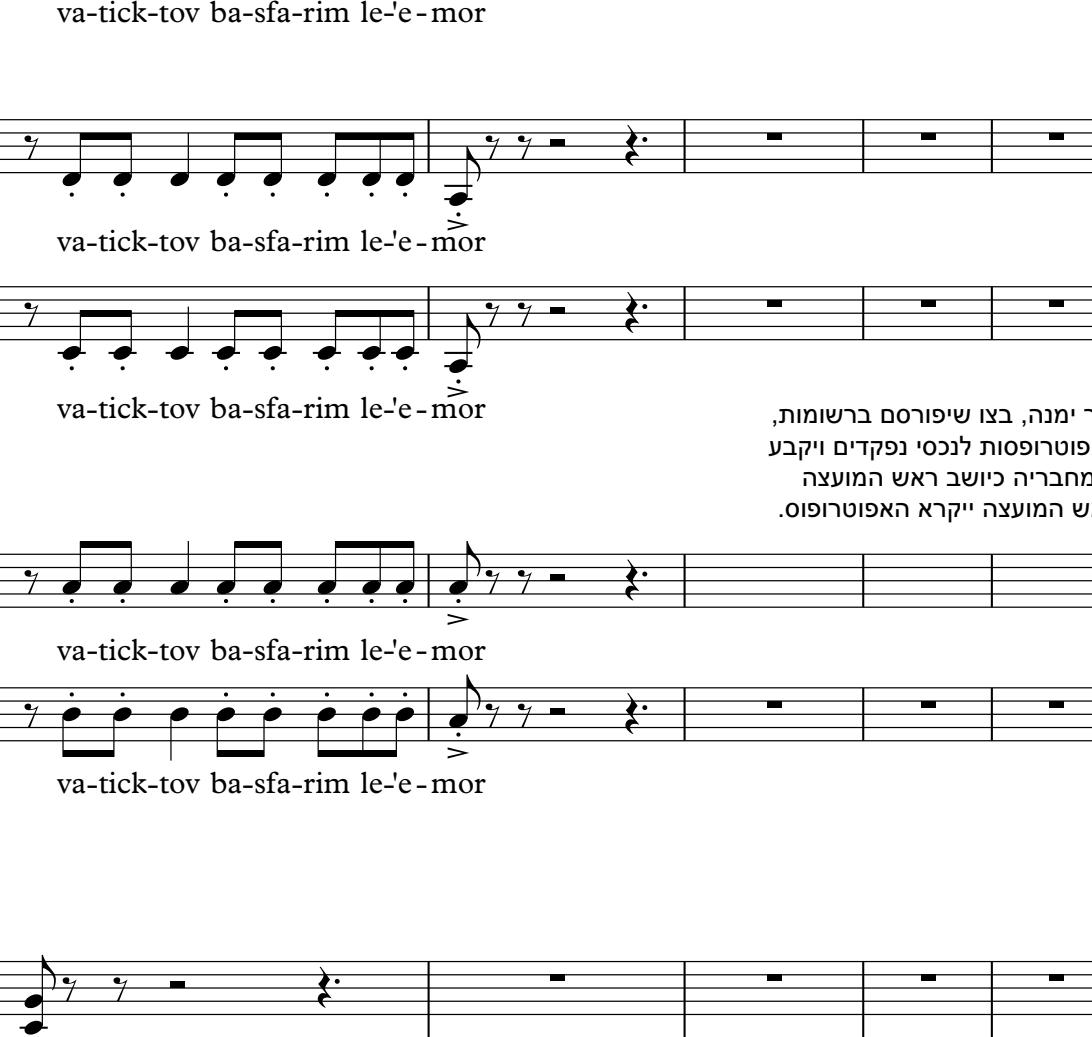
M. 
 va tikh-tov ba - sfa - rim le - 'e - mor

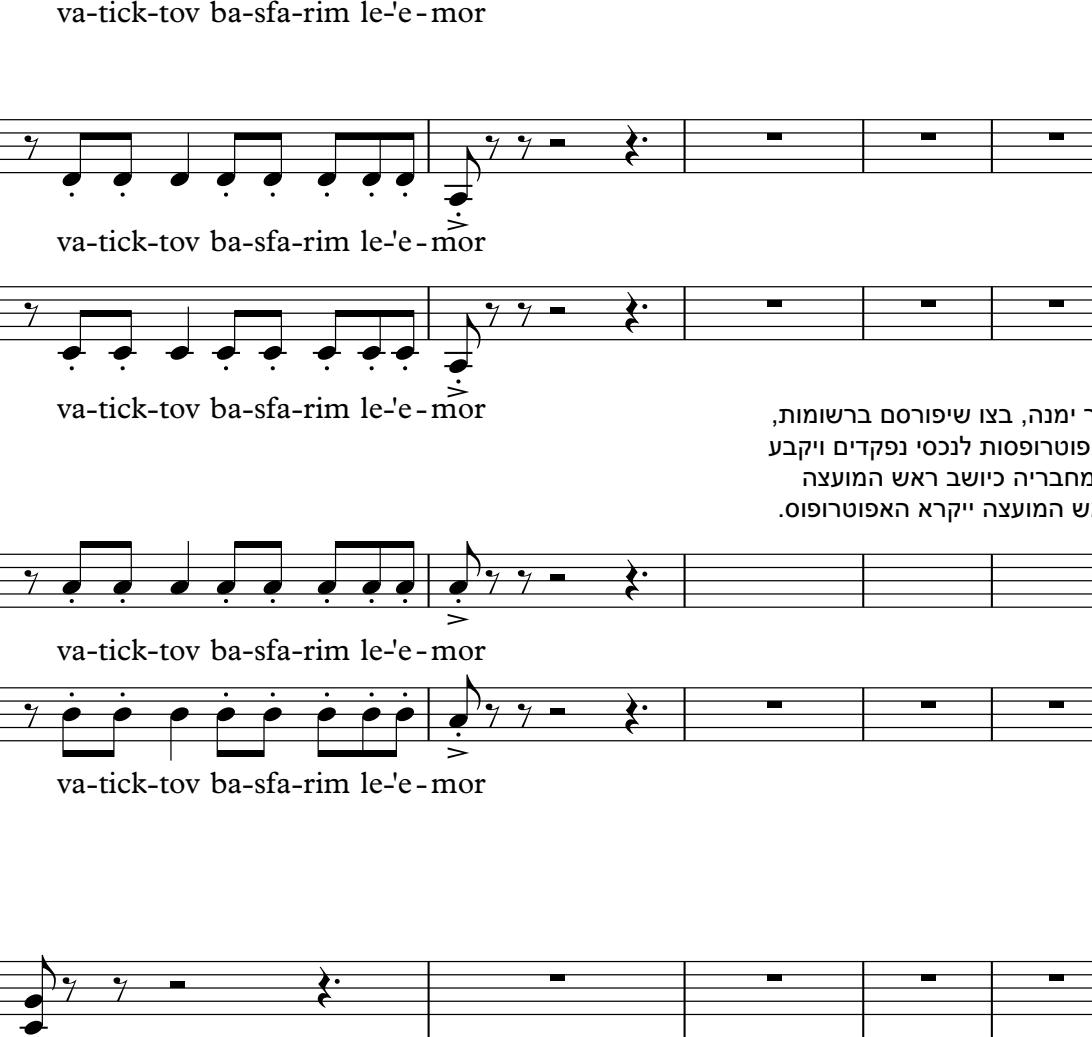
Pno. 
 ff *tr*

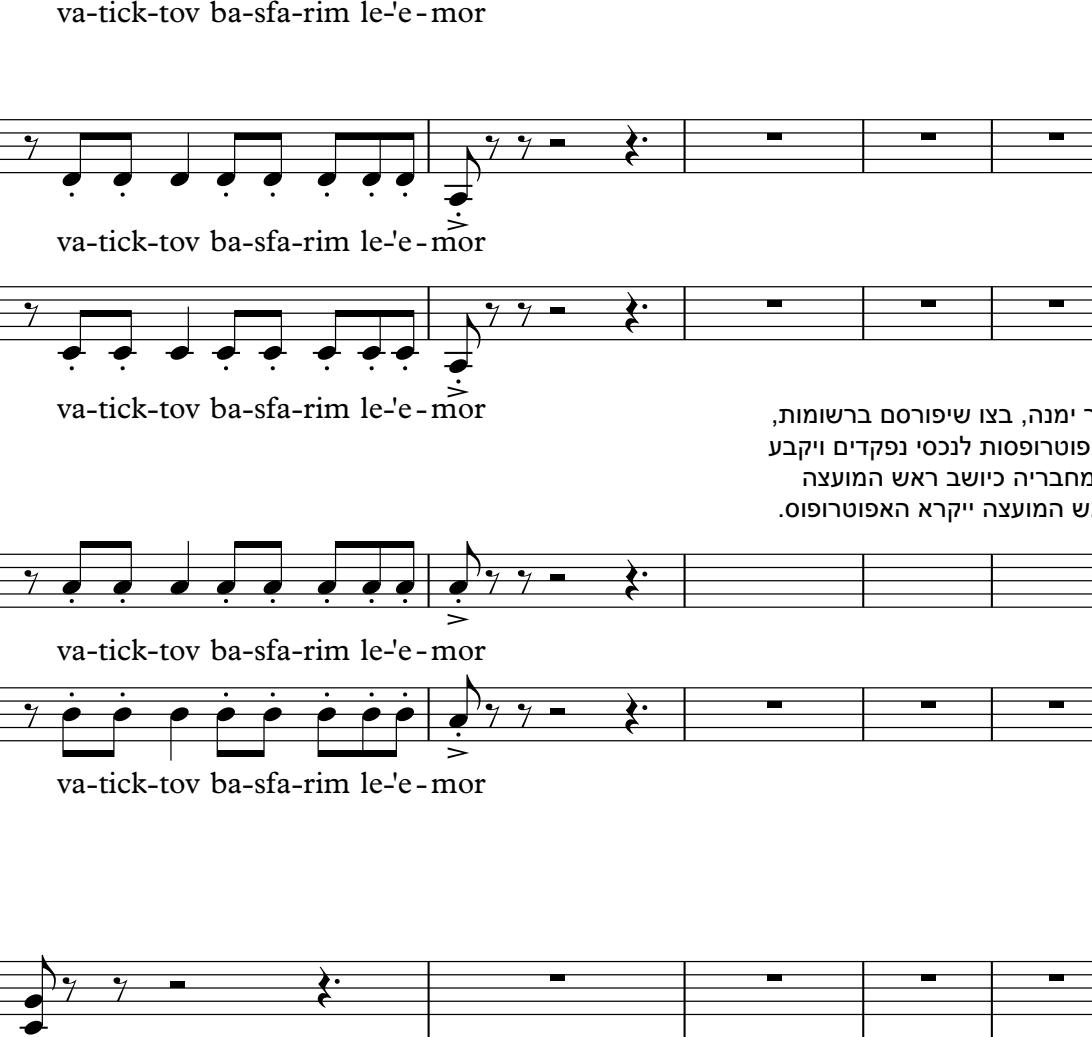
17

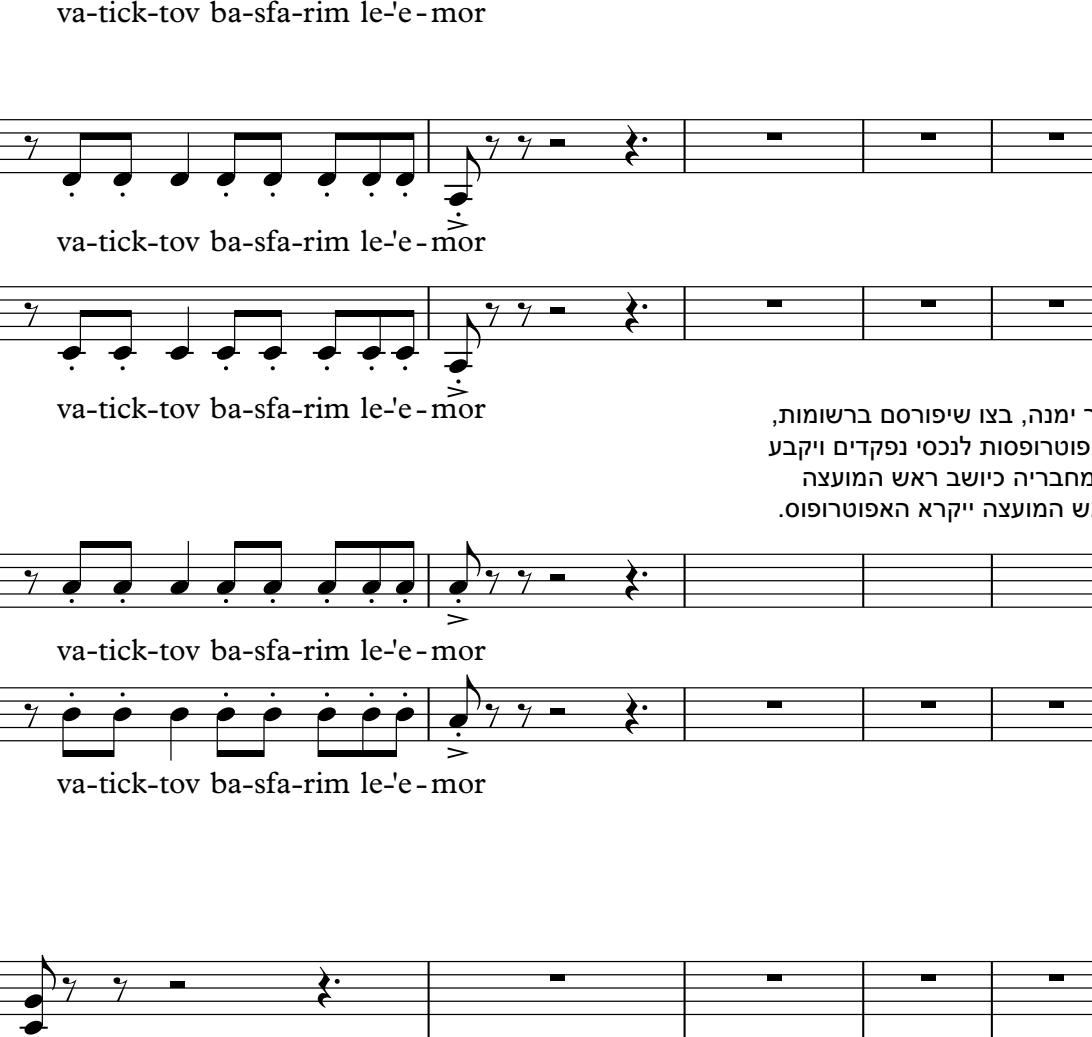
L. 

T. 

Y. 

S. 

M. 

Pno. 

שר האוצר ימנה, בצו שיפורם ברשומות,  
מועצת אפוטרופוסות לנכס נפקדים ויקבע  
את אחד מחבריה כיושב ראש המועצה  
יושב ראש המועצה יקרא האפוטרופוס.

23

L.

T.

Y.

S. *mf*  
va - ya - 'a - su an-shei 'i - ro ha - zke - nim ve - ha kho -

M. *mf*  
va - ya - 'a - su an-shei 'i - ro ha - zke - nim ve - ha kho -

Pno.

va - ya - 'a - su an-shei 'i - ro ha - zke - nim ve - ha kho -

va - ya - 'a - su an-shei 'i - ro ha - zke - nim ve - ha kho -

26

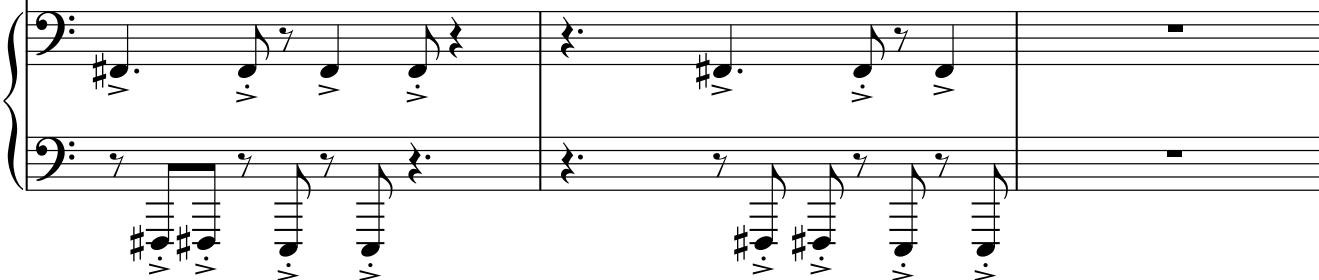
L. -

T. *p* *mf*  
ka-a-sher shal-kha el-'ei-hem va-

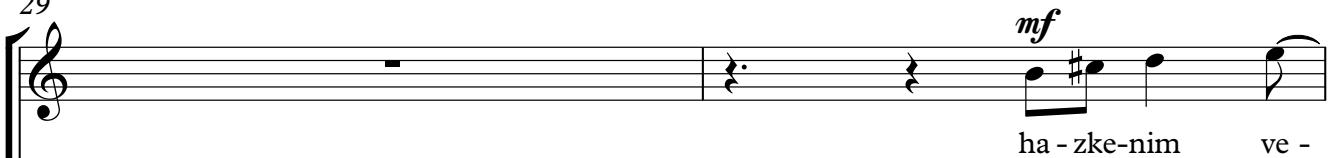
Y. *p* *mf*  
a-sher yosh-vim be-'i - ro va-

S. *mf*  
8 rim va-ya-'a-

M. *mf*  
8 rim va-ya-'a-

Pno. 

29

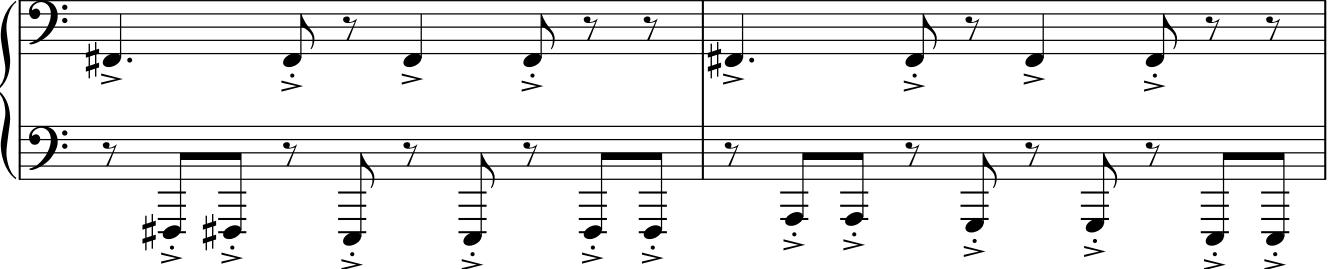
L.  ha - zke-nim ve -

T. ya - 'a - su an-shey 'i - ro \_\_\_\_\_ haz - ke nim ve - ha -

Y. ya - 'a - su an-shey 'i - ro \_\_\_\_\_ haz - ke nim ve - ha -

S.  su an-shei 'i - ro ha - zke-nim ve - ha kho -

M.  su an-shei 'i - ro ha - zke-nim ve - ha kho -

Pno. 

31

L. ha - kho - rim a - sher yo-shvim be - 'i - ro ka - 'a - sher

T. kho - rim a - sher yosh-vim be - 'i - ro ka - a - sher shal-kha

Y. kho - rim a - sher yosh-vim be - 'i - ro ka - a - sher shal-kha

S. 8 rim a - sher yosh-vim be - 'i - ro ka - 'a - sher shal-kha el - 'ei -

M. 8 rim a - sher yosh-vim be - 'i - ro ka - 'a - sher shal-kha el - 'ei -

Pno.

33

L. shal-kha el-ei-hem I-ze vel \_\_\_\_\_

T. el - 'ei-hem I-ze vel \_\_\_\_\_

Y. el - 'ei-hem I-Ize vel \_\_\_\_\_

S. hem I-ze vel \_\_\_\_\_

M. hem I-ze vel \_\_\_\_\_

Pno. *fff*

The musical score consists of five vocal parts (L., T., Y., S., M.) and a piano part. The vocal parts are in soprano clef, and the piano part is in bass clef. The vocal parts sing a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The piano part provides harmonic support with eighth-note chords. The vocal parts sing lyrics: 'shal-kha el-ei-hem', 'el - 'ei-hem', 'el - 'ei-hem', 'hem', 'hem', and 'I-ze vel \_\_\_\_\_'. The piano part has a dynamic marking of *fff* in the third measure. The score is in common time.

37

L.  $\text{♩} = 65$

T.  $\text{♩} = 65$  *p cantabile*  
 אישר האפטרופוں בכתוב שאדם הוא נפקד,  
 ייחשב האדם לנפקד כל עוד לא הוכח היפוכו של דבר.

Y.

S.

M.  $\text{♩} = 65$  *p cantabile*  
 va - ya - vu - 'u shnei\_ ha-'a-na-shim

Pno.

Re.

42

L. *whisper* ***ppp***

T. ***sfz*** ***f*** ***mp***

Y. *whisper* ***ppp***

S. *whisper* ***ppp***

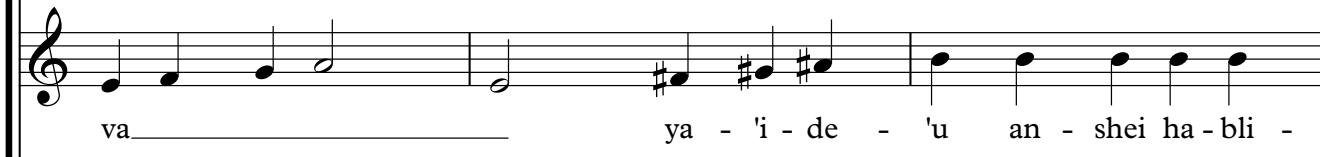
M. ***sfz***

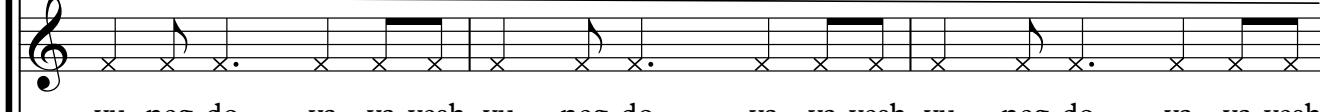
Pno. ***pp***

va-yesh - vu neg-do va va-yesh vu neg-do va va-yesh  
 bnei bli - 'a - - - 'al  
 va-yesh - vu neg-do va va-yesh vu neg-do va va-yesh  
 va-yesh - vu neg-do va va-yesh vu neg-do va va-yesh  
 bnei 'a - - - 'al

45

L.   
vu neg-do va va-yesh vu neg-do va va-yesh vu neg-do va va-yesh

T.   
va ya - 'i - de - 'u an - shei ha - bli -

Y.   
vu neg-do va va-yesh vu neg-do va va-yesh vu neg-do va va-yesh

S.   
vu neg-do va va-yesh vu neg-do va va-yesh vu neg-do va va-yesh

M.   
bnei ha - bli - 'a - - -

Pno.   
#

48

L. *ff*  
vu neg-do va va-yesh

T. *mp*  
'a - - - 'al  
איישר האופטראפום בכתב שנקס מסוים הוא נכו נפקד,  
"יחשב הנכו לנכו נפקד כל עוד לא הוכח היפוכו של דבר."

Y. *ff*  
vu neg-do va va-yesh  
איישר האופטראפום בכתב שנקס מסוים הוא נכו נפקד,  
"יחשב הנכו לנכו נפקד כל עוד לא הוכח היפוכו של דבר."

S. *ff*  
vu neg-do va va-yesh

M. *f* *mp*  
- - - 'al

Pno. *mf*  
mf

# Nifikad 2

$\text{♩} = 105$

Lily

Tamar

Yael

Shira

Michal

Amit

$\text{♩} = 105$

7

L. *pp*  
maya - ra - sh - ta ha

T. *pp*  
ta ha - - ra - tza

Y. *pp*  
ra - sh - ta ha - ra

S. *pp*  
ga - mya - - ra - sh - ta

M. *mf*  
kum kum kum kum

Pno.

14

Pno. *mf*

19

Pno.

20

Pno.

21

L.

T.

Y.

S.

M.

ne -

ne -

ne -

ne -

ne -

va - to - mer I - ze - vel\_ le-'Akh - 'av

Pno.



28

L. *f* |  $\frac{3}{4}$  | - | - | - |  $\frac{5}{4}$

T. *f* |  $\frac{3}{4}$  | - | - | - |  $\frac{5}{4}$

Y. *f* |  $\frac{3}{4}$  | - | - | - |  $\frac{5}{4}$

S. *f* |  $\frac{3}{4}$  | - | - | - |  $\frac{5}{4}$

M. |  $\frac{3}{4}$  | - | - | - |  $\frac{5}{4}$

Cl. 'en la-tet le - kha be-khe - sef ki

Pno. |  $\frac{3}{4}$  | - | - | - |  $\frac{5}{4}$

כל נכו נפקד מוקנה בזה לאפו-

33

L. *f* tro - pus

T. *f* tro - pus

Y. *f* tro - pus

S. *f* tro - pus

M. *f* tro - pus

Pno. *pp*

34

L. *4*

T. *4*

Y. *4*

S. *4*

M. *4*

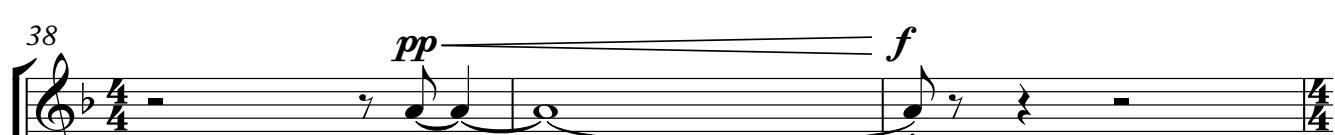
Pno. 6 6 6 6

35

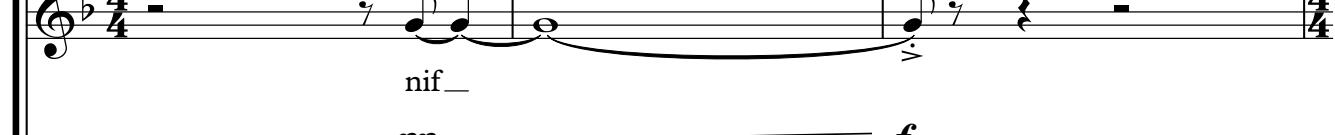
M. 

Pno. 

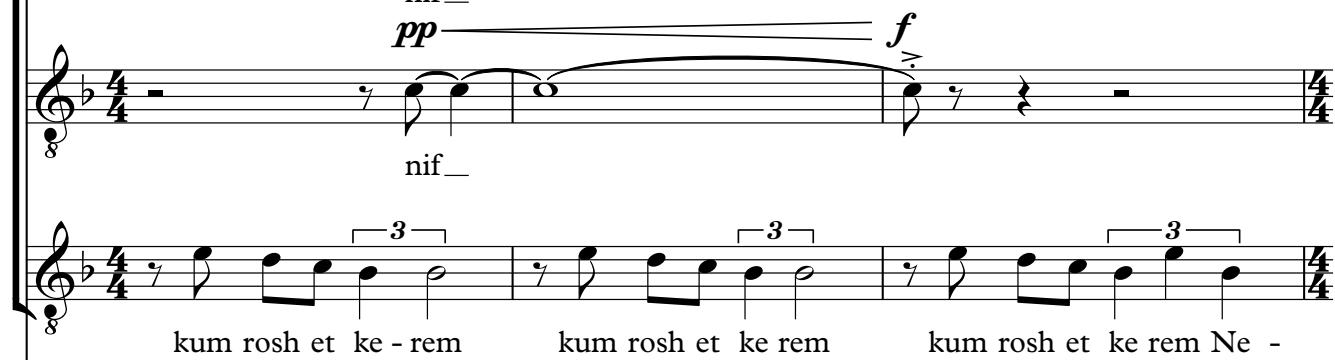
38

L. 

T. 

Y. 

S. 

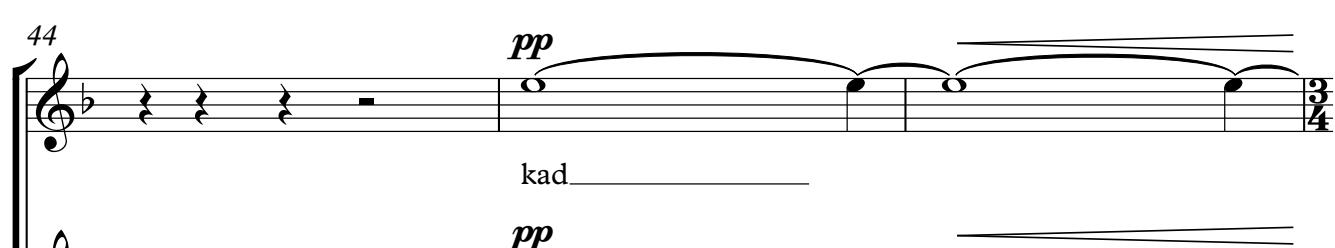
M. 

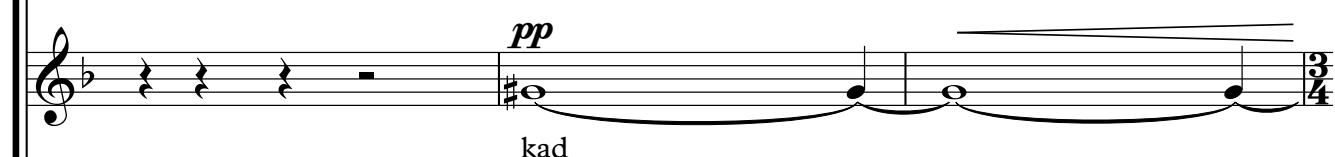
Pno. 

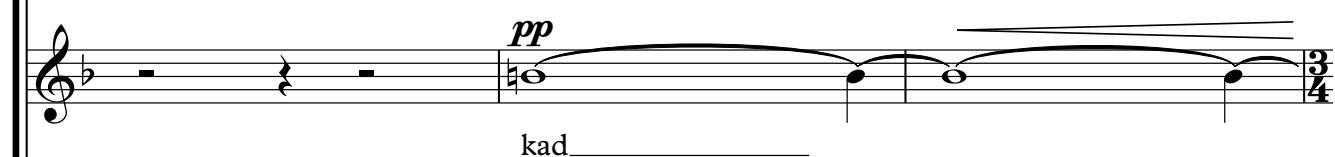
41

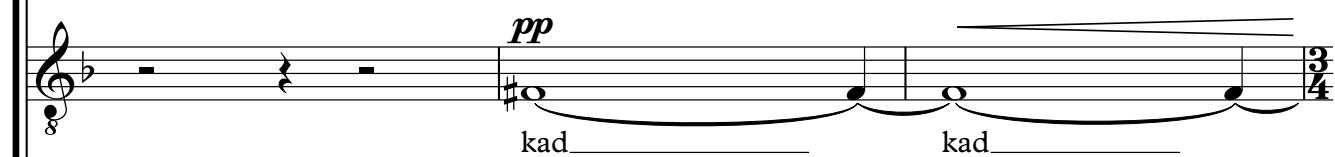
M. 

44

L. 

T. 

Y. 

S. 

M. 

Pno. 

47

L. *f* tro - pus

T. *f* tro - pus

Y. *f* tro - pus

S. *f* tro - pus

M. *f* tro - pus

kha be - khe - sef ki

בנכש עוברת מלאיה לאפו- כל זכות שהייתה לנפקד

Pno.

HaRaTzaKhta 2

*d* = 100

Amit { *tr* *tr* *tr* *tr* *tr*

Amit { *pp* *f*

Amit { *tr* *tr* *tr*

Amit { *pp*

Amit { *6* *6* *6* *6* *6*

Amit { *pp*

7

A. *tr*

A. *tr*

A. *tr*

A. *tr*

A. *pp*

11

A. *tr* *tr* *tr*

A. *tr* *tr*

A. *tr* *tr*

A. *tr* *tr*

==

13

A. *tr* *tr* *tr*

A. *tr* *tr*

15

A.

A. <img alt="Continuation of the musical score for section A. The score continues from the previous page. The first two staves are bass staves with 'tr' dynamics. The third staff is a treble staff with 'tr' dynamics. The fourth staff is a bass staff with sixteenth-note patterns and '6' below the notes. The fifth staff is a treble staff with sixteenth-note patterns and '6' below the notes. The sixth staff is a bass staff with sixteenth-note patterns and '6' below the notes. The score is divided into two measures by a vertical bar line. The first measure ends with a bass note on the first line of the bass staff. The second measure begins with a bass note

17 *almost whisper close to the mic*

L. ha - - - - - ra - - - tza - kh - - - ta

T. ha - - - - - ya - - - ra - sh - - - ta

Y. ha - - - - - ya - - - ra - sh - - - ta

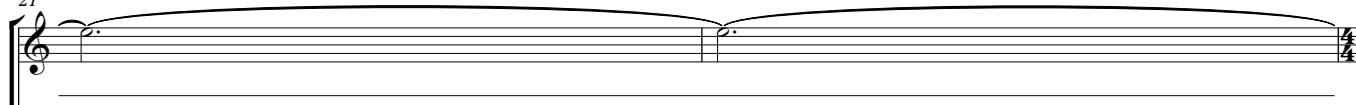
S. ha - - - - - ya - - - ra - sh - - - ta

M. ha - - - - - ra - - - tza - kh - - - ta

A. *tr* *tr*



21

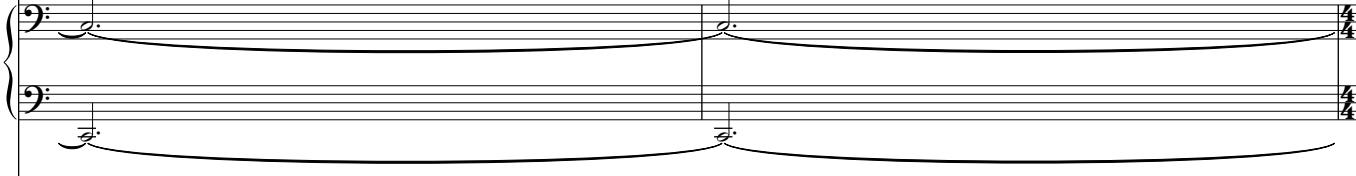
L. 

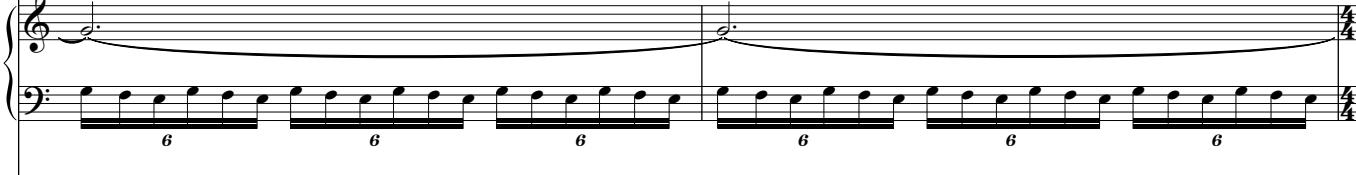
T. 

Y. 

S. 

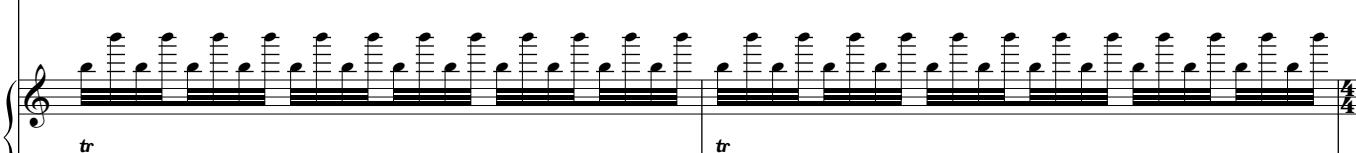
M. 

A. 

A. 

A. 

A. 

A. 

23

L. —

T. —

Y. —

S.  $\frac{4}{4}$  8 —

M.  $\frac{4}{4}$  8 —

A.  $\frac{2}{4}$  *tr* —

A.  $\frac{2}{4}$  —

A.  $\frac{4}{4}$  *tr* 6 6 6 6

A.  $\frac{4}{4}$   $\flat$  6 6 6 6

A.  $\frac{2}{4}$   $\flat$  6 6 6 6

A.  $\frac{2}{4}$  *tr* 6 6 6 6

A.  $\frac{2}{4}$   $\sharp$  6 6 6 6

*far from mic*

27  $\text{♩} = 70$

A.

A.

A.

A.

A.

## Nifkad Kum

$\text{♪} = 290$

Claps  $\frac{7}{8}$

Lily  $\frac{7}{8}$  *pp* *f* *mf* *f* *mp*  
 kum kum kum kum kum kum kum kum red lik-rat Akh - av kum kum red lik-rat Akh - 'av kum red lik-rat Akh - 'av va - di

Tamar  $\frac{7}{8}$  *pp* *mf* *f* *mp*  
 kum kum kum kum kum kum kum kum red lik-rat Akh - av kum kum red lik-rat Akh - 'av kum red lik-rat Akh - 'av va - di

Yael  $\frac{7}{8}$  *pp* *mf* *f* *mp*  
 kum kum kum kum kum kum kum kum red lik-rat Akh - av kum kum red lik-rat Akh - 'av kum red lik-rat Akh - 'av va - di

Shira  $\frac{7}{8}$  *pp* *mf* *f*  
 kum kum kum kum kum kum kum kum red lik-rat Akh - av kum kum red lik-rat Akh - 'av me-lekh ys-ra - 'el

Michal  $\frac{7}{8}$  *pp* *mf* *f*  
 kum kum kum kum kum kum kum kum red lik-rat Akh - av kum kum red lik-rat Akh - 'av me-lekh ys-ra - 'el

$\text{♪} = 290$

Amit  $\frac{7}{8}$

Amit 2  $\frac{7}{8}$

12

*f*  
 bar-ta e-lav le-'e - mor kum red lik rat Akh - 'av me-lekh ys-ra - 'el va-di - bar-ta e-lav le-'e - mor va-di - bar - ta e-lav-le-'e - mor

*f*  
 bar-ta e-lav le-'e - mor kum red lik rat Akh - 'av me-lekh ys-ra - 'el va-di - bar-ta e-lav le-'e - mor va-di - bar - ta e-lav-le-'e - mor

*f*  
 bar-ta e-lav le-'e - mor kum red lik rat Akh - 'av me-lekh ys-ra - 'el va-di - bar-ta e-lav le-'e - mor va-di - bar - ta e-lav-le-'e - mor

*f*  
 kum red lik rat Akh - 'av me-lekh ys-ra - 'el va-di - bar-ta e-lav le-'e - mor va-di - bar - ta e-lav-le-'e - mor

*f*  
 kum red lik rat Akh - 'av me-lekh ys-ra - 'el va-di - bar-ta e-lav le-'e - mor va-di - bar - ta e-lav-le-'e - mor

*p*



34

# University of Southampton

Faculty of Humanities  
Music department

## **How to do Things With Sounds: New Music as Political Action**

Volume 3 of 10

By

Uri Agnon

ORCID ID 0000-0001-7010-6618

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2024

# **I HATE EGGPLANT**

For Clarinet in Bb, Cello, Keyboard, Electric Guitar and Electronics

Uri Agnon  
2021

### Sound:

- Keyboard: Grand Pipe Organ sound [midi, artificial]. Sounds out of an amp, not the PA.
- Guitar: The basic sound is of a warm rock-ballad guitar. Light distortion switches on and off with a pedal/switch. When the distortion is on play with a pick, otherwise use fingers. Capo on 2 where indicated. Sounds out of an amp, not the PA.
- Clarinet Bb: Play with a Klezmer sonority and style when possible.
- Cello: Harmonics played on open strings when possible.

### Electronics:

Samples triggered by Max patch

Max Patch controlled by the Keyboard player with a pedal, samples routed to PA.

### Samples:

There are 25 samples

The Max patch allows you to choose where to begin from

On the score - words within squares are cues to be taken from the samples.

### Staging:

Ideally the ensemble is seated in a wide semicircle, PA at both ends, leaving the centre of the stage empty.

# I HATE EGGPLANT

*J = 140*

*Uri Agnon*

**Clarinet in B♭**

**Electric Guitar**

**Violoncello**

**Keyboard**

**Pedal**

**1**

**Hi**

**mp**

**I'm**

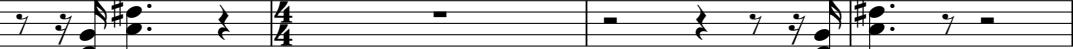
**f declarative**

**moved to**

**f declarative**

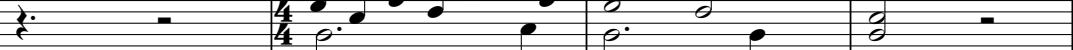


5 It's an

Vc. 

*f declarative*

K.B. 

Ped. 

to move to the

2

10

Cl. *mf*

E. Gtr. *intimate* *mf*

Vc. *f* but it's

K.B. *mf* 3 *8vb*

Ped. 3



14

E. Gtr.

Vc. *p* 3

K.B. 3 3 3

Ped. (8)-----4-----

18

Cl. as a as a  $\frac{3}{4}$

E. Gtr.

Vc.

K.B.

Ped.

5

$\frac{3}{4}$

=

22

Cl.

E. Gtr.

K.B.

$\frac{3}{4}$   $\frac{4}{4}$

=

26

Cl.

E. Gtr.

Vc.

K.B.

Ped.

6

A

## why are we losing?



38

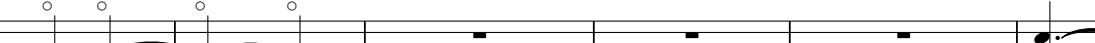
38

Cl. 

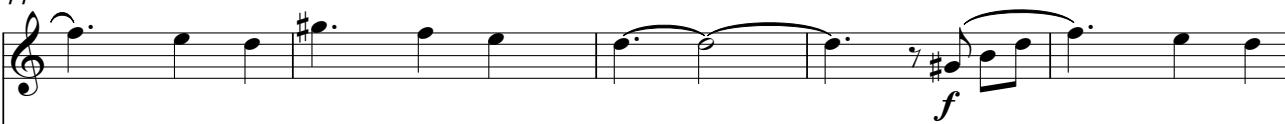
E. Gtr.

Vc.

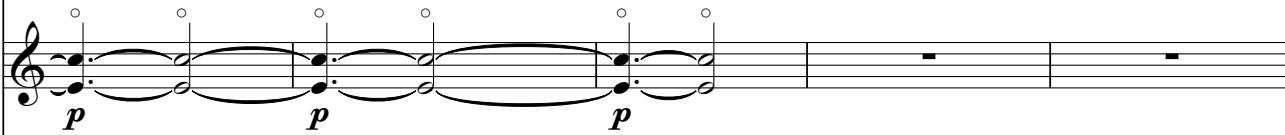
K.B.

Ped. 

44

Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

Vc. 

K.B. 

Ped. 

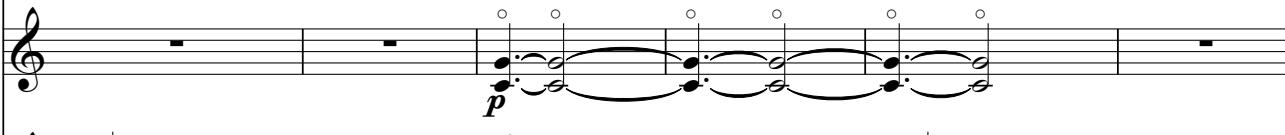
11

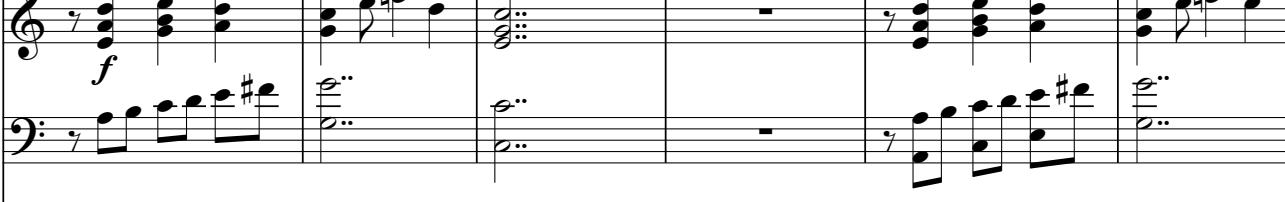


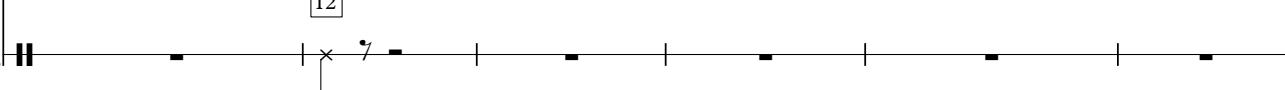
49

Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

Vc. 

K.B. 

Ped. 

12

55

Cl. *mp* *f* *ff* *#tr* but only when it has the to

E. Gtr.

Vc.

K.B. *p* *f* *ff*

Ped. 13



62

Cl. *p* I mean *dry* why is it

Vc. *f*

K.B. *f* *8* *8vb*

Ped. 14 15



69

Cl. that has to do with meaning *f* *p*

K.B. *mp* *f*

Ped. 16 17

75

Cl.  - - - -  - - - -

Vc.  sul pont. - - - -  sul tasto **f**

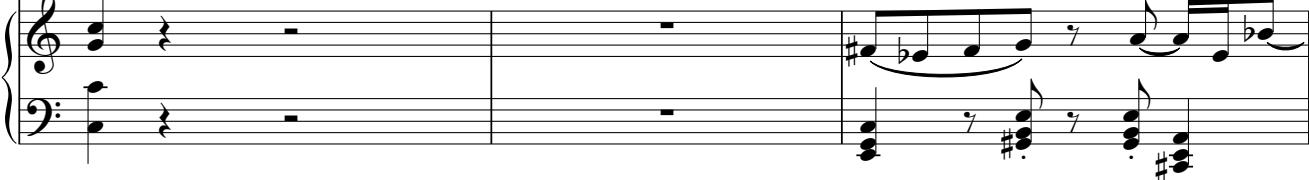
K.B.  legato **p** - - - -  espress. **f** - - - -  **p** - - - -

**ff** **f** - - - -

=

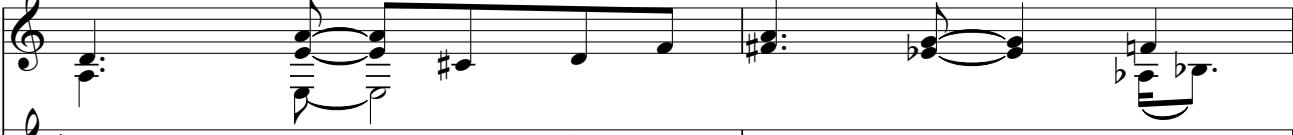
79 no pick, no distortion  
*intimate*

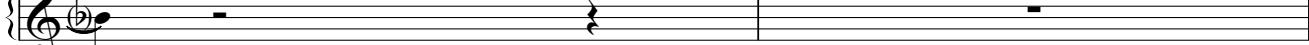
E. Gtr. 

K.B. 

=

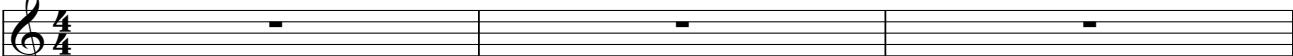
82

E. Gtr. 

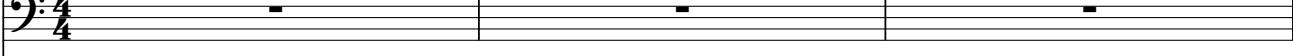
K.B. 

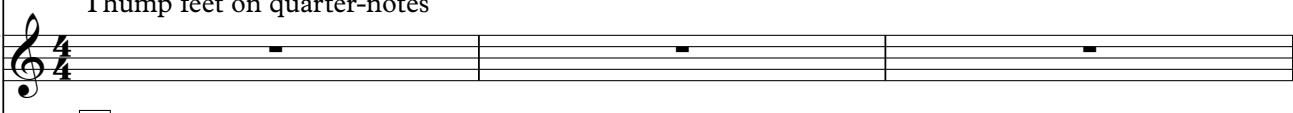
=

84 **B** With movement  $\text{♩} = 160$   
Thump feet on quarter-notes

Cl.   
pick, distortion

E. Gtr.   
**f**  
Thump feet on quarter-notes

Vc.   
Thump feet on quarter-notes

K.B.   
18

Ped. 

87

E. Gtr.

*p* I

*f*

≡

90

E. Gtr.

*mf*

*f*

Vc.

≡

93

E. Gtr.

*mf*

*f*

Vc.

≡

95

Cl.

*f*

*mf*

E. Gtr.

Vc.

K.B.

98

Cl.

E. Gtr.

Vc.

K.B.

pizz.

arco

*f*



101

Cl.

E. Gtr.

Vc.

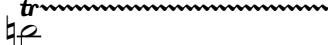
K.B.

*mf*

pizz.

*f*

103

Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

Vc. *arco*

K.B. 



105

Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

Vc. 

*mf*

K.B. 



106

Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

Vc. *pizz.* *arco*

K.B. 



108 (tr)

Cl.

E. Gr.

Vc.

K.B.

II

I, III

mf

112 (tr)

Cl.

E. Gtr.

Vc.

K.B.

III

pizz.

mf

f

ff

114

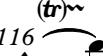
Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

Vc. *f*

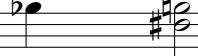
K.B. 

=

116 

Cl. 

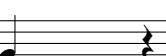
E. Gtr.

Vc.  *ff*

K.B. 

=

118

Cl. 

E. Gtr.

Vc.  *fff*

K.B. 

Musical score for Viola (Vc.) and Pedal (Ped.). The score includes a dynamic marking of **120**, grace notes, a duration of **10"**, a dynamic of **35"**, and a performance instruction **dim. to silence**. The page number **19** is indicated in a box. The Viola part has a bass clef and the Pedal part has a treble clef.

2

122 *Capo on II* *intimate* *no pick, no distortion*

E. Gtr.

Ped.

2

2

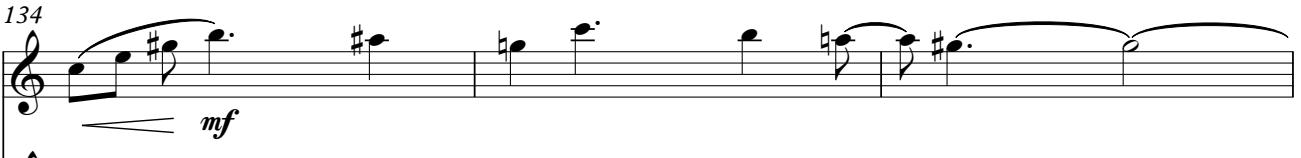
130

Cl.

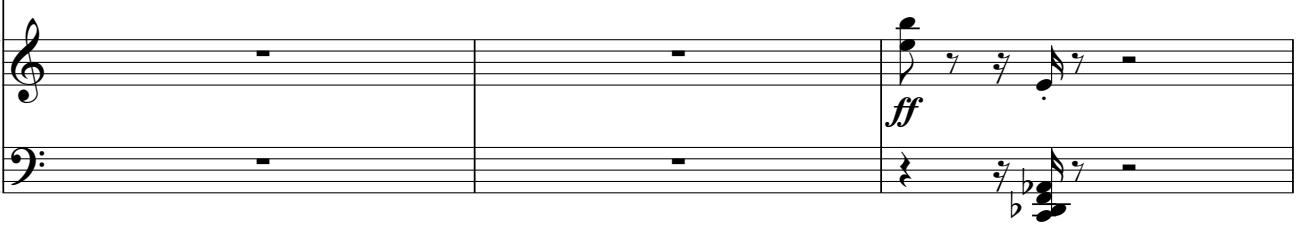
E. Gr.

K. B.

134

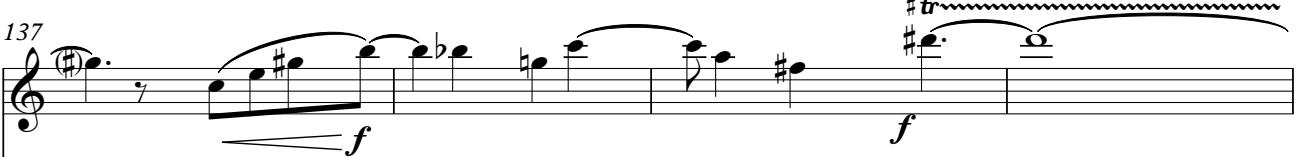
Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

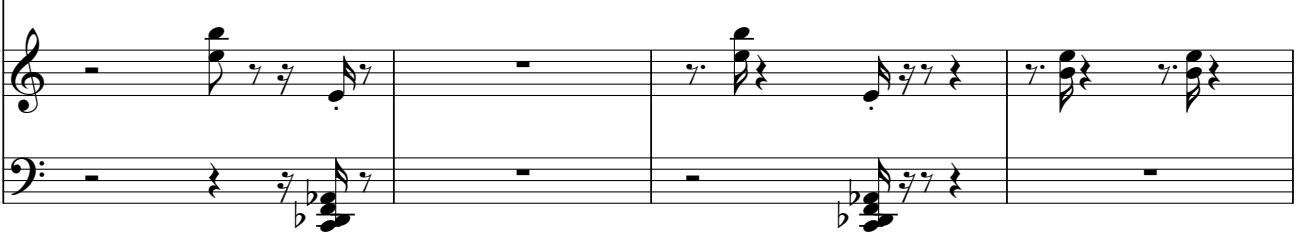
K.B. 

==

137

Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

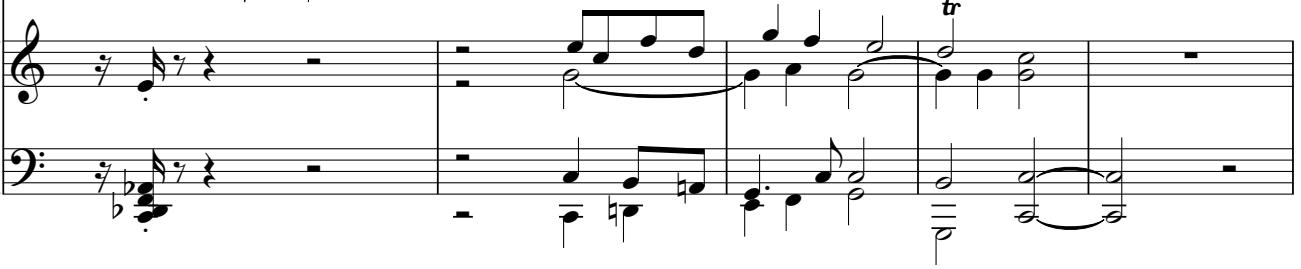
K.B. 

==

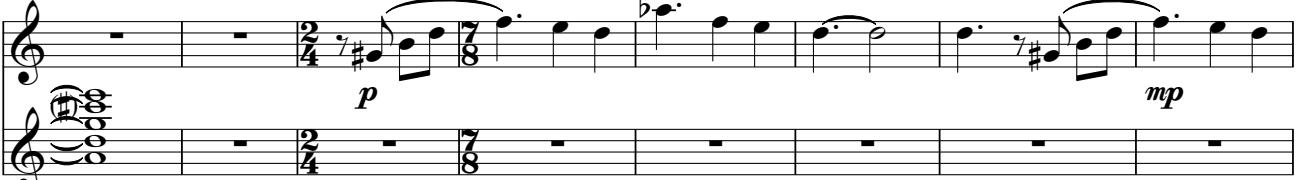
141

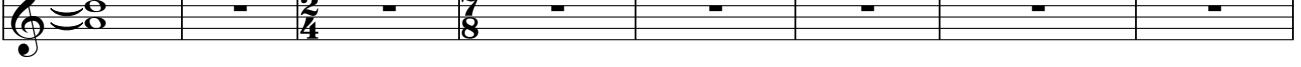
Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

K.B. 

146

Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

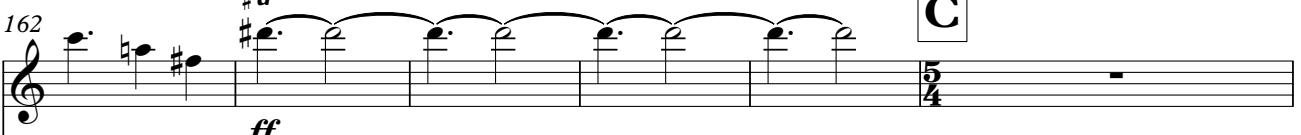
==

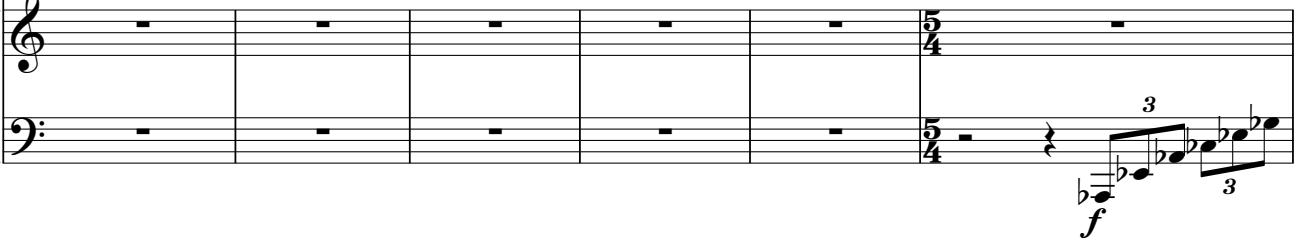
154

Cl. 

==

162

Cl. 

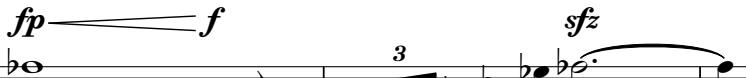
K.B. 

**C**

168

Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

Vc. 

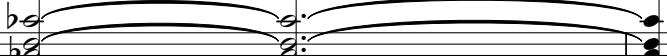
K.B. 

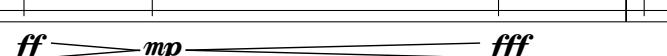
Ped. 

====

171

Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

Vc. 

K.B. 

Ped. 

173 80"  
 Cl. 80"  
 E. Gtr. 80"  
 Vc. 80"  
 K.B. 80"  
 Ped. 80"

6/8 6/8 6/8 6/8 6/8 6/8

174 = 110  
 K.B. (white noise)  
 silence f

185 f  
 K.B. f

191  
 K.B.

197

203  $\text{♩} = 80$   $\text{♩} = 130$

Cl.  $p$

Vc.  $p$

K.B.  $p$

208

K.B.  $p$

214

K.B.  $p$

220

K.B.  $p$

226  $\text{♩} = 80$   $\text{♩} = 190$

Cl. *mf dolce*

Vc.  $mp$

K.B.



**E With movement**  $\text{♩} = 190$

Cl. 251 Claps sample: Thump feet on quarter-notes

E. Gtr. Claps sample: Thump feet on quarter-notes

Vc. Claps sample: Thump feet on quarter-notes

K.B. Claps sample: Thump feet on quarter-notes

Ped. 25



Cl. 253

E. Gtr.

Vc.

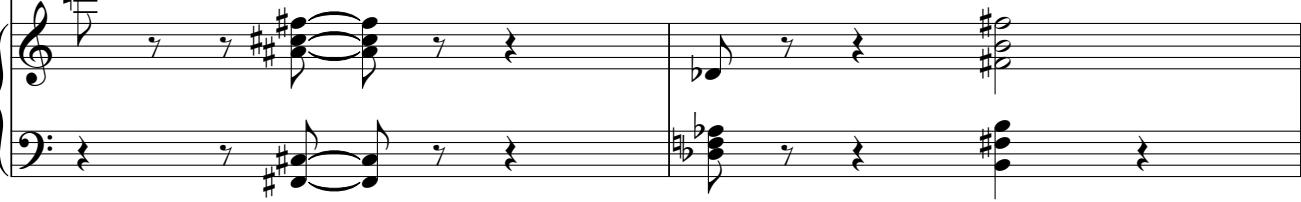
K.B.

254

Cl. 

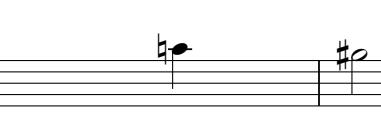
E. Gtr. 

Vc. 

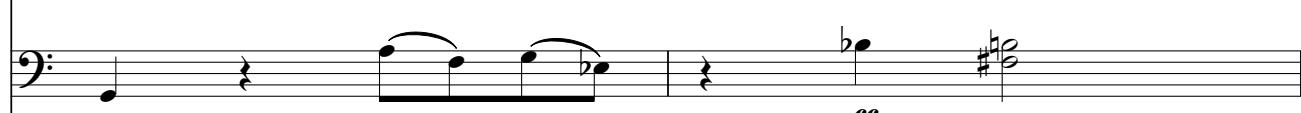
K.B. 

==

256

Cl. 

E. Gtr. 

Vc. 

K.B. 

258

Cl.

E. Gtr.

Vc.

K.B.

==

tr.....

260

Cl.

E. Gtr.

Vc.

K.B.

262

Cl.

E. Gtr.

Vc.

K.B.

Ped. [26]

This musical score page shows a single measure (262) for an orchestra and organ. The score is arranged in five staves. The top four staves are for woodwind and string instruments: Clarinet (Cl.), Electric Guitar (E. Gtr.), Bassoon (Vc.), and Double Bass (K.B.). The K.B. staff is grouped with a brace. The bottom staff is for the Organ Pedals (Ped.). The organ pedals staff features a bass clef, a '26' in a box, an 'x', a brace, and a square symbol. The woodwind and string parts have fermatas above the notes.

University of Southampton

Faculty of Humanities  
Music department

**How to do Things With Sounds: New Music as Political Action**

Volume 4 of 10

By

Uri Agnon

ORCID ID 0000-0001-7010-6618

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2024

# ***What Can I Do?***

**For Zöllner-Roche duo**

**By Uri Agnon**

**A piece for**

**Clarinets, accordion and tape**

**With voices by Noa Haran, James Oldham and Uri Agnon**

**2021/2023**

# What Can I Do

## I

Uri Agnon

Bass Clarinet in B<sub>b</sub>

$\text{♩} = 55$   
play tape

multiphonics clearly marked, in other intervals the top voice is sung

Accordion

B. Cl.

5

Accord.

pp      mf      mp

mf      p      pp

B. Cl.

9

Accord.

ppp      mf

B. Cl.

12

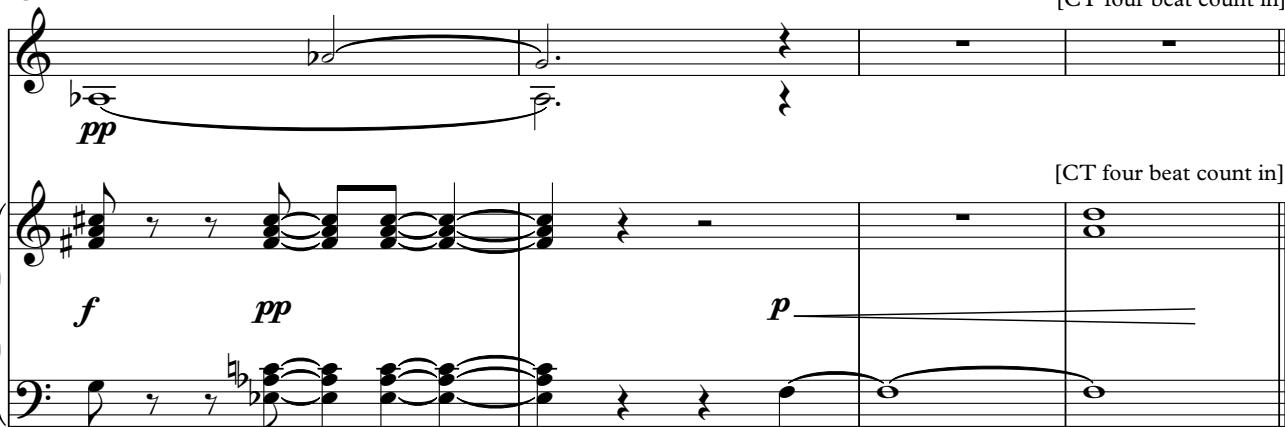
Accord.

mp      pp

ppp      f

To Cl.

[CT four beat count in]

15 B. Cl. 

[CT four beat count in]

Accord. 

A 

19 Clarinet in B $\flat$  

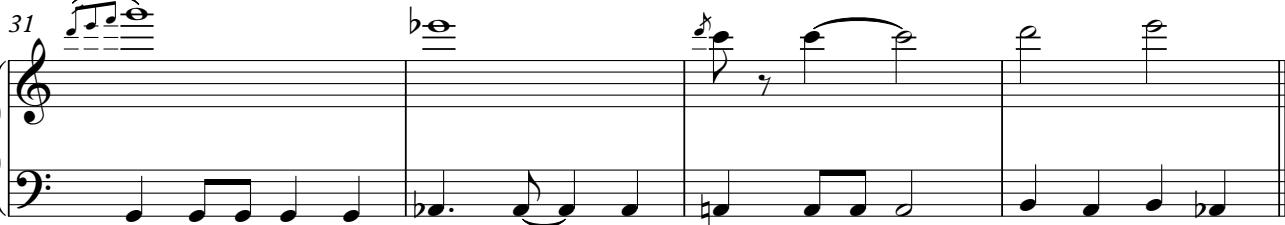
Cl. 

To B. Cl.

23 Cl. 

Accord. 

27 Accord. 

31 Accord. 

## II

Uri Agnon

 $\text{♩} = 110$ Bass Clarinet  
in B $\flat$ 

*with effort*

Accordion

*simply*

B. Cl.

*sing C# play B*

Accord.

B. Cl.

Accord.

13

B. Cl. 

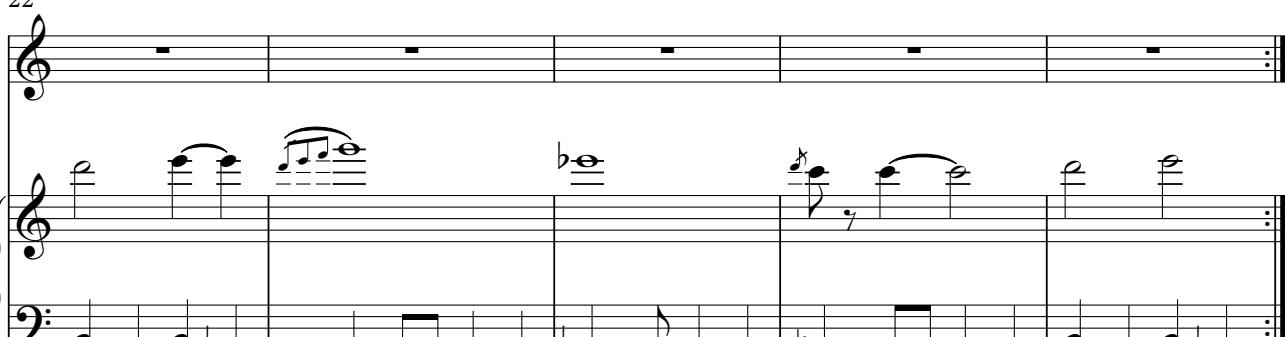
16

B. Cl. 

18 [CT four beat count in]

B. Cl. 

22

B. Cl. 

## III

Uri Agnon

*Bass Clarinet in B<sub>b</sub>*

*play tape*

*sing C#*

*p f p p f*

*f ff f ff f ff f ff f ff f ff*

*Bass Clarinet in B<sub>b</sub>*

*Accordian*

*f ff f ff f ff f ff f ff f ff*

*Bass Clarinet in B<sub>b</sub>*

*B. Cl.*

*Accord.*

*6*

*7*

*8*

*9*

*10*

*11*

*12*

*13*

*14*

*15*

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*920*

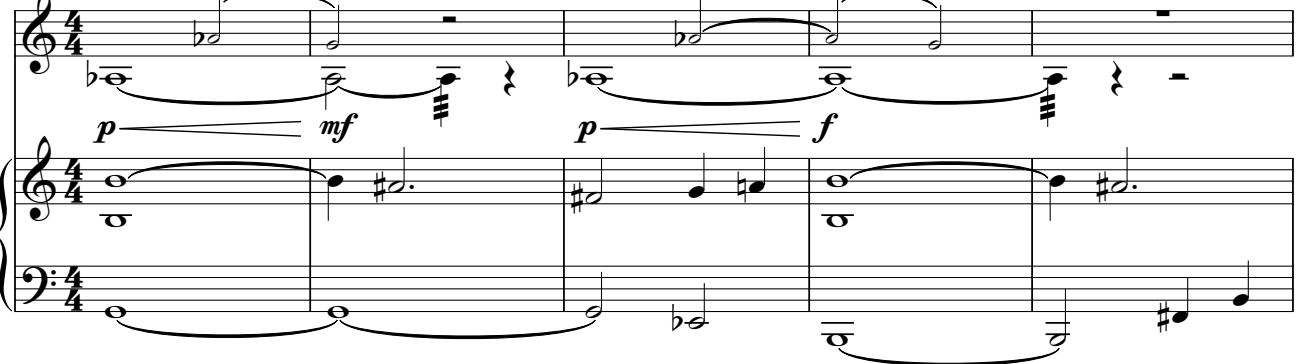
*921*

*922*

*923*

*92*

14  $\text{♩} = 110$

B. Cl. 

19

B. Cl. 

23

B. Cl. 

27  $\text{♩} = 220$

B. Cl. 

31

B. Cl. To B. Cl.  
To Cl. Clarinet in B  
[CT four beat count in]

Accord. *f*

35 **A**  $\text{♩} = 150$   
Cl. [clarinet in tape part]

Accord. *f*

40 Cl. *f* optimistic

Accord.

44 Cl.

Accord.

48

Cl.

Accord.

$\text{J} = 110$   
[CT four beat count in]

$\text{5}$   $\text{4}$   $\text{5}$   $\text{4}$   $\text{5}$   $\text{4}$   $\text{5}$   $\text{4}$

3 3

3 3

3 3

3 3

3 3

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3 3

## IV

Uri Agnon

$\text{♩} = 110$   
play tape

Accordion

B E<sub>b</sub> C A B E<sub>b</sub> C A B E<sub>b</sub>

*f*

6

Accord.

C A B E<sub>b</sub> C A B E<sub>b</sub> C A

Cl. 11 *like singing in the shower*

*f*

Accord.

B E<sub>b</sub> C A B E<sub>b</sub> C A

Cl. 15

*f*

Accord.

B E<sub>b</sub> C A B E<sub>b</sub> C A

Cl. 18

*p*

Accord.

C A B E<sub>b</sub> C A

21

Cl.

Accord.

B Eb C A B Eb

24

Cl.

Accord.

C A B Eb C A

27

Cl.

Accord.

ff fff

declarative

University of Southampton

Faculty of Humanities  
Music department

**How to do Things With Sounds: New Music as Political Action**

Volume 5 of 10

By

Uri Agnon

ORCID ID 0000-0001-7010-6618

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2024

# ***Put Your Hands Together***

[for late capitalism]



By Uri Agnon

For Yshani Perinpanayagam and Katherine Tinker

2021

What you'll need:

1 piano	MAX MSP patch controls the screen and the speakers. It receives input from the microphone (via interface) midi keyboard and midi pedal.
1 projector	
1 laptop with wifi	
1 super directional microphone (like an SM7B)	
1 audio interface	These are all located on a desk as frontal as possible while still allowing eye contact with the other performer.
1 midi keyboard (at least 1 octave)	
1 midi pedal	
2-3 speakers	

Keyboard:

12 samples are mapped over the central octave of the keyboard. Set the keyboard as midi input by double clicking “notein” on the max patch and choosing it.

Pedal:

the pedal moves the max patch between the sections of the piece. A fancy P on the score indicated where it should be pressed. Set the pedal as midi input by double clicking “ctlin” on the max patch and choosing it.

Microphone:

When the microphone detects a loud attack it triggers a browser window with an ecosia.org search to pop up on screen. These are first triggered by snapping fingers and clapping hands above the microphone.

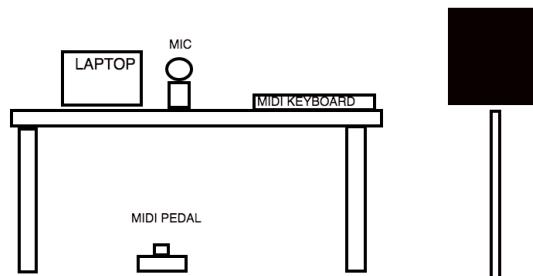
In bars 78-82 the performer turns the audio off (either in max or on the interface) and directs the microphone towards one of the speakers, ideally to a small speaker that is also located on the desk then turns audio back on. From this moment until rehearsal mark J the samples being played on the speaker trigger the ecosia searches.

\* Take your time when directing the microphone at the speaker.

\* If the microphone can't be aimed directly enough at the speaker to be triggered by the samples, aim it as close as possible, leave the audio off and press the relevant toggle at the bottom of the patch.

Stage notes please read! 🕶️⚠️👍

- Take your time.
- All *rit.* and *accel.* are gradual.
- Begin the piece with only performer 1 playing the piano, and performer 2 off stage.
- When performer 2 comes on stage do it with the calm confidence of a high tech genius.
- In rehearsal marks D and F performer 1 plays the piano part and is interrupted by performer 2. When performer 2 plays clap trigger, performer 1 must return to the beginning of the section. In D this ends when performer one reaches E. In F it ends in a loop of performer 1 playing a single note and being sent back to the beginning by a clap. This loop is represented as bar 134.
- On rehearsal mark G the tempo is indicated by the tree counter on screen. One beat per tree
- On rehearsal mark H the tempo is indicated by the Bill Gates money counter. One bar = \$100.
- If performer 1 can't see the screen performer 2 can conduct.
- On H Performer 2 joins on the piano or any other chromatic instrument that can play two simultaneous notes (the registers are not holy).
- On I performer 1 goes and stands at the desk, triggering searches with clapping and snapping.
- The last section should reach a chaotic energy and tempo. Give a signal 2 rounds before finishing and finish together.
- Audience applause generates more searches.
- The desk can look like this:



# Put Your Hands Together

Uri Agnon

**Grave**  $\text{♩} = 50$

Player 1 at the piano, alone on stage



8



Player 2 comes on stage and walks directly toward their position, time it so that you arrive just in time



**A**

Player 2 snaps fingers/claps without using a score

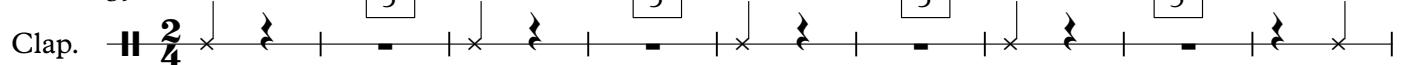
finger snap +pedal

‘5”

‘5”

‘5”

‘3”



2 48

Clap. 

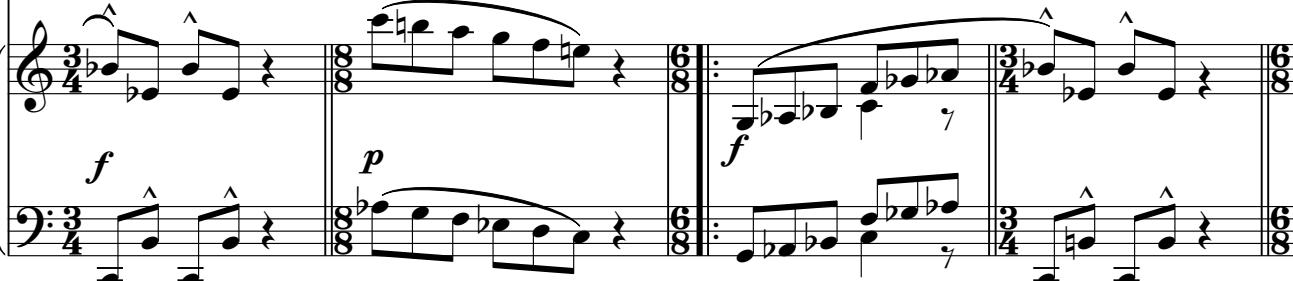
Pno. 

A musical score for the 'Clap.' section. Measure 56 starts with a key signature of two sharps. The time signature is 9/8. The tempo is Allegretto, indicated by a dot over the 'A' in 'Allegretto' and a '105' below it. The instruction 'Clap.' is written in the first measure. The music consists of a series of eighth-note patterns. The first six measures are in 9/8 time, indicated by a '9' over a '8' in the time signature. The next three measures are in 6/8 time, indicated by a '6' over a '8' in the time signature. The notes are grouped by vertical bar lines and horizontal beams. The first six measures have three groups of three notes each, while the last three measures have two groups of three notes each.

Musical score for piano and clapping. The score consists of two staves. The top staff, labeled 'Clap.', shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The bottom staff, labeled 'Pno.', shows a piano part with various chords and dynamics, including a forte dynamic (f) and a piano dynamic (p). The score is numbered 61 at the top left. The piano part includes a dynamic marking 'f' and a dynamic marking 'p' with a slur. The piano part also includes a dynamic marking 'f' at the end of the measure.

74

Kbd. 

Pno. 

78

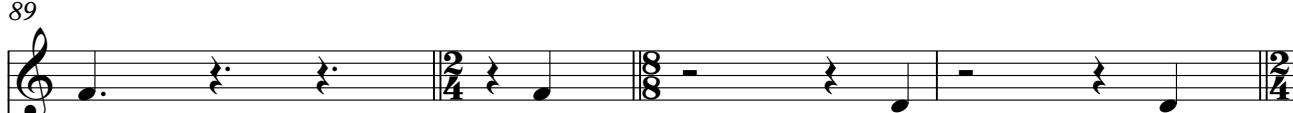
Kbd. 

Pno. 

84

Pno. 

89

Kbd. 

Pno. 

93

Kbd.

Pno.

97

Kbd.

Pno.

101

play whenever you wish to make Player 1 return to D.  
Repeat at least 50" until finally Player 1 reaches E

Kbd.

Pno.

106

Kbd.

**E**

Pno.

**E**

*f*

*p*

*mf* *f*

*p* *ff*

*p* *ff*

*p* *mf*

*f*

*ff*

113

Kbd.

**F**

Pno.

**F**

*p*

*f*

*p*

*mp*

117

Kbd.

play whenever you wish to make Player 1 return to F.  
Repeat at least 20" loop getting shorter until turning into G

Pno.

122

Kbd.

rit.  
2. repeat many times slowly rit

Pno.

rit.  
2.

125

**G** rit.

**G** rit.

Pno.

**G** rit.

**H**  $\downarrow$ . = Tree (46)

129

Use ecosia tree counter as metronome. Aprox 46bpm

Kbd.

**H**  $\downarrow$ . = Tree (46)

Use ecosia tree counter as metronome. Yshani to conduct (Aprox 46bpm)

Pno.

136

Pno.

144

Pno.

152

Pno.

158

Pno.

164

Pno. {

2

167

Pno. {

2

170 To Pno.

Kbd.

Pno. {

I  $\text{d} = 130$

175

Pno. {

180

Pno. {

185

Pno. {



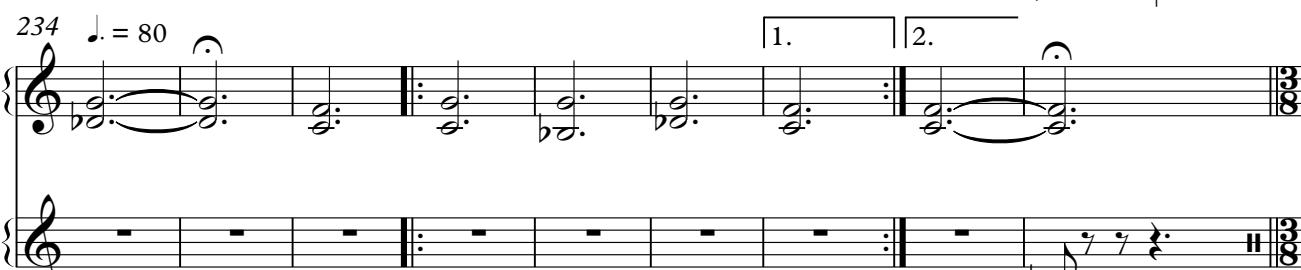
(8)

214 Pno. { 

219 Pno. { 

224 Pno. { 

229 Pno. { 

234 Pno. { 

243 **J** Allegretto  $\text{♩} = 105$

Pno.

Hands  
finger snap + pedal      clap + pedal

Hands

**ff**

248

Pno.

Hands

253

Pno.

258 **K** *accel...*

Pno.

Hands

**ff**

Repeat many many times  
slowly accelerating to as fast as  
possible

261

Pno.

Hands

Repeat many many times  
slowly accelerating to as fast as  
possible

Keep repeating at an unsustianble tempo  
Try finising together

264

Pno.

Hands

Keep repeating at an unsustianble tempo  
Try finising together

University of Southampton

Faculty of Humanities  
Music department

**How to do Things With Sounds: New Music as Political Action**

Volume 6 of 10

By

Uri Agnon

ORCID ID 0000-0001-7010-6618

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2024

# *Or Never*

For an orchestra answering questions

By Uri Agnon

2022



## Performance Notes

### A. Reaction to the Questions

Each member of the ensemble must answer these questions before starting to play. Whether or not they play a section depends on their answer to the corresponding question. Question numbers are indicated on the score. A question can influence the playing of a single note, or entire phrases. Whenever the word *Tutti* appears everyone plays their parts as written until the next question marking.

If the answer to questions 32, 33 or 34 is positive, play a solo over bars 110-114.

The last two questions function a bit differently. If the answer to “Do you ever feel despair” is positive, performers play their corresponding part. If the answer to the next question “Are you hopeful” is positive, players move to play that part, but if the answer is negative, hold on to your note from “despair” until the end of bar 117, and then stop. That way the “hopeful” chord should appear from beneath the despair chord. (If the answer to Despair is negative, but to Hopeful is positive, simply play the part written on 117).

Percussions always play as written and are not affected by their answers to the questions.

### B. Approximate times

The descent motif recurring in bars; 4, 14 40 142 is slow and quite free, players within the same section should play at slightly different speeds and try to arrive at the same place by the end of the time slot (indicated above). The conductor indicates the dashed bar lines to give a fluid sense of time.

In bars 29, 30, 33, 34 rhythm can be approximate, as long as the bar remains strict. The effect should be that of a cloud of sounds sparkling on the 2nd half of the bar.

### C. Set-up

Ideally the orchestra faces the screen, with their back to the audience. The conductor stands between the orchestra and the screen. If this is not possible, try to indicate in other ways that the performers are reacting to the questions on screen (i.e. they can turn to the screen for the first three questions, or someone can stand behind the conductors with signs or a mirror.)

Questions can also be spoken if slides are unavailable.

D The questions:

- 1 Are you worried about climate change?
- 2 Do personal choices matter?
- 3 Are we going to beat the climate crisis?
- 4 Can music make a difference?  
I
- 5 Is it moral to eat an avocado?
- 6 Shop on amazon?
- 7 Is it moral to fly to France?
- 8 America?
- 9 Outer space?
- 10 Is it moral to buy new clothes?
- 11 Is it moral to have new children?
- 12 Should it be illegal to through paper into the general waste?
- 13 Spill oil in the ocean?
- 14 Leave a light on?
- 15 Be rich?
- 16 Eat the rich?
- 17 Lobby for oil companies?
- 18 Drill new fossil fuel
- 19 Is it moral to disobey the law?  
II
- 20 Have you ever recycled a can of tomatoes?
- 21 Do you ever worry about the bees?
- 22 Have you signed a petition about the climate?
- 23 Do you eat less meat because of the climate?
- 24 Do you ever lie awake at night thinking about the future?
- 25 Have you had a meaningful conversation with someone about the climate this month?
- 26 This week?
- 27 Are you angry (about our climate situation)?
- 28 Did you ever take part in a climate protest?
- 29 Should we protest climate change?
- 30 Will you?
- 31 Do you feel responsible?
- 32 Did you ever tie yourself to an oil rig?
- 33 Did you ever sleep on the top of an oil tanker?
- 34 Do you know how to dismantle a pipeline?
- 35 Do you ever feel despair?
- 36 Are you hopeful?

Or Never

Forward moving

*Tutti*  $\text{♩} = 100$  *slowly, in free time [aprox 20"]*

*1. Are you worried about the climate?*

*Tutti*  $\text{♩} = 100$

Uri Agnon

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[18. Drill]

19. Disobey?

Tutti

slowly, in free time [aprox 20"]

37

Picc. *p*

Fl. *p*

Ob. *p*

Cl. *p*

B. Cl. *p*

Bsn. *fpp* *p*

Hn. *ppp* *p*

Tpt. *p*

Tbn. *p* *gliss.* *gliss.*

Tba. *fp*

Timp.

S. D.

B. D. *mf* *ff* *pp*

Tri.

Glock. *f* *p*

Slds.

Hp. *f*

Pno. *f* *ff*

Vln. I *fpp* *p*

Vln. II *ppp* *p*

Vla. *ppp* *p*

Vc. *p*

D. b. *mp*

44  $\downarrow = 100$

Fl. Bsn.  $\text{f dolce}$   $\text{p}$

Timp.  $f$   $p-f$   $f$   $p-f$

S. D.  $f$

B. D.  $ff$   $p-f$   $ff$   $p-f$

Tri.  $ff$

Glock.  $p-f$   $f-p$   $p$   $fff$

Vln. I  $f$  pizz. uni.

Vln. II  $f$  pizz.

Vla.  $f$  pizz.

Vc.  $f$  pizz.

Db.  $f$

B

20. Have you ever

21 Do you ever worry about  
the bees?22. Have you signed a petition  
about the climate?

62

Picc. *f* *p*<sup>3</sup> *f* *p*<sup>3</sup> *p*<sup>3</sup> *f* *p*<sup>3</sup> *p*<sup>3</sup> *f*

Fl. *f* *p*<sup>3</sup> *f* *p*<sup>3</sup> *f* *p*<sup>3</sup> *mf* *f*

Ob. *f* *p*<sup>3</sup> *f* *p*<sup>3</sup> *f* *f* *p*<sup>3</sup> *f*

Cl. *f* *f* *p*<sup>3</sup> *f* *f* *mf* *f* *p*<sup>3</sup>

B. Cl. *p*<sup>3</sup> *p* *3* *p*<sup>3</sup>

Bsn. *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b*

Hn. *mf dolce* *mf dolce* *mf dolce* *mf dolce*

Tpt. *f dramatic* *f dramatic* *f dramatic* *f dramatic*

Tbn. *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b*

Tba. *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b*

Tim. *mf*

S. D. *z* *z* *z* *z*

B. D. *z* *z* *z* *z*

Tri. *z* *z* *z* *z*

Glock. *z* *z* *z* *z*

Slds. *z* *z* *z* *z*

Hp. *z* *z* *z* *z*

Pno. *z* *z* *z* *z*

Vln. I *spiccato* *spiccato* *ord.* *p*<sup>3</sup> *ord.* *p*<sup>3</sup>

Vln. II *spiccato* *spiccato* *mf* *mf*

Vla. *f* *spiccato* *3* *p* *p*

Vc. *f*<sup>3</sup> *p* *3* *p* *3*

Db. *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b*

[23. Do you eat less meat?]

[24. Do you ever lie awake at night thinking about the future?]

70

Picc. *p* *f*<sup>3</sup>

Fl. *p* *mf* *mp* *f* *f* *f* *f*

Ob. *p* *f* *f* *mf dolce* *mf dolce*

Cl. *div.* *mf* *f* *p*

B. Cl. *p* *f*

Bsn. *f* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b*

Hn. *p* *p* *f*

Tpt. *p* *p* *f* *f*

Tbn. *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b* *b*

Tba. *p* *p* *p* *p* *p* *p* *p* *p*

Tim. *p*

S. D. *mp* *f* *mp* *f* *mp*

B. D. *mp*

Tri. *p*

Glock. *p*

(35)

Slds. *p*

Hp. *p* *f* *f* *f*

Pno. *p* *f* *mp* *p* *p* *p* *p* *p*

Vln. I *spiccato* *mp* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato*

Vln. II *spiccato* *mp* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato* *mp* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato*

Vla. *mp* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato* *ff* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato*

Vc. *p*<sup>3</sup> *mp* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato* *spiccato*

D. *arco* *pizz.* *mp*



## 26. This week?

### 27. Are you angry?

Tutti

96 *Tutti*

Picc. *f*

Fl. *f*

Ob. *p* *mf*

Cl. *p*

B. Cl. *f*

Bsn. *p*

Hn. *mf* *f* *mf dolce* *p*

Tpt. *mf* *f* *mf dolce* *p*

Tbn. *p*

Tba. *p*

Tim. *p*

S. D. *p* *mp* *mf* *f*

B. D. *p*

Tri. *p*

Glock. *p*

Slds. *p*

Hp. *ff* *p*

Pno. *f* *p* *p*

Vln. I *spiccato* *f*

Vln. II *spiccato* *spiccato* *mf*

Vla. *mf*

Vc. *f* *pizz.* *ff* *3* *p* *arco*

D. B. *ff*

29. Should we protest  
about the climate crisis?

20. Will you?

31: Do you feel  
responsible?

101

Picc. *p* *f*

Fl. *p* *mf*

Ob. *p* *mf*

Cl. *p* *p* *mf*

B. Cl. *mf*

Bsn. *mf* *f*

Hn. *mf* *f*

Tpt. *mf* *f*

Tbn. *mf*

Tba. *mf* *f*

Tim. *p* *f* *ff*

S. D. *p* *f* *f* *ff*

B. D. *pp* *f* *f* *ff*

Tri. *f* *fff*

Glock. *mf* *p* *ff*

Slds. *mf*

Hp. *mf* *f* *(pent.)* *gliss.* *8th*

Pno. *mf* *f* *ff* *3*

Vln. I *mf* *f* *ff* *3*

Vln. II *mf* *f* *ff* *3*

Vla. *p* *f* *f* *ff* *3*

Vc. *mf* *f* *f* *ff* *3*

Db. *mf* *f* *f* *ff* *3*

Tri. *mf* *ff*

Slds. *mf*

Did you ever tie yourself to an oil rig?

110

spiccato

div.

(55)

115

35: Do you ever  
feel despair?

36: Are you  
hopeful?

**C** = 40 Largo

Picc. Fl. Ob. Cl. B. Cl. Bsn. Hn. Tpt. Tbn. Tba. Timp. S. D. B. D. Tri. Glock. Slds. Hp. Pno. Vln. I Vln. II Vla. Vc. Db.

13

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100117

100118

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100122

100123

100124</

119 Tutti

Hn. *ff*  
Slds. (60)  
Vln. I dolce *p* *mf* uni.  
Vln. II  
Vla. pizz. *mp*  
Vc. *mp* pizz.  
Db. *mp*

126

Picc.  
Fl. solo. *f* *mf* div.  
Ob. *p* *mf* *p* *f* *mp* *mf* *f*  
Cl. *p* *mf* *p* *f* *mp* div.  
B. Cl.  
Bsn. *p*

Hn. *pp* *mf*  
Tpt. *mf*  
Tbn. *mf*  
Tba. *p* *mp*

Tim. *pp* *f* *pp* *f* *p* Cymbals  
S. D.  
B. D.  
Tri. *p*

Glock.  
Slds.  
Hp. *p* *f* *p* *mf* *f* *mf* *p*  
Pno. *p*

Vln. I  
Vln. II pizz.  
Vla. arco  
Vc.  
Db.

138  $\text{♩} = 100$

slowly, in free time [aprox 25"]

Picc. *ff* *fp*

Fl. *ff* *fp*

Ob. *ff* *fp*

Cl. *ff* *fp*

B. Cl. *f* *fp*

Bsn. *f* *fp*

Hn. *ff* *fp*

Tpt. *ff* *fp* *con sord.* *con sord.*

Tbn. *ff* *fp* *f* *gliss.* *gliss.* *gliss.*

Tba. *ff* *fp* *#* *gliss.*

Tim. *ff*

Cym. *fff* *To S. D.*

B. D. *f*

Tri.

Glock. *ff* *f*

Slds.

Hp. *f* *ff* *f*

Pno. *ff* *f* *150*

Vln. I  $\text{♩} = 100$  *ff* *fpp* *div.* *mf*

Vln. II *ff* *fp* *div.* *f*

Vla. *f* *fp* *arco*

Vc. *f* *fp*

Db. *f* *ff* *fp*

D

148

*p*

*p*

*solo*

*p*

*p*

*fff*

(65)

*p*

**D**

*pizz. solo*

*2 players*

158

Picc. *p*

Fl. *p*

Ob. *p*

Cl. *solo* *p*

B. Cl.

Bsn. *f*

Hn. *p*

Tpt. *p*

Tbn. *p*

Tba.

Tri. *p*

Slds.

Hp.

Pno.

Vln. I pizz. solo *p*

Vln. II pizz. solo *p* 3 players

Vla. 4 players *mf*

Vc. 7 players *mf*

Db. 5 players etc. *mf*

uni.

2 players

A page of a musical score for orchestra and piano, page 166. The score includes parts for Picc., Fl., Ob., Cl., B. Cl., Bsn., Hn., Tpt., Tbn., Tba., Timp., S. D., B. D., Tri., Glock., Sids., Hp., Pno., Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., Vc., and Db. The score features various musical markings such as dynamics (f, p, mf, div.), articulations (uni., 4 players), and performance instructions (8va, 3). The piano part is prominent in the lower half of the page, with a dynamic of (80) indicated.

173

Picc. Fl. Ob. Cl. B. Cl. Bsn. Hn. Tpt. Tbn. Tba. Timp. S. D. B. D. Tri. ff

Glock. Slds. Hp. (8) Pno. Vln. I Vln. II Vla. Vc. Db.

div.

arco

uni.

180

Picc.

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

B. Cl.

Bsn.

Hn.

Tpt.

Tbn.

Tba.

Timp.

S. D.

B. D.

Tri.

Glock.

Slds.

Hp.

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Db.

(8)

(100)

185

Picc. *fff*

Fl. *fff*

Ob. *fff*

Cl. *fff*

B. Cl. *fff*

Bsn. *fff*

Hn. *fff*

senza sord.

Tpt. *fff*

senza sord.

Tbn.

Tba. *ff*

Tim. *fff*

S. D.

B. D. *ff*

Tri. *fff*

To Cym. Cymbals

Glock. *fff*

Slds.

Hp. *ff*

Pno. *ff*

*ff*

*ff*

Vln. I arco

Vln. II *fff*

Vla. *fff*

Vc. *ff*

Db. *ff*

University of Southampton

Faculty of Humanities  
Music department

**How to do Things With Sounds: New Music as Political Action**

Volume 7 of 10

By

Uri Agnon

ORCID ID 0000-0001-7010-6618

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2024

***Workers Union***  
*(gig version)*

**For solo percussionist with any six instruments**

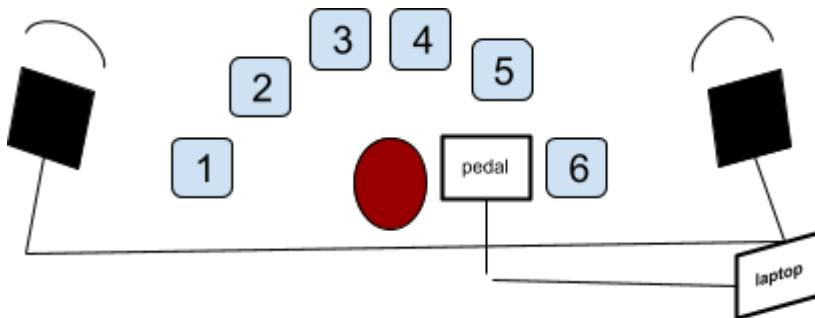
2022  
Uri Agnon

## Instrumentation and tech

Equipment requirements:

- Six percussion instruments (or objects)
- A midi switch pedal/pad
- Laptop running a Max/MSP [patch](#)
- PA system

Choose any six percussion instruments/objects and organise them in a semicircle according to a spectrum of your choice (low to high, dry to wet, small to big etc.)



It should be physically on the edge of possibility to play instruments 1 and 6 simultaneously.

## The Backing Track

A playback of a backing track is triggered with a midi pedal/pad. In section A the playback acts as a click track that you try to play in time with. The tempo of the playback fluctuates. As there is randomness built into the patch, the nature of this fluctuation will be different every time. From section B to the end, you play independently; (you no longer play in time with the backing track). At the beginning of section C you trigger a second track. This track is the same every time it is triggered.

### **The Score**

The first line of the staff represents instrument 1, and so on. The diamond head represents the pedal.



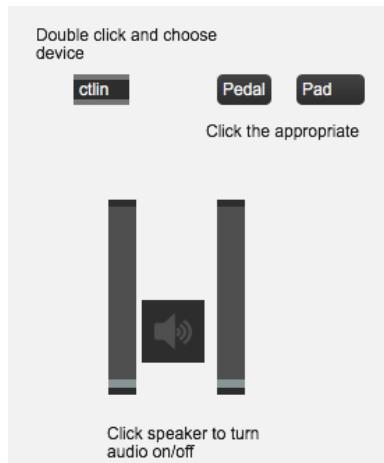
You choose how many times to repeat each loop (the repetitions will not be identical owing to the randomised change in tempo.)

The pedal/pad is pressed twice on rehearsal mark A and C. The length of the press is unimportant.

### **Max Patch**

The max patch can be found in this link:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ZlqgpTTMaEhTGdDYH6yJacB5XNxHdi\\_P?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ZlqgpTTMaEhTGdDYH6yJacB5XNxHdi_P?usp=sharing)

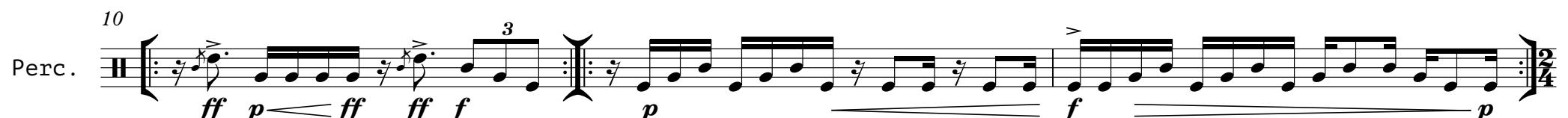


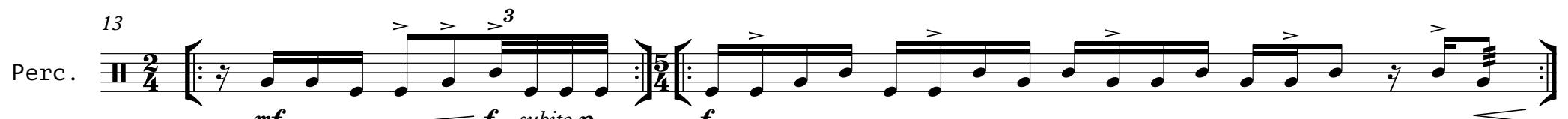
# Workers Union Gig (economy)

Uri Agnon

Percussion 

Perc. 6 

Perc. 10 

Perc. 13 

Perc. 15 

Perc. 17 

**A** 

2

19

Perc.

24

Perc.

**B**

Gradual rit. and dim. over 15-20 seconds to  $\text{♩} = 5$  (disregard backing track)

15-20 seconds

27

Perc.

**C**

Disregard tempo. Backing track melody on synth. is in rubato

Perc.

Play independently of the  
backing track's tempi.  
Repeating the rhythmic riff  
create a huge buildup of energy  
through accel., cress. and  
instrumentation, gradually  
introducing the other instruments.

Towards the end the  
percussion part should  
sound like a chaotic solo,  
feel free to add ornaments.

Stop sharply as the  
choir sample enters  
just before the  
last note on synth melody.

University of Southampton

Faculty of Humanities  
Music department

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January 2024

# *BP Must Fall* Not A Score

By BP or not BP?

Music lead: Uri Agnon

Scoreless piece for hundreds of participants

The composition process of this piece was the co-authoring of songs that were taught by a group of musicians to hundreds of participants during the creative occupation of the British Museum (February 2020). The songs were sung throughout the museum reaching a climax when 1500 participants sang them together in the museum's great hall.

These are aural pieces of music; the notes below are not scores, but were used by the musicians' group for planning and organising. During the action these notes were interrupted, animated and changed using improvisations, canons, clapping and shouting.

## Songs for 8/2 Troy action

### Song for horse day

*We're bringing you a gift and,  
We've come to give you glory.  
Forget about the climate,  
Forget about that story.  
It's just a tiny present.  
And it's free!*

*Don't think about away lands,  
Or think about the future.  
Forget about our past,  
behold this fancy creature.  
It's just a tiny present,  
Don't check it by its mouth!*

### Mass moment

*It's time to take it down,  
To tear away that logo,  
This horse is not a gift,  
It only leads to sorrow,  
BP must fall - now!  
BP must fall - (rip!)*

### Don't Trust That Horse -

#### Missions

Choir:  
*"O unhappy citizens, what  
madness?  
Do you think the crisis sailed  
away?  
Do you think this gift is free of  
treachery?  
**We know BP's reputation!**  
**We know BP's reputation!***

(In the shout and response part the shouter is free to improvise, anyone can be the shouter)

Shouter: Trojans  
Crowd: Don't trust that horse.  
Shouter: Artists  
Crowd: Don't trust that horse  
Shouter: Mainstream media  
Crowd: Don't trust that horse  
Shouter: British museum  
Crowd: Don't trust that horse

Other options: National Gallery, artists, humans, children, parents, grandparents, politicians, voters, London

## BP Must Fall (mass moment song)

BP Must Fall

## Moderato

A musical score for 'Take It Down' in 4/4 time. The melody is in G major. The lyrics are: "it's time to take it down to tear a-way that lo - go this horse is not a gift it". The score consists of a single line of music with corresponding lyrics below it.

4

on - ly leads to so - rrow B - P must fall B - P must fall!

*rip logo!*

♯ x

# Missions song

$\text{♩} = 85$

4

Oh un - ha - ppy ci - ti - zens what mad - ness

This musical line is in 4/4 time, treble clef, and a key signature of one flat. It consists of eighth and sixteenth note patterns. The lyrics are: "Oh un - ha - ppy ci - ti - zens what mad - ness".

3

do you think the cri - sis sailed a - way?

This musical line is in 4/4 time, treble clef, and a key signature of one flat. It consists of eighth and sixteenth note patterns. The lyrics are: "do you think the cri - sis sailed a - way?".

5

do you think this gift is free from trea - che - ry?

This musical line is in 4/4 time, treble clef, and a key signature of one flat. It consists of eighth and sixteenth note patterns. The lyrics are: "do you think this gift is free from trea - che - ry?".

7

we know B - Ps re - pu - ta - tion we know B - P's re - pu - ta - tion

*Whisper*

This musical line is in 4/4 time, treble clef, and a key signature of one flat. It features a whisper effect with a dynamic of  $\text{p}$  and a vocal range from  $\text{B}3$  to  $\text{C}4$ . The lyrics are: "we know B - Ps re - pu - ta - tion we know B - P's re - pu - ta - tion".

9

Call and response:

*Tro - jans* don't trust that horse *Art - ists* don't trust that horse

This musical line is in 4/4 time, treble clef, and a key signature of one flat. It features a call and response pattern with two groups of eighth and sixteenth note patterns. The lyrics are: "Call and response: *Tro - jans* don't trust that horse *Art - ists* don't trust that horse".

11

*Main-stream me dia* don't trust that horse *Lon - don* don't trust that horse

This musical line is in 4/4 time, treble clef, and a key signature of one flat. It features a call and response pattern with two groups of eighth and sixteenth note patterns. The lyrics are: "*Main-stream me dia* don't trust that horse *Lon - don* don't trust that horse".

Horse song (to be performed when the horse is in the BM)

$\text{♩} = 90$

Piano

we're bring-ing you a gift and we've come to give you glo - ry for -

3

Pno.

get a-bout the cli-mate for- get a-bout that sto ry it's just a ti-ny pre-sent it's

7

Pno.

just a ti-ny pre - sent and it's free! don't think a-bout a-way lands or

11

Pno.

think a-bout the fu- ture for - get a-bout our past be-hold this fan-cy crea ture it's

14

Pno.

just a ti-ny pre - sent\_ it's just a ti-ny

17

Pno.

pre - sent\_ don't check it by the mouth!

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Faculty of Humanities  
Music department

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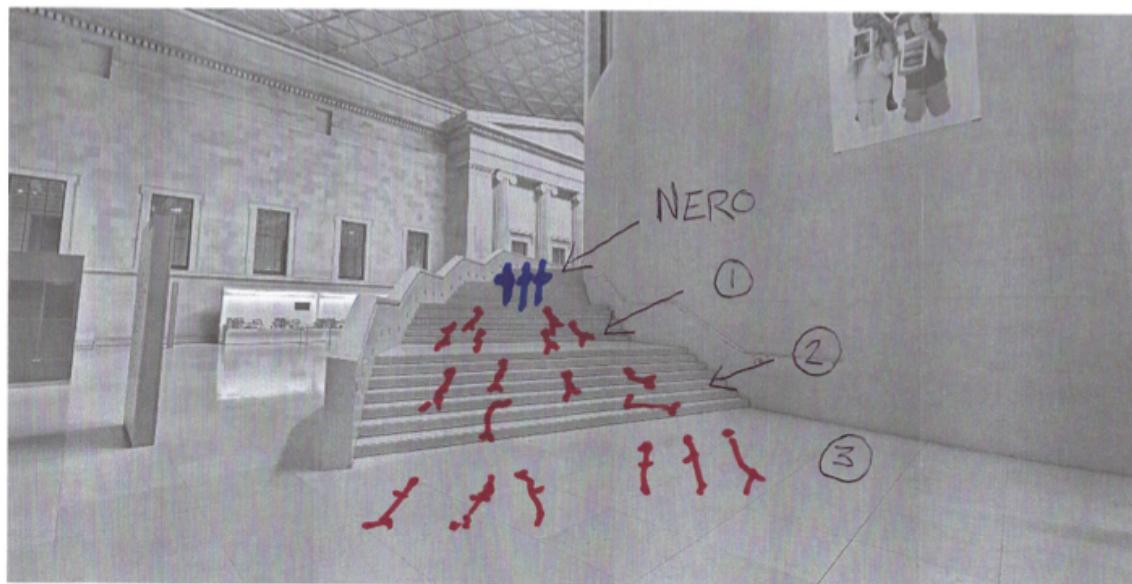
January 2024

## Nero violinists instructions

MEETING TIME 9:30 AM

1. Take your position on the steps.

*You should be standing at the top*



2. 0:00 - Stay silent as background fire sounds play for 30"
3. 0:30 - The Choir starts singing. Stay silent. Never look at the Choir.
4. 0:45 - Play section A in unison, twice. (Q from Uri)
5. 1:00 - Move on with the piece, looping as you see fit
6. 4:20 - All reach C.

**Nero**  
**For Violins, Voices and Speakers**  
**- Violins Part**

Performance notes:

Two - five violinists play with a common sense of beat. As the piece progresses, their sense of bar drifts. The melody is split into three sections: A, B, C. The leading principal is that while there is much room for choice about the number of times a bar or a section is played, the order of bars and sections is kept.

The piece begins with everyone playing A in unison. When it ends everyone should be playing C (probably in a canon). The middle part is up to each performer as indicated below:

Order of parts:

- First play section A in its entirety.
- Then repeat the section, this time each player chooses how many times they want to loop every bar of section A. The order of the bars should be kept.
- At the end of A (the second time) choose if to progress to B or to repeat A (if A is repeated bars can be looped but the order kept).
- When moving to B, any bar of B can be looped any number of times. The order of bars should be kept. At the end of B go to A, repeat B or continue to C.
- When in section C any bar in C any number of times. C can also be repeated any number of times, after which return to A (or end the piece).

# Fiddeling

BONB (UA)

**A**

$\text{♩} = 180$   
*Bright, optimistic*

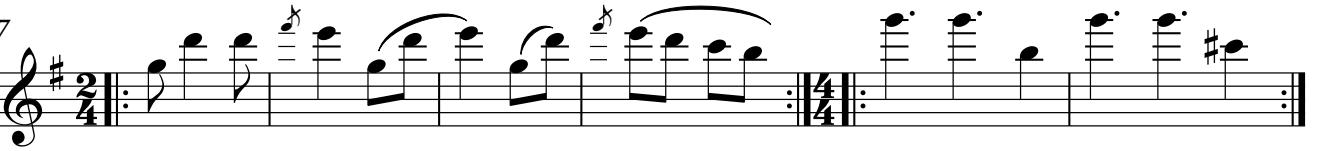
Violin



Play A as written once, then repeat allowing looping any bar as many times as you see fit

**B**

Vln.



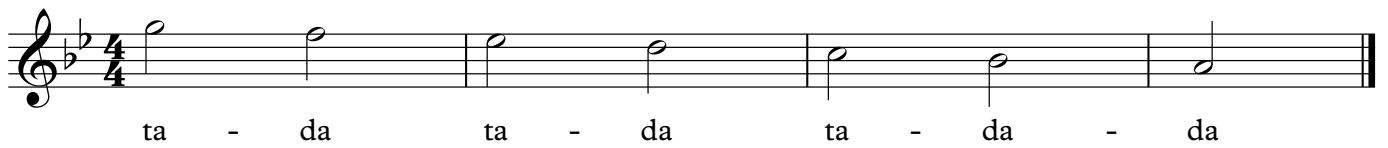
Loop any bar as many times as you see fit.  
at the end of B go to the begining of A, B or C

**C**

Loop any bar as many times as you see fit.  
at the end of C go to the begining of A or C, not B

# Lament nero

bonp



*Sing in small groups, each group should keep to a separate tempo, and all should be distinct from to the violins' tempo.*

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It Should Be In The Hands (bonb)

$\text{♩} = 50$  ac. slowly until b8

Soprano

in the ci-ty of Id-ku a voice ful of dread is

Alto

on the shore of the Med crushed with a fist full of

S.

with a fist full of B - Ps hun-gry for

A.

oil and gas cash for E-gypt's dic-ta-tors

S.

po-ter tight grip thir-sty for rights ex-

A.

and kee-ping a on wri-ters and free-dom figh-ters rights

S.

trac-tered and sold by the ba-rrel but Ro - sse-tta pro-claims so ve-ry blunt-ly

A.

but Ro - sse-tta pro-claims so ve-ry blunt-ly

Crowd.

Claps

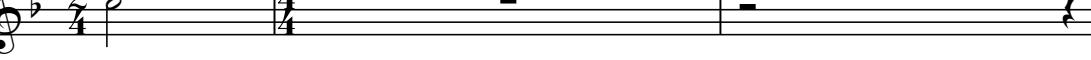
$\text{♩} = 80$

Poco rit.

$f \xrightarrow{\quad} ffff$



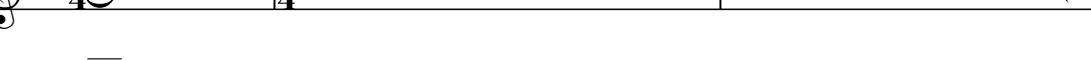
20 a tempo

S. 

the

A. 

the

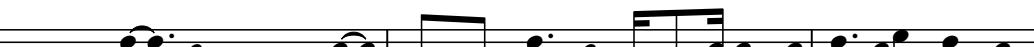
Crowd. 

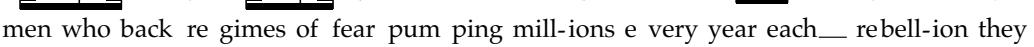
it should be in the hands of those who live in the count-ry

Claps 

*f* *ffff*

23

S.  men who back re gimes of fear pum ping mill-ions e very year each\_\_ rebell-ion they try to steer

A.  men who back re gimes of fear pum ping mill-ions e very year each\_\_ rebell-ion they try to steer

26

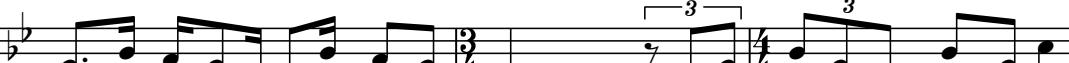
S. towards less free dom and more tears wash their con-science right now right here am-

A. towards less free dom and more tears wash their con-science-right now right here am -

28

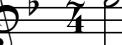
S. 

A. 

Claps 

Poco rit.

31 a tempo

S. 

A. 

Crowd. 

Claps 

it should be in the hands

*f*  *fff* 

33 CHANTING

S.                                                                                                                                  <img alt="MIDI note on the A4 line" data-bbox="113 7175 135 7