

CREATING AN INTERACTIVE/IMMERSIVE CLASSICAL MUSIC CONCERT

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Classical music is heavily characterized by tradition and conventions that shape and dictate the way it is supposed to be performed. As a performer (classical guitarist and conductor) I've been looking for ways to negotiate the conventions of the classical music performance by readapting it to the technological and immersive/interactive demands of the 21st Century. Music can also be used to express and declare a social issue such as the migrant crisis we live today, without losing the music's original value but rather recontextualizing its message to the current events.

I consider the stage as the big screen that frames our performances, but how can we enhance the audience experience with the use of technology, immersion and interaction? Also, if the traditional stage is a form of marginalization that creates separation between the audience (as individual and community) and the performers, how can we reshape it as a more inclusive arena?

This research explores how, by adding theatre techniques (immersion and interaction) and media (big screens, animations, lights and photography) to classical music concerts, we can create a performance experience that connects with the audience and appeals to their reality, environment and emotions. The

main premise behind these additions is that “people want to be engaged” and that empathy can be used to build and enhance the message of a performance to the audience. Therefore, I show how, through media, free roaming (not restricting audiences to chairs) and a focus on social issues, an immersive and interactive classical music experience can be an effective tool to engage audiences, provide a type of enjoyment that goes beyond the sonic layer, and be a form of social declaration and activism.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated first, to the memory of my beloved brother Lester Antonio Bendaña Rivas, who lost his fight against Leukemia six days before I came to the United States to begin this Master and who always encouraged me to continue my dreams and goals, no matter the obstacles.

Second, I also want to dedicate this thesis to my parents, who have supported in all ways during my education. Without their support, enrolling and completing this Master would have never been possible. Also, to my dear friend Karla Maria Santana Pacheco for her encouragement and unconditional support since I began my professional music career. They have been invaluable for my professional development.

Third, this thesis is also dedicated to the memory of all those migrants who have lost their lives trying to reach a new and better life for them and their beloved ones. Let's hope someday there are no borders anymore, and that misery be exiled of this world.

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1. CHAPTER I

1.1 Introduction.

In my childhood, I was never exposed to classical music. I was raised in Nicaragua surrounded by a variety of pop music ranging from Rancheras, a type of folk music from Mexico, to Classic Rock and Hard Rock music. There was always a broad taste of music around my house, but never anything like classical music. My father, who directly influenced my musical taste, never had a liking for classical music, which is the reason why I was never directly or consciously exposed to it. My first contact with classical music was when I was watching cartoons, such as those by Walt Disney and Warner Bros that commonly use classical music as background sound, but I can't say I ever paid attention to the music itself. It is typical of Nicaraguan society to regard classical music as something that is just good for sleeping, relaxing, and is sometimes used as background music while studying. I must even admit, that I disliked this type of music, and never was attracted to it, but everything changed when I started learning classical guitar.

I began learning popular guitar when I was 12 years old because I wanted to play classic rock tunes from the 60s to 90s. I began first taking private lessons and then moved to different schools of music in my city, trying to improve my playing. At that time, 2003, there were very few schools of music in my town and felt that none of them provided what I was looking for, to be an exceptional pop guitar player. Normally, this type of music is learned in the street, by playing along with other experienced musicians or gathering with other guitar aficionados, hence going to a school of music to learn how to play rock guitar was basically impossible. In my search for a more qualified guitar school, I

ended up meeting Dennis Miranda, a private classical guitar teacher, who first introduced me to this music genre. It was through his lessons that I started to appreciate classical music since the repertoire I started playing with him was classical guitar music. My ambition to enhance my skills and master the guitar forced me to listen more and more to this music genre, taking me to a point where it became the only music I listened to.

Listening to classical guitar music for several hours was my first immersive experience with the classical music world. This then resulted in my curiosity to know more about its composers, styles, interpreters and repertoire just to mention a few

Indeed, I realized that part of my earlier lack of interest in classical music was not only because I was not properly exposed to it, but instead because I could not comprehend this type of music. I was eventually able to appreciate the music after developing the ability to understand all the things that go into the creation of classical pieces. Things such as: how classical music is written, knowledge of the composer's life and intentions for the composition, and a capacity to comprehend what the composers are saying in the score. Many people, I assume, cannot appreciate classical music, partly because they lack this ability, knowledge, and capacity.¹ However, because of the active engagement I had with classical music since beginning, I never conceptualized it as an elitist art, because I made it part of me and assimilated it as part of my life. It stops being something strange or unknown to me, but rather converted in part of my vocabulary which made feel familiarize and identified with it.

¹ While my experience as a performer make me assume this position, Christopher Small also states that "only those who can read a score have access to the inner meanings of music" (5), affirming the assumption that to understand and enjoy classical music requires a deeper understanding and engagement with the composer's work, making it difficult for those without the proper training,

Another reality that took part in my lack of interest in classical music was the society and education in which I grew up. In Nicaragua, there is no music education in the schools, neither pop nor classical, unlike many other countries where music is part of the curriculum. While it is also true that having an early music education program at the school does not guarantee we would all become future classical music consumers, not having exposure to it at all may complicate the things in the long term when trying to create a habit of listening to or liking classical music.

The difference in the nature of the music notwithstanding, my experience with popular and classical music concerts over the 16 years that I have been making music makes me suspect that the lack of public interest in classical music has to do with something more than the music in and of itself.

Classical music venues seem to draw on a standardized proscenium structure where the audience's mobility is restricted to a chair in front of a stage where the music is performed. Instead, popular music venues are more varied, some without chairs and others with, but people are still free to roam and are not expected to remain in silence or immobile during the performance.

Outside of my own experiences, there are already many investigations showing that people in general, no matter their age, do not dislike classical music itself, but rather they don't enjoy the way it is presented (Price, 2007, Kolb, 1998, Dobson, 2010). Especially over the last two decades, more classical musicians have been trying to innovate and change the performance style and create new ways of presenting a concert, but there is still a lot to be done and investigated when it comes to stage design and technology improvements.

The Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival, for example, created two concerts: *What's so Great about Mozart* and *The Secrets of Chamber Music* (Wallace, 2008). These were family concerts oriented to kids, where musicians interacted with the audience by asking them questions about the composers, music history, instruments and making them sing. *Myths and Legends* is a concert performed by the Hudson Valley Philharmonic Orchestra, intended for students from eight to twelve years old (Wallace, 2008), and which is a musical journey where the audience is introduced to the history behind some famous orchestral works with two narrators and musicians improvising excerpts at certain moments during the performance. Alternatively, BBC Proms has been cultivating an informal atmosphere, where people can either stand or sit and dress informally, sometimes performing orchestral music along with a narrator making jokes throughout the performance, which has proven to attract a larger and more youthful audience (Kolb, 1998). These examples, as well as many others I've found during my research, show some of the ways classical musicians have begun exploring new ways to perform music and immerse and interact with the audience that have been proven to work. However, technological resources such as image projection, lighting, and sound effects haven't been explored that much in classical music venues, which I argue would help to create a more multisensory and interactive musical experience.

For the purposes of this thesis I want to define the terms immersion and interaction as I see them. Immersion is the act of feeling and being in an alternate reality, where you may forget for a moment the reality that is happening outside the walls. Immersion is about entering into a different world than the one we habit and transit every day, but where everything is happening around you. There are many ways in which we can be immersed in a performance. It could be through a sonic immersion, a physical immersion and a psychological immersion. All of them are different layers of immersion, which can perform

separately or at the same time. Interaction is about creating the conditions in the stage where the audience can interact and actively communicate with the performers and other audience members, having the capacity to shape the performance and event transform it if desire. As immersion, there are also different layers of interaction. People can interact physically and verbally with others, all at the same time.

While developing this project, I wanted to explore different ways of performing classical music besides the traditional and what others have been doing so far, like the concerts mentioned above. It seems that most of the nontraditional classical music performances happening today are framed within the educational and instructional aspect of music, that is why most of the concerts analyzed and discussed by the authors are children's concerts or thematic concerts built around a specific composer.

My first idea was to create a concert with the purpose of exploring different or alternative ways in which classical music can be performed. Part of the reason that many people do not attend classical music concerts has to do with the notion that you need to be knowledgeable about this type of music, and the fact that the venues where this music is performed are full of rules and conventions that may seem antiquated or undesirable to some. With this in mind, I envisioned a concert where I would perform on different parts of the stage and add video animations that illustrate the story behind each of the pieces I would be playing, to immerse the audience in the world of the compositions so they could see what the pieces were about, to give a different layer of immersion besides the sonic layer that already exists.

However, as I further discuss later in this thesis, due to the collaborative aspect of the project, it ended up evolving into a more complex argument of social declaration and activism. The performance resulted in an exploration on how classical music along with immersion and interaction can be used to engage and discuss a social drama that is very common today, such as the migrant's struggle that thousands of people in the world suffer every day, through which they are dehumanized by the governments and society. The main question became how classical music, immersion, and interaction can be used to create awareness of a social issue and ultimately create empathy and affect in the audience. At the same time, how the guitar along with the music symbolically represent the migration process because of the innate qualities of both the instrument and the compositions. We landed on this topic after the first meetings with the research collaborators, but I must admit it was not by accident, but rather the product of living in a society and in a time when this topic is widely discussed in the media. Thanks to this awareness of the problem, we were able to come up with a performance that engaged with it and find the connection between the guitar, music, poetry, immersion, and interaction to create an experience where the audience could witness the struggle and feel part of it during the performance.

Along these lines, it is also important to answer some of these questions: what makes a classical music concert engaging? How does the traditional way of performing classical music affect the engagement of new audiences? How can immersive/interactive theatre techniques enhance the classical music concert experience? How can we, as performers, link the music performed and the audience's reality? Does adding immersive/interactive approaches enhance empathy in the audience and make them feel more attached to the performance and problematic? In what ways do the neoliberal values, such as the freedom to choose, that are reflected in free-roaming, affect today's audience and

performers, and how can we use it in favor of classical music productions? Is it really worth moving from the traditional to a renovated way of performing classical music? How does involvement with technology affect the classical music concert experience?

As a musician on stage, I have seen, felt, and found it easier to get more audience involvement and interaction with the audience at popular music concerts compared to classical music concerts. Some of this is due to the difference in the use of technology at these two kinds of events. Whereas popular music concerts use more technology in the form of electronic instruments, sound effects and animated lights, classical music concerts by an orchestra, a guitarist or a pianist, tend to use acoustic instruments, sometimes amplified but without effects or animated lights. Consequently, whereas one can stage popular music concerts anywhere and still be heard because it uses technology (including electronic amplification) that supports all kinds of venues, classical music concerts are limited to spaces that do not require major amplification in order to maintain its sonic quality. It is no secret that it is hard to properly amplify acoustic instruments such as the ones used for classical music performances because they were not necessarily designed to be played with amplification, but rather for halls, theatres, and spaces with good acoustics. Therefore, it becomes challenging and even very expensive to try to capture and play the best sound of these instruments

A related consequence is that unlike classical music concerts, popular music concerts, freed to occur anywhere, can employ more spectacular light effects (including fireworks) and image projection. The combined use of sound and lighting effects and image projection provides an exciting, multisensory musical experience for audiences at popular music concerts. Basically, the traditions of a classical concert performance, such as solo recitals and orchestral

performances are less engaging, especially for young people who are more exposed to popular music. Such traditions frame classical music—in Nicaragua, as in other parts of the world—as the entitlement of a higher social class—creating a perception that it is essentially elitist music for a certain class level, and not for a broader public. I think this is a valid perception, especially if we take into consideration that the patrons of classical music composers throughout music history have been mainly aristocrats, wealthy people,² and powerful organizations such as the church, so it is understandable that to this day people from middle or lower classes don't identify with this music style. Mass media also plays a role in the cultivation of these ideas. It is common to see in movies and television shows that classical music is performed in fancy theatres, both by and for well-dressed people, or in wealthy environments, fostering the idea that this is where this music belongs or should be performed. Even the venue of classical music concerts adds to this perception: I have personally known people who do not attend classical music concerts at theatres or halls because they feel don't fit in with the expected code and related class level, a reason that has nothing to do with the type of music but rather with the social assumptions explained above.

Given the need to banish these stereotypes, I felt interested in exploring how a classical music concert might engage the interest and appreciation of audiences and make them less inclined to assume that classical music is boring and only for high-class people. Today's generation has experienced the massive invasion of new technology into everyday life throughout more of its lifetime than any other generation. In other words, multimedia technology defines this

² Christopher Small argues that classical music was in some way a type of commodity where “the musicians were customarily the patron’s servants”, who depending on their wealthy, such as Henry VIII of England, Frederick the Great of Prussia, the Hungarian Esterhazy family, would hire composer and musicians and formed orchestras for their own entertainment. (Small, 40)

generation's experience of everyday life. I am interested particularly in the promise that an interactive/immersive multimedia classical music concert holds for engaging the fascination and admiration of audiences made up of the young and atypical attendees, thus helping to erase the image of classical music as a boring and high social class genre.

My project reflects the importance of turning our eyes to the reality of the 21st century, to discover a new way of presenting classical music so that we can bring it closer to today's audience. We live in a century in which technology is all around us. We interact with it every day of our lives and it is increasingly a more significant part of our everyday routine. Therefore, as musicians, it is important that we adapt to this development and involve more technology in our shows because it can enhance the concert experience and contribute to the immersion of the performance if properly employed. Yet, as of now, technology is rarely employed in classical music concert³ nor even discussed in academia and conservatories of music as a potentially useful feature of the classical music concert. Musicians are usually trained in academia to follow and respect tradition making it difficult to break, and classical music is one of the areas where tradition has such an influence. My goal is to create a different type of concert that involves immersive and interactive theatre techniques and that uses technology as well, to explore better ways of reaching today's young audiences. These contradictions between the tradition and immersive/interactive aesthetics are part of the exploration of this project, to understand how they enhance and/or affect the concert experience in a positive or negative way.

³ The typical involvement of technology in classical music is the use of microphones, speakers, lately iPad that are replacing music scores and lights. But these additions rather than improving the overall experience, serve only as a vehicle to foster the tradition or canon, to maintain the already established way of performing classical music. My intention is to use these tools and experiment on how to enhance the concert experience, moving away from the tradition.

In this thesis, I set out to deliver to my audience some of the same experiences an immersive/interactive performance can provoke, by having them experience both terms at the different layers each one of them provide. I explain how physical, psychological and sonic immersion can be achieved and use in a performance. Also, how physical and verbal interaction can enhance the audience enjoyment and experience in a classical music concert.

I also describe the creation process of the show “US”. This was the performance experience I created to experiment with immersive and interactive theatre into a classical music concert. I will begin by discussing how I deviated from the conventional into a different aesthetic that uses these concepts and techniques. I explain how the idea was built and developed, describe the design and production process in realizing this performance, how we used the space during the performance and the reasons behind each decision taken.

Additionally, I discuss the expectations I had throughout the whole process, and how they were met. I also describe the concert itself and provide a narrative to help the reader understand the performance and present the outcomes after the show as well as what expectations were met, which ones can be improved, what we learned throughout the process and which ones provided new findings.

At last, I conclude with the main results of the experiment and demonstrate based on the surveys handed out at the performance, along with my own experience and observation, that adding immersion and interaction into a classical music concert can enhance the experience. And it can do so by providing more engagement and enjoyment for the audience through a different set of emotions that the members can experience in a performance like this one. I also argue that while tradition is good and necessary up to a point for the

musician's training, experimenting with new techniques is as important as tradition in order to keep this style of music alive and bring it to new audiences. At the same time, I acknowledge the challenges and difficulties of these types of performances.

2. CHAPTER II CREATING AN INTERACTIVE/IMMERSIVE CLASSICAL MUSIC CONCERT

2.1 The tradition or canon in the western tradition.

The traditional style of performing classical music in the western tradition and in a proscenium theatre means that there is already an agreement on where and how the performer and audience should be placed and interact. The formal convention tends to dictate that as an audience member, you enter the theatre, auditorium or hall and look for a place to sit and enjoy the performance. Usually, at the entrance, you will be handed a concert program with information about the performers and pieces to be played. The wealthier the hall, theatre or stage, the more pages this program tends to include, and with more information written in it. Once in your seat, you might take some time to read the program, check your cellphone, admire the concert hall and talk with your neighbour.

The way a classical music performance typically starts is by having a host or an audio recording instructing everyone to turn off their cellphones, not to take pictures and asking them to try and remain in their seats during the performance. Basically, the beginning of the performance is marked by informing the audience of the many rules and restrictions to follow, therefore placing part of the responsibility of the success of the performance on them. When the

concert starts, typically there is also a change in lighting to focus attention onto the stage and keep it there until the end of the concert.

Throughout the concert, the audience restricts their movement to the personal space of their seats, trying not to encroach on the space of others and avoiding, if possible, any unwanted noise. In between pieces or movements, it is common to hear some audience members coughing and movement. This is also the moment when those who want to leave the room or go to the restroom do so. People tend to clap between pieces. If it were a long piece with many movements, they would be expected to wait and clap at the end. Usually, people won't shout at the performers either until the end of the concert. This is the moment to finally express gratitude and show their emotions to the performer.

In my own experience as an audience member at dozens of concerts, this format doesn't change much at all from one performance to another. Rather, it is already cultivated in the subconscious of the audience members who know what to expect and do during the performance. The interaction that happens in these performances, seems to be limited to a type of minimal contact or interaction. It also tends to be one-way communication, where generally the musician or leader of the group directly addresses the audience with more information about the work they are about to play, or to offer a small anecdote or joke. It is a very

rare occasion when people are asked to take part in the performance in a way other than just sitting, listening and applauding.

From the performer's point of view, the traditional way of performing classical music involves waiting in a dressing room next to the stage, where he or she normally just rests, takes time to concentrate or warm up with his or her instrument. When it is time to play, the performer typically heads to the stage through one of the out of sight stage doors. Next, if playing as a soloist, he or she often salutes the audience by bowing to them and taking the predetermined seat or place to perform from. It is common to take a few seconds to check for proper tuning, concentrate, and then start playing. Some performers like to stand up after each piece of music and bow once again while people applaud, and others just stay seated. Others on stage, such as conductors, leave the stage after every piece while the audience is applauding. This formality continues throughout the rest of the concert until the end when the artist normally stands up, if seated, bows and leaves the stage. If applause continues, he or she returns to the stage and salutes once again or plays an encore piece to end the concert.

Once the concert ends, people often gather for a while in the lobby of the theatre, to talk about the performance or just say hello to others in attendance.

This is also usually the only moment when the artist lets him/herself be seen with the audience and interact in a more informal manner with them.

What is described above, is the traditional or canonic form for performing classical music in the western tradition, which is a very framed, simplistic, and formal one from my point of view. It is a process that fosters the proscenium theatre idea of separating the audience from the performers, and is a vestige of the Romantic style when artists were seen as divine creatures or superhumans that were blessed to have the God-given gift of art. This superhuman had to be celebrated, respected and glorified by the audience who lacked these qualities.⁴ This can be traced back to the transition period between the classical and romantic music style when the argument appeared that music could express what words can't.⁵

However, this western tradition we know today, it has not always been like that. At some moment in the history, what we consider today as classical

⁴ Bonds states that: "this reconfigured perception of music as an oracular language appeared around the same time that a handful of composers—most notably Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—were beginning to be hailed as geniuses, as Promethean figures with access to divine insights that they could convey, through music, to mere mortals. The genius of individual composers had been recognized long before, to be sure, but it was understood as a faculty, not as an identity." (114)

⁵ "Schlegel argues, is the root of subjectivity and consciousness; yet language, for all its richness, falls short in conveying the richness of human emotion. This 'fundamental deficiency' of language must be "supplemented" by another means of communication: music." (Bonds, 113)

music was considered popular music. The conventions were different as this music not only belonged to aristocrats but also to the people. For example, in Europe it was common during the classical period to attend an opera and have the audience speaking loud at some moments of the performance, such as in the beginning while the overture was being played. This musical form marks the beginning of an opera and functions as an introduction of the drama. Typically, the composer uses the overture to introduce some of the main musical motives and themes of the opera to help the audience familiarize with the music. If today we listen to ringing bells at the theater announcing the opera is about to begin, in that time the overture was equivalent. People knew that when the musicians started playing it, it was the time to look for their seats and still socialize with the other before the first aria began.

It was also common during the performance to have the audience shout at the performers if they liked or disliked a piece or their interpretation. People could throw things at the performers to express their discontent too. More recently, we can recall the premiere of Igor Stravinsky's ballet *Rite of Spring* in Paris in 1913, where the audience almost created a riot inside the theater, that even the police was called to control, showing their discontent to the piece.

While my plan when creating this performance was not to reenact in the same way any of these rebel behaviors in my performance, I did want to seek and return to that essence of freedom and allow the audience to experience a

type of power that was available to then before, which I assumed could be achieved through immersion and interaction the performance.

So, “what happens to a performance when the usual agreements between performer and spectator are broken?” (Schechner, 40). This is exactly what an interactive and immersive performance can do. They can break most of these agreements and expectations and create a different experience along with a new set of rules. We can create a concert where the audience could empathize with a certain topic and feel part of it. A concert where the performers are not seen as superhumans, but rather as humans at the same level as their audience, in Victor Turner’s words providing a space of *communitas*. A concert that allows them the freedom to do whatever they want throughout the performance, or at least provide the illusion they can. My project draws from these ideas of immersive and interactive theatre in order to solve some of the problems or limitations found in a conventional classical music concert setting to add and provide a different layer of enjoyment to the audience.

While there are many factors involved in an immersive/interactive performance that are not planned or controlled by the performers, because of the audience’s freedom to some extent. It is also important to recognize that these types of experiences still follow a storyline. This storyline includes designing most of the audience’s behaviors and responses beforehand and expecting that they will react most of the time as predicted. To be able to

successfully create this environment, it is necessary to put in conversation all the elements involving a performance, such as space, performers, lights, music and visuals, to create unity and help convey a clear message to the audience.

Josephine Machon states that: “Immersive theatres are always interdisciplinary, blurring boundaries between installation performance, private and public ritual, underground gigs and open-air festivals. Often these works incorporate elements from varied disciplines including architecture, improvisation, storytelling, spoken and or physical performance, dance, circus skills, aerial arts, puppetry, sculpture, digital or mechanical animation, gaming, sound, film, video audio and or haptic technologies” (55). Acknowledging this, we can unveil that an immersive performance requires a team of many specialists to make the experience a success. In my case, which involved adding immersion to a concert, it required working along with other artists besides musicians, something that is not typical or even frequent in the traditional classical music world.

The process of creating an interactive/immersive classical music concert is a very challenging one, as can be perceived by now, which I assume is the main reason why so many musicians do not embark on this experience. There are many details to figure out that simply require a lot of time, knowledge, and experience to make them work, and as musicians we are not trained on or even conscious about several of these details. On top of that, as if playing an

instrument is not already challenging enough to consume all of our time as performers, trying to stay on top of the many other layers that an interactive and immersive concert requires, may result in a very exhausting experience since there are new worries and complexities to take into consideration.

I would like to highlight that I use both terms; interactive and immersive interchangeably because both of them denote ways in which the audience experience in a different way a performance, by using the space in different ways than the tradition. Both terms carry on consequences and actions in the audience that function to enhance the performance or concert experience.

Throughout the next paragraphs, I will discuss my personal experience and the process of creating an immersive and interactive show I designed called “US”, that took place at the Blackbox Theater in the Liberal Arts & Humanities Building, at Texas A&M University on February 15th, 2019. I will explain the conception of the idea, the design and production process, as well as the expectations and outcomes of this performance that also served as an experiment on how we, as performers, can bring new ideas and elements into classical music performance, as an attempt to find an alternate way of performing classical music rather than by tradition or canon, but also to ultimately attract new audiences to classical music concerts. Including

audiences that don't feel interested in classical music because of the many rules and conventions explained before.

While this concert/performance was my idea, in the end it resulted in a collaborative work with other artists and scholars, who helped shape the idea. I must recognize the hard work and hours put in by all the people involved. In the end, this is one of the characteristics of immersive/interactive theatre as well, to have people working together towards the same goal but valuing their opinions and thoughts, resulting in collective creation.

2.2 My exploration

After many years performing within the traditional or canonic style of playing classical music, I decided to put alternate forms of art into play, such as visual art, dance, and theatre that already exist but are not commonly applied to classical music performance. I must admit that my own background as a graphic designer, classical guitar performer, and orchestral conductor, provided me with the interdisciplinary approach and skills needed to conceptualize this performance, which may have been harder to achieve if only trained as a musician. I wanted to find a different way to navigate using some elements of the tradition but putting it in conversation with other forms of performance. Throughout this process, I always kept in mind Richard Wagner's idea of

“*Gesamtkunstwerk*,” which translates to “*total work of art*.” This was an aesthetic idea of unifying all works of art along with theatre into the opera to create a more renovated and improved experience. Wagner believed that over time the arts had separated from each other, taking different paths and that reuniting them again was the way to create a more inclusive and appropriate experience. As a performer who has been in touch with actors, singers, dancers, and visual artists, I also believe in the arts as a whole, not as separate products. The practice of immersive theatre can be traced back to this idea of Wagner’s. As Machon points out, “certain techniques and sensibilities attached to immersive theater can be seen to have directly emerged from Modernist period that evolved from Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* and early romantic arguments for the inherent unity of all the aesthetic disciplines” (29).

In my conception, art is like a pyramid. It has different faces, but all of them belong to the same body, and hence they shouldn’t be separated all the time. In my experience, working with artists from other areas has always been a very enriching and exciting experience. Therefore, I assume it would be the same for the audience as well. In fact, as already discussed in the introduction, popular music concerts have already employed this idea to enhance the experience, with good results and a warm welcome from the audience.

My idea when creating “US”, was to implement techniques from the theater, dance and visual art and put them into conversation with classical music. I implemented interactive and immersive theatre concepts such as multi-focus (Schechner 1973), performing proximity (Hill & Paris 2014), environmental theatre (Shechner 1973), participatory theater (Boal 1974), the experience economy (Pine II & Gilmore 1999),⁶ and free roaming (Alston 2016)⁷ to enhance the classical music concert experience. I also added a second visual layer.⁸ For this purpose, I used photography as one of the mediums to enhance the experience and worked along with a graduate student from the visualization department at Texas A&M University, Eman Al-Zubeidi, who created a set of digital animations and video mapping. Dance also took part in the performance. We worked alongside two professional dancers from Texas A&M University, Kelsy Clark and Ashlyn Thompson, who created an improvised choreography set to one of the pieces. We used a computer-based software that tracked their movements to create a visual animation in an attempt to develop a human interactive animation that shows realistic human movements rather than computerized. It was important to me to keep the human aspect involved from

⁶ While this book is not concentrated in theater, its theory is broadly employed by immersive and interactive theater companies around the world.

⁷ Alston is not the creator of this idea, as it's been implemented by many theater companies, but he widely uses this term in his book to analyze the way free roaming is used in immersive theater performances and how it relates to the neoliberal politics.

⁸ The stage in itself is a visual layer, the only one that normally take part in a traditional classical music performance.

beginning to end in the performance if we wanted to connect its topic with the audience. Therefore, while live dancers would not be seen in the performance, the animations and video generated needed to reflect this human liveness experience. An actor, Salvador Garcia, also took part in the performance to give life to the story. And last but not least, lights play an important role in defining spaces, actions, and focus throughout the performance.

To provide the feeling of an immersive concert experience required rethinking the use of the theatre space to convert it into a more inclusive space. The goal was to make it look like one unified space where everything is happening, instead of two separate spaces, one for the audience and other for the performers. For a performance like this one, we had to rethink what we conventionally considered as the stage and think of it as the same space where the audience and performers interact.

If the performance happens at the stage, and the audience is usually outside of it, then they become passive participants. Rancière talks about this and proposes that theater should give power to the audiences. In the *Emancipated Spectator*, he talks about a “theater without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images: where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs” (4). Other authors such as Brecht, Umberto Eco and Artaud also engage in the same

discussion, but all of them are basically following Plato's critique of theater who "wanted to replace the democratic, ignorant community of theater with a different community, encapsulated in a different performance of bodies" (Rancière, 5). By bringing the stage into the audience, it means we are creating the conditions to allow them to be active participants, who can play an active role and shape the performance if they choose to. In this way, we are allowing a different type of power to the audience, by inviting them into the same space along with the performers. The audience and the performer are now on the same level; reducing the physical and spatial barriers that restrict their interactions with the artist and others, as tends to be the case in the tradition. It also helps foster the sense of community that this type of theater looks for.

This also matches with Machon's list of characteristics of an immersive experience: "You don't know what the performance space is and what's the everyday space." (54). In this sense, using a Blackbox theatre, in my opinion, provides an advantage in achieving this experience because the configuration can usually be easily changed to fit the purposes of the performance, in contrast with a traditional theater or hall, where seats are fixed to the floor and the audience and performers at a different level.

In an immersive experience like "US", the audiences must be able to feel and perceive it as immersive from the moment they enter the space. Because of

this, it was crucial to define where each of the pieces and poems were going to be performed, where the projections and images were going to take place, and where and how the lights were going to be used to achieve success of the experience. We wanted to make the audience feel part of the journey and as active participants, not as passive members, which tend to be the tradition. At the same time, if we wanted the audience involved in the performance and have them at certain points participate in it and interact with other members, it was important to think carefully about how to create and build the moment of climax where the audience would feel more willing to take part in it. All these decisions were meticulously made and rehearsed to guarantee the success of it.

Something new I learned, or found out, from this experience was the different ways or levels in which we can rehearse. Normally as musicians, we think of rehearsal as the mechanical practice and repetitive movements with the instrument, the learning of the score and as the pre-performance before the debut in front of an audience. However, to plan where an action should take place, what an animation should look like, how the story should be told, how the space will be used, how the lights will be set up, where the audience will be standing, sitting, or moving and the many other details that a performance such as this one involves, it is definitely a method of rehearsing, where on paper, in our minds, and in discussions we rehearse many of the details that are necessary to define before starting the “rehearsal” on the stage or theatre space.

I think of this as a “mindful holistic rehearsal”, necessary to achieve the success of a performance of this type.

Based on these concepts and ideas, we reshaped the configuration of the Blackbox theatre. The first important decision made was to eliminate the seats in order to provide more mobility and flexibility to the audience. Besides that, the seats are the first oppressive apparatus in a performance, because of the power they exercise in limiting our movements and freedom, therefore getting rid of them was crucial for the success of the performance and its aesthetics of free roaming.

However, we decided to keep the risers in their original position, a decision that we later found out was not the most appropriate one, because the audience felt attracted to gravitate to them at the beginning of the performance. Nonetheless, this invited us to rethink alternate ways of using them for future performances, such as separating the 3 risers and placing them in different areas of the stage in the event of a future performance, so even if people felt attracted to move to the risers, they would find themselves more spread throughout the stage, in separate groups.

Next, drawing from Oliver Grau’s book *Virtual Art*, and his discussion of the panorama and how throughout the centuries the artists have used the

panorama technique to create an illusion of a bigger and open space (46),⁹ we wanted to create the perception that the entire stage was part of the performance. For this, I conceptualized it as a 360° experience so that wherever an audience member looked there is an element of the performance. This was achieved by having a massive curved screen on one side of the stage, and at the other side, pictures hanging around that equilibrate and create balance with the screens (see fig. 1).

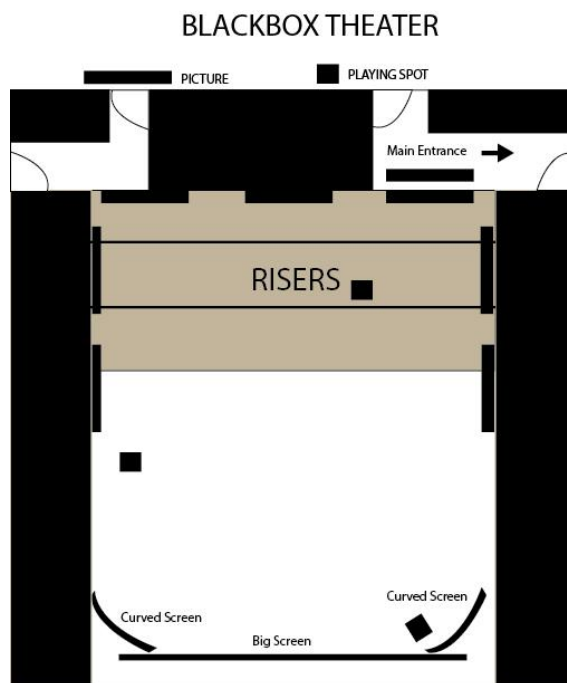


Figure 1. Blackbox theater diagram

⁹ Grau explains that since the sixteenth century, some baroque artist such as Giulio Romano, Paolo Veronese and Andrea Pozzo painted panoramas to enhance the viewers experience and create an illusion of a dynamic space.

We tried to fill any gap in the space by spreading candles in the floor too. Also, to establish the mood of the performance, before entering the stage, the first thing the audience would see was a picture at the entrance that reflected the message of the show. As can be perceived by now, creating a performance of this kind, requires a lot of rehearsal and preparation, not only on the stage but also on paper and in the mind to make sure it will work as expected. But we must also keep in mind that unlike playing an instrument, where the responsibility relies mainly on the performer, this type of concert relies on many external factors, such as technology and the audience, that make it very unpredictable no matter how often it is rehearsed. At the same time, these external factors that make the performance more challenging, are also the ones that make it more exciting and produce a sensation of liveness, because the moment depends on so many things outside of the performer, that help maintain active consciousness all the time. One of the most interesting things I found out while creating this concert was how similar the process of its creation is to the process of learning and mastering a new piece of music. When, as a musician, you start to learn a new piece, you learn the score note by note, figuring out any movement and digitation required, thinking and planning second to second what must happen to make it successful. In the same way, the process of designing the concert requires minute-to-minute thinking. It is important to rehearse and have all the movements happening at every moment of the performance planned clearly because it is the only way to eliminate loose ends.

I also wanted to explore how we can create a classical music concert experience that differs from the traditional way of performing, without losing its original value but rather increasing it, and that, at the same time, appeals to both nontraditional and traditional classical music attendees. It was very clear from the beginning that any addition or change in the performance would have to be made to the stage and set up, but not in the music itself. As a classical guitar performer and conductor with many years of experience, I understand the value that the music and score themselves have within the music academy. In the same way that the composer is seen as a superhuman figure, the score remains as the material part and presence of that deity even after his death. The score is like a holy scripture that shouldn't be argued, manipulated or changed because we are not capable or worthy of doing it. This is one of the main features of the canon, preserving the style of playing in terms of sound and music style, and to respect the composer's intention and deliver the message as accurately as possible. While the score is always subject to interpretations, any musical decision made about it has to be done consciously and well argued, because this is the only way to find validity and yet be loyal to the composer in our own perspective. Music is about meaning, and the score is the way of representing it. Our function as performers is reduced to decode that meaning and pass it on to the audience as loyally as possible, because we somehow presume the audience is not able of understanding the meaning on their own.

This is also an argument that can be found in Rancière's discussion in *Emancipated Spectator*, when he argues that according to the conventional theater: "to be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act" (2). Therefore, if I am trying to create a different way of performing classical music, I wanted it to be done by respecting this very basic premise of the classical music canon. I have seen many classical music performers trying to change the score itself and play with it, something not broadly welcome in the music academy. Usually, this is seen as disrespectful to the music. Not only that, sometimes they intentionally change the score to ease the difficulty of their playing, showing their own lack of preparation, and a low level of playing and/or musicianship. These "innovations or additions," if we can call them that, many times are not more than an easy way out for many performers since they find in them a way to hide their inexperience or lack of knowledge in the instrument. I agree with Maestro Leo Brouwer when he says that in order to break the tradition, we must first learn the tradition to perfection because only by understanding its language will we be able to surpass it and create a new language. Besides that, it is evident for a trained musician, when a performer knows and has mastered the music language and plays with it or when it is only an impostor. While an impostor may still find acceptance from the uneducated audience and a decent way of living, in the eyes of the professionals, he/she will never be recognized as a valued musician. In this

sense, I wanted to create a different type of performing but still maintain the playing at the highest-level possible, as if it were going to be performed in the traditional canon. I believe that adding any other layer of experience to the performance, should not be in detriment of what is already important, the quality of the music and the musician, only like this it may still find its value within the academy and find acceptance amongst both professional musicians and nontraditional classical music audiences.

Another topic I desired to pursue was how we can use music, theatre, and technology to tell a story with which the audience could feel connected and empathize with. Empathy was one of the most important tools and poles when designing this concert. It is worth mentioning too that it is one of the most common tools used in theater. As Boal expresses in *Theater of the Oppressed*: “Empathy is the most dangerous weapon in the entire arsenal of the theater and related arts” (113), because it creates a juxtaposition in the spectators, one where the experience they are being presented with becomes real and they adopt it as such. This reality can ultimately change behaviors and provoke change within the environment making empathy a powerful but dangerous tool if desired. While Boal criticizes the use of empathy in theater because it carries a conflict of interests, which can be used by power structures because of the “fact that their ideological penetration takes place subliminally” (114), reaching deeper into our subconsciousness, converting the audience in a powerless and

manipulated object, I wanted to use empathy as the vehicle to deliver the performance's message because of its proven effectiveness. This process will be explained later in the chapter

2.3 The collaborative process

My first idea when developing this concert was to create a performance where the meaning of the score was going to be translated into a visual performance through animations and lights, along with the guitar playing. I wanted to let the audience be immersed in the mind of the composers of the pieces I was going to play and portray the meaning and intention behind each of them to provide them with the same level of enjoyment I have when performing them.

Thinking back on this idea, I think it vividly reflects what I just discussed above, how in the music academy, performers are trained to deliver the composer's intention as accurately and cleanly as possible. Maybe my interest in representing the world inside the music had to do with the doctrine and belief I've been taught to follow through many years as a classical music performer. This idea was a manifestation of the canon performing in my mind. I've always believed that one of the main reasons that classical music is not as broadly consumed nowadays has to do with the fact that most people don't understand

the meanings of the pieces, and since sound can be very abstract at times, it is very easy to get lost in the translation or message, unless you are already trained to understand this language, which doesn't even guarantee you will fully understand the message. Therefore, I thought about approaching the concert in this way, to help the uneducated audience understand the music's meaning.

When I first met with Eman to discuss my project, I explained my idea and shared with her a video I created on one of the pieces I was going to be performing. I created this video before knowing I would find someone to collaborate in my project, therefore it was my first tryout of what to project in some of the pieces. In this video I used some pictures and animations to tell the story and depict some of the feelings, motives and emotions the composer portrays in the composition. We went through listening the entire piece, meanwhile I was explaining her the story behind the composition and the why of the images, colors and animations I've chosen. I also shared audio recordings of the rest of the pieces of the concert and described each of them to Eman. I provided a list of feeling and emotions each piece had, along with a narrative of the story being told to help her understand the meaning of the pieces so she could create the animations. As important as that, we engaged in a personal conversation of our own lives, getting to know us each other better, know our background, past and how we got into arts. I can argue this meeting was the first immersive experience during the production process that we experienced as

creators of the show. It was a necessary process in order to create a fluid flow of ideas and begin the creative process. However, I must recognize that getting to know each other better was an intentional act from my part. After many years performing with small music ensembles, I've realized of the importance of getting to know the real human behind the instrument, because this is the only way possible to create a real connection with that performer, ultimately resulting in a more profound and honest way of creating music, because it becomes easier to connect with your partner if there's an extra layer of intimacy and respect that comes as the result of this connection. The first conversation with Eman was also our first moment of empathy, since we were honest with each other and open enough to share some personal experiences, like the one of being migrants and from different cultures, and also discovering that we both use arts to express ourselves in ways we can't do it in the everyday life and as tool to connect with others. This created an interesting energy between us, making the process very organic and building confidence in us. This definitely set the bases on how the project developed, because we were able to create a deeper connection than just two unknown strangers working on a project only for a grade or money.

After a couple of meeting and conversations with Eman, we decided that it was better to keep the essence of the message for each piece but translate them into a topic with which the audience might feel familiar with. So, what could

be an appropriate topic to represent, given the place and time of the performance? If art in itself is always about meaning, how can we create meaning with all these tools and deliver the right message to the audience?

After a while, the idea switched into creating a more social art activist performance in the style of Boal's participatory theatre.¹⁰ The goal was to create a concert that vividly reflects and reenacts how migrants are often mistreated and dehumanized in this world, and to represent this suffering using classical music, acting, visual elements, space, and lights. For this purpose, I chose to perform pieces of music, as well as collect poems and pictures from different parts of the world to represent the idea of migration. This will be further explained later in the next section. The intention was to create a unified and comprehensive message with all the elements involved in the performance so that each of them was in conversation with the other but tuned in the same frequency so that wherever the audience decided to look, the message and feelings they got were the same.

Thinking back on this decision, and particularly why it appealed to me so much, I think it had to do with my inner desires of bringing arts to people and

¹⁰ Boal and his "theater of the oppressed" used theater to empower and create awareness in the community. He saw and understood theater as a play where normal people, not necessarily trained in art, could use it as a vehicle to express social discontent or navigate through the social system, where they could freely declare some of the problems they lived in and possibly find a solution for them.

making it accessible to everybody. But it also had to do with my own political opinion about the topic and my responsibility as an artist to use the art as a medium with which to express these struggles. On this topic, Jacques Attali mentions “musicians see society in a political light. They speak of society and against it” (12). At the same time, “immersive practice harnesses the lasting ephemerality of performance as an artistic medium of expression” (Machon, 43). I found in “US” the perfect stage to voice this social drama that our society, and especially the U.S. is experiencing today. A drama that is being widely covered in media, but whose coverage seems to focus more on the political lens rather than the humanistic lens and all the layers this includes.

Working with Salvador Garcia as the actor also added an extra layer of immersion to the performance and to the development of the creative process. While he is a US citizen, his family comes from Mexico and has lived there as well, hence he also knows what is to be a migrant. As someone who has lived next to the US-Mexico border most of his lifetime, he has experienced and seen the migration struggle throughout his life which added an extra layer of realism to the interpretation of his character. While he is not a professional actor, as a musician he is well trained on how to get to the meaning out of a piece and express it, which I think he was able to use quite well during the performance. During the first meetings, I shared with him the poems he was going to be reciting and explaining the performance. I provided him a background for each of

the poem, why I choose them and how they fit within the performance. Thanks to this he was able to visualize how the stage was going to be used, long time before we could do a rehearsal on the theater, and the why of the pieces and animations done by Eman. I also recited the poems to him a couple of times to show him what character I envisioned each poem should have. Based on my interpretation he started developing his own version of the poems. However, to enhance his acting, we asked the advice of Prof Anne Quackenbush who is an experienced actor to help Salvador perform. She taught Salvador how to play with his movements, body and space to create more drama and realism in the performance.

One way in which Salvador shaped the performance and my vision of it, were his suggestions on how to use some of the props. My idea was that he held a notebook throughout the performance, where he would read the poems from. Salvador suggested he could use the book as a tool to engage the audience, by choosing random member of the audience and ask them questions like where were they from? How long they have been in College Station? What did they miss more from their places? Etc. and writing down the answers on the notebook. This would serve to plant the idea that we are all migrants in different ways. It was also Salvador's idea to buy a rosary to use in one of the pieces, and pray while using it, something it vividly reflected his own personal

engagement and experience with Catholicism, adding another layer of reality to the performance of his character.

Every part of the concert had to be some type of performance, starting with the name. I wanted a name that could insinuate a double meaning to let the people play around with it in their minds in regard to what the concert was about. At the same time, the title had to reflect the message of the performance. After discussing it with the people involved, we decided to call it “US”. This word reflected the message of the performance because we wanted to show that we are all migrants in this world, no matter where we come from, hence this sounded like an inclusive word to use to represent it. At the same time, we knew some readers would perceive and understand it as U.S.= United States, because of the place where the performance was being held. Also, the topic itself is being widely covered by the news agencies across the country. Throughout the performance, some of the images included the U.S. flag and the border topic. This was something I confirmed by talking with some friends after the performance that mentioned feeling lost at the beginning when trying to pinpoint the meaning. But everything was clear for them after the performance was over. One of them mentioned, “I thought it was the United States in the beginning, but after I while I realized it was about us, not the U.S.” I can argue that the title also performed by itself, achieving its goal and contributing to the message of the concert. This is another of the characteristics of immersive

theater Machon mentions: “You will be aware that the marketing language used is evocative of the mystery surrounding the event, perhaps similar to that of secret societies” (54).

By publicizing this show as an immersive/interactive classical music concert and inviting people who don't normally attend either classical music concerts or immersive/interactive experiences, I assumed most people would come to the performance thinking they were attending a traditional classical music concert, meaning they were coming to listen and enjoy some live music while sitting comfortably in a chair. After speaking with some of the audience at the end of the performance I found that this was quite true.

2.4 The performance

The performance began in the lobby, not on the stage as would normally happen in a traditional classical music concert. While every day we begin to see more pre-concert performances taking place in the lobby, they usually include an interview with the composer, artist, or conductor, or a small ensemble playing a couple of pieces before the concert to create the mood and atmosphere, I decided to play with the pre-concert idea in a different way, breaking from the traditional method of performing classical music.

First, I wanted to debunk the idea of spatial separation between the audience and the performers. I believe the spatial separation can be created either visually, in terms of costume and lighting, or spatially, in terms of physical space where the artist and audience access through different doors, creating a social separation from the beginning, that affects the process of the entire performance. For this purpose, Salvador and I intentionally waited outside the theatre, in the lobby along with the audience. We wanted to have time to possibly start a conversation with an unknown member of the audience, to pretend we were just other spectators. This is another of Machon's characteristics: "you have been placed in a context where the performance already begun" (54).

I also wanted to begin cultivating an element of what Victor Turner calls *communitas*, the idea of a ritual where we all are interconnected and participating at the same time of something larger than ourselves. That we all are the same, audience and performers, without one being more important than the other, both just parts of a bigger machine or speech, in this case being part of creating awareness about a social issue such as migration.

To me, it was clear that if I wanted to have the audience attending this specific performance to feel that the artist is a human like them, first, the costume would play a significant role. Also, the costume needed to reflect the

topic of the concert, which was “migrants”. Therefore, I needed to find a way to look like a student but with some characteristics of a migrant. It was important that we didn’t stand out from the crowd in order to fit with the concert’s aesthetic and message. Both of us needed to dress according to the message explained before.

To achieve this purpose, we did research on how migrants usually dressed and what elements they have in common, by comparing pictures from the internet and newspapers. Here we discovered a common trend of colours normally used by migrants: Blue, Red and Yellow. Also, jeans seemed to be predominant. Then, analyzing how students and faculty at A&M dress, we found that these were also clothes and colours commonly seen on campus. If this concert had taken place in another environment or setting, let’s say for example a nice theatre in downtown Houston where the expected audience would have been middle- and upper-class working people arriving very well dressed, then the costume would have been completely different to be able to adapt and mix with their style, in order to create the same perception.

Once the visual separation imposed by the costume was cleared, the next thing to erase was the physical spatial separation. While in a normal concert setting, as explained before, the audience and the performers never see or interact with each other before the performance, I wanted to create an

interaction with the audience throughout the entire experience. For this purpose, we tried to talk to some of the attendees and pretend we were also just members of the audience attending the performance.

When the main doors opened, each audience member received a booklet with the lyrics of a Mexican folk piece named "*La Llorona*", with an inscription that read "*And you can sing too*". The people didn't know at this moment that we were going to have a procession inside the stage, the moment when they were going to be invited to sing the piece along with Salvador.

Candles were also given to each member of the audience at the beginning of the performance, but no instructions were given, so they could choose what to do with them. The idea was to let the audience decide what the candles symbolized during the performance and to use them as they wanted. Here, we noticed some people lit their candles, presumably after watching some of the candles lit up throughout the stage, while others waited until the moment of the procession.

Salvador and I entered the stage along with the audience and stayed with them until the beginning of the show. This was a way to humanize ourselves and erase or at least soften any boundaries between us, to begin breaking the idea that an artist is a type of superior human being. But also, it was done as part of

the aesthetics of the performance. Since the concert was about migrants, I wanted to show from the beginning that we (the performers) were also migrants, that was the purpose of the concert, to make the audience feel like migrants if they were not already aware of this reality. At this moment of the performance, I expected most of the audience would feel lost or uncertain of what was going to happen next, but at the same time alert to their surroundings and peers who they may have not known at the moment. This resembled the type of feelings the migrants experience throughout the journey that I wanted the audience to experience.



Figure 2. Entrance Picture.

The first thing the audience encountered was an image of a woman with a shirt saying: birthplace: earth, Race: Human, Politics: Freedom, Religion: Love.

The reason for choosing this image¹¹ as the visual welcome to the concert was to catch the audience members' attention and create a sense of mystery about what was going to

¹¹ Figure 2 "May Day Immigrants and Workers March DC 2" by Stephen Melkisetian is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

happen. Until this moment, the audience was not aware of the topic of the performance. There was nothing describing the story they were about to experience before entering the theatre space. Not knowing what was going to happen, I assumed was going to make our audience more attentive and receptive to the plot. It was also going to help in creating emotions, like uncertainty which was crucial at the beginning to make the audience feel one of the most basic emotions migrants experience in real life when they leave their homes to go towards the unknown, with only the premise that they will arrive at their destination. In the same way, the premise for the audience was that they were going to see a concert that provided a sort of immersive experience, but they were not aware of the level and type of immersion and interaction they were going to be exposed to.

When the audience entered the stage, they entered a different type of space than what most of them would have expected to encounter, a stage with no chairs or any clear signal of what to do. The stage was illuminated with soft lights at that moment and adorned with small LED candles spread throughout the room that were intended to provide a sense of both contemplation and mystery at the same time, all working towards the goal of creating uncertainty as a first emotion.

One of the main principles for this performance was to allow the audience to move freely around the space. This is called “free roaming.” Seats in the theatre are the most basic and successful way of restricting audiences’ movement and behaviour. The power they exercise over us is strong and add to the expected behaviour when attending a classical music concert. To some extent, seats also fostered the tradition. Hence, if we wanted to achieve a free-roaming experience, removing the seats was going to be necessary to achieve this goal.

Once the audience entered the stage, they were welcomed by a space with no seats. By removing them, the audience would first, have to decide where to place themselves, decide if they wanted to be sitting, laying on the floor, standing, or walking around. They pointed out that they were surprised there were no seats, so they didn’t know what to do in the beginning. “I even came to the show with a nice dress and high heels thinking I was just going to sit and listen to some music” one of the audience members mentioned later to me. This is another of Machon’s immersive theater characteristics: “you have little or no idea what you are about to experience” (54). This exemplifies exactly the type of disruption I wanted to create for the audience when entering the stage for the first time. The uncertainty that the audience felt at that moment, was intentionally created because this is one of the feelings a migrant who must flee from home feels. We wanted to let the audience experience this kind of emotion from the

first moment and all throughout the performance to foster a sense of empathy with the topic and message presented. Feeling lost and not sure what to do play an important role in this part of the story, to make sure we feel like migrants from the very start. This is again another of Machon's characteristics: "you are excited and a bit scared" (54), "you are physically surrounded of another world" (55). I must recognize that the audience may not have been aware of this correlation during the performance, but it perfectly served the intention of feeling similar to a migrant, because as such you are not totally aware of what is going to happen or is happening at the moment in your surroundings.

I wanted to recreate an Imax theatre-like experience, where the audience sits in front of a huge curved screen that helps in the immersive perception of the movie. Therefore, having a small screen wouldn't have been as effective as a big screen, considering the size of the theatre. For this purpose, a big screen, almost the size of one of the walls was used, along with two smaller curved screens placed at the sides, to create a sense of involvement. However, while rehearsing the projections, Dr. Hwaryoung noticed that using the entire big screen was going to be too massive for the size of the space and would distract the audience too much from other elements happening during the performance. If we wanted to keep the multimodal idea, it was important to be sure that none of the elements competed with the other, because by doing so it meant all the attention was going to be driven to that specific medium.

Since we intentionally designed where the focal point of every moment should have been, having a massive focal point would have harmed the success of the experience since we wanted the audience to be free to focus on whatever they wanted. Since I was going to be performing some of the pieces in front of the screens, it was important that the guitar and my silhouette didn't feel too minimized in front of the animations. This is why we decided not to use the entire size of the big screen, choosing a projection size that was more appropriate for this purpose.

Also, the use of photography played an important role in the transmission of the message. At the opposite side where the screens were placed, there were 7 photographs hanging to help create the 360° experience. Here I choose to collect pictures of migrants throughout the world, to visually tell the story of many of them. I decided to choose images that would represent the struggle migrants suffer throughout their journey. Images that would have an immediate impact on the viewer and a clear message too. The images would also have to depict people from around the world, rather than from only one culture, to represent the idea that we are all migrants. The images did not perform only as a commodity¹²

¹² By commodity I mean like an accessory or something that functions merely as an adornment without real significance or importance.

to the performance. The secondary purpose of using them was not only to help tell the story, but to reenact one of the most famous rituals of the Catholic church, known as the “stations of the cross.”¹³ While I was aware not all the audience attending the performance might be Catholic, it is one of the most well-known rituals. Therefore, adding it into the performance was a good way of having the audience identify with the mood and message of it. Also, to add to this solemn layer, there were candles spread throughout the room, in an attempt to symbolize the religious environment, but also to create a sense of respect and attention to the performance.

Since the performance involved the entire stage, with no separation of the audience, I assumed that due to the way the stage was set up, with the massive curved screen in the front wall, people would gather and place themselves in front of it at the beginning. Because of this, we decided that the first spotlight where the actor would be performing, which also marked the beginning of the show, was going to be in the middle of the crowd, to surprise everyone but at the same time disrupt any expectation. This would also help foster the idea, that this was not a usual performance, or at least not the type most people are used to attending. I assumed that creating the sensation that this was an unusual

¹³ This is ritual practiced during Easter time. What Catholics reenact here is the journey of Jesus Christ from his judgement, the crucifixion up to the tomb. The ritual involves 14 stations. In each one of them praying and singing happens. This ritual may take place either inside a church or temple, as well as on the street. People would walk from stage to stage, following the priest who leads the group.

performance would result in more awareness on the part of the audience throughout the performance, contributing to keeping their attention the entire time, the fact that there were many things happening most of the time notwithstanding. The performance was designed to persuade the audience to move their attention from one point to another. In this way, the audience would also be migrating with their eyes as well as their bodies.

We expected that the audience would remain together instinctively, despite the fact there were no chairs. Because of this, we had planted audience members who were asked to take different positions in the stage and move around, to show others they were also able to do it. By doing this, I assumed some members were going to be more adventurous and move to other places throughout the performance once realizing this was allowed too. As a result, I saw some members sitting and standing at times, and taking different positions during the progression of the concert.

To vividly represent migration in this small performance space, I based the concept on the idea of a cycle. A migrant departs his/her place and begins a journey where experiences and emotions are collected, and new relationships and connections are created in the path before arriving at the final destination. However, the migrant doesn't really change his or her essence. He or she continues being the same human with desires and aspirations but is now

carrying all these experiences. The way I chose to represent this process throughout the performance was to have every piece and poem performed in a different area of the stage to represent this journey, but intentionally the first and last piece, or poem, were performed in the same initial spot, to represent the end of the cycle. This was also represented more symbolically in the music. The first piece of the concert began with an open note E, and the last one ended with the same note. While the audience may not have been aware of this feature, these were artistic decisions to keep the symbolism and message in the performance. Most likely only a trained musician would have been able to identify it. In my personal point of view, this added a new and different layer of the multimodal experience. Normally this is thought of in terms of spatial distribution, where many things are happening at the same time, so you choose where to focus, but by adding this new element we can also talk about playing with the sonic layer of the performance, requiring attention to detail by the audience. In the same way that a trained musician goes to a concert and enjoy the harmonies, dynamics, tempos, and interpretation, this addition added to this layer of enjoyment, intended for this type of audience. This means you could either focus on the projections, the actor, or the music and its inner construction to understand this symbolism.

As lights were dimmed, a spotlight came on, pointing at the middle of the stage, where there was a book lying in the floor. It is no secret that the lights

enhance the experience of a performance. It can provide different moods, emotions, specify focal points and also guide the audience through the performance. It was important to plan and rehearse in order to synchronize every change of light, and meticulously choose colours and the intensities of them to achieve the desired purpose. For this, we defined a certain set of lights and colour for the beginning and end of the performance, so instead of having a host or audio recording announcing that the show is about to begin or has ended, we wanted to show this through the lights and let the audience infer these cues.

This was the cue for Salvador to begin his performance. He walked to the spotlight, grabbed the book and began reading a text I wrote that goes like this:

This is my story, but it could be your story. I have a name, but for many, I am just an object, a number, a discomfort, a menace, a soulless man, a weird animal that looks like a human, an animal with no rights, an animal with no feelings, an animal without a family. I am a possession of others. I am just a good or merchandise to be traded, and some feel they have power over me to do with me whatever they want.

All of those who think like that about me, forget that I am a man. A man with a name. A man with a heart, feelings, dreams and desires. A man with a family. A man who wants to be loved and accepted by others. Yes, I am an animal, an animal called human... like you and me.

But, what did I do to deserve be treated like this? That's the same question I asked myself everyday.... I am just a human like you, who has dreams and goals, but who unfortunately was born in the wrong place of the world, and found myself forced to leave, and leave behind everything I love, my friends, family, daughter, son, wife, pets and food, to try to get a better life. I am just trying to recover some of what has been taken away or what I've never had. I just want to recover my humanity.

I wrote this text to exemplify the objectification of migrants that happens in our society and is magnified through the media. We are bombarded every day by the media about the migrant crisis throughout the world. It has become so normal in our lives that we tend to forget they are people, humans like us with the same aspirations and desires in life. By having this text as the “official” beginning of the performance, I expected to start cultivating the concept and aesthetic of the performance in the audience, about migrants, empathy and humanization. Another concept I had in mind while writing the text was Karen Shimakawa’s figure of National Abjection (2002). This refers to the process by which Asian Americans are excluded from the American imaginary and become impossible to integrate within the American culture. They end up living in a liminal space where they don’t belong either to their culture or to (white) American culture. I think the way that many migrants are portrayed and perceived through the media are as weird beings that do not belong to the place they want to access nor to the place they come from.

The concert was conceptualized in a very theatrical way, in terms of light, space and speech. Since immersion was part of the performance, this was the way to get the people immersed in the story, if they were not already starting to get immersed due to the environment. By opening the book and reading it aloud, I expected the audience would understand that a story was about to be told, almost like when parents read a book to their kids.

By having the audience and performers in close proximity to each other, I wanted to play with Edward T. Hall's idea of social distance, a concept that Paris and Hill use to exemplify some of the techniques applied in the realms of performances. This is a safe distance where people can clearly see and listen to each other without much effort. Therefore, it would add to creating a sense of community and belonging to the same place, which was one of the goals behind the message. While normally having people too close to each other is perceived as a crowded space (Paris and Hill, 12), if properly designed, the concert wouldn't create this perception but rather the sense of community and belonging. Also, for me as a performer and for Salvador too, having an audience around us was going to allow us to connect with them more easily, being able to feel their energy and reactions, that would shape my guitar playing and Salvador's speech intention and speed. Once again, all of these would add to the sense of liveness that I wanted to achieve throughout the performance. And at the same time, it provided a form of involvement with the audience at every moment, since our performance became moulded at every minute, based on the energy experimented at all moments. While this is also true when you perform as a musician in front of an audience,¹⁴ I expected I was going to feel more

¹⁴ As a performer, playing in public is always a unique experience, no matter the place. While all our movements are rehearsed and controlled at every moment, and we draw in our minds the shape of the music, knowing beforehand where a climax or resting point should be, the truth is that they are still malleable and change from performance to performance. The audience and the

confident and connected with the audience. Hence, because of this proximity, my tempo, dynamics and expressions were going to be more heavily shaped than in a traditional configuration of playing.

After the first narration, the spotlight went off and the projection of the animation began, with me sitting in front of the screen playing the first piece. While I must admit most of the pieces I played were pieces I already had in my repertoire, there were others I learned specifically for the purposes of this concert. Since the topic was migration, I wanted to show it in the music also, but maybe in a more rhetorical than objective way. For this purpose, I decided to play music from different composers and countries around the world to hint that as people migrate, music also migrates from country to country. I played music from Russia, Spain, Brazil and Mexico and from different styles too, ranging from romanticism to contemporary. All these pieces were either composed for the classical guitar or transcribed for it.

The reason behind choosing the classical guitar for this performance has two answers. First, because it is my main musical instrument that I've been playing for years and I was going to be the only musician on stage, but second and more important, is because the classical guitar is a migrant instrument. It is

environment also affects our playing. In general terms, no playing is the same as the other. There are always at least slight changes that make them all different in between.

the result of many instruments such as the lute and vihuela that came into Spain thanks to the migrations where it finally acquired the shape of the guitar we know today. And since its conception, it is an instrument that has migrated throughout the entire world, becoming so well-known and easy to find almost everywhere. For me, the guitar is the perfect example of migration and of a migrant, therefore using it in this performance added another value or quality that fit with the message and topic of the concert. It is also true that like the guitar, many more instruments have migrated from their original places, but something quite noticeable about the guitar is the fact that it can be found in many different social classes. Many different people from low to high social classes use, learn and play this instrument, just in the same way as migrants can belong to any social class in the society. It is also not a musical instrument strictly associated with one particular music genre or place, but rather is an instrument with so many faces, facets, shapes, and colours. It is a diverse instrument just like migrants who come from all around the world. I found so much symbolism in using this instrument in this performance because it fits very well the concept, message and idea of the performance.

As stated earlier, following the tradition or canon it is one of the most important values within the western classical music, reason why I wanted to respect the meaning and message of the music I performed in this concert. While the entire performance was based on a social issue such as the migrant

crisis already explained and none of the pieces I played were written by the composers as a statement or depiction of such problematic, I prefer to keep the meaning and essence of the pieces and use it to tell this story. The way I achieved this was by relating each piece to the plot and matching their character and mood with the one in the performance.

The first piece was *Introduction and Vivace* by the Russian composer *Nikita Koshkin*. This is a two-part piece as the title suggests which was written for a guitar competition, therefore it doesn't have a specific message or meaning, rather is a sort of exploration and mix of genres and techniques by the composer. However, the character of the movements matched perfectly the image we wanted to depict at the beginning of the performance. The piece begins with a suspense-like mood, followed by rapid scales and repetitive figures. In the same way, the animation that accompanied this piece evoked that image of suspense, followed by illustrations of someone trying to flee from a war conflict. The second part of the piece is march style, full of rapid scales, loud chords and with a climax building towards the end. This matched with the video that illustrated the characters fleeing from the war, in the middle of bombs along with other survivors.

While my playing was happening, an animation was being projected onto the screens. The animations were created by designing a mood board based on

the emotions of the piece. The animations included symbols such as the US flag, fighter jets and war, which are well known in U.S. society thanks to the media coverage of national and world conflicts. The animation was in fact based on a real story, of a relative of Eman Al-Zubeidi. While her relative's story took place many years ago while fleeing from Palestine, we basically migrated the story to the present historical context, using symbols and images as mentioned before, that properly reflected this time. Having a real story animated, helped contribute to the idea of the context and humanization throughout the performance, that was important to keep all the time to convey the message. But it also helped achieve a sense of liveness. By liveness, I mean the idea of feeling and being present. I wanted to get the audience to feel as if they were inside the story, by having everything happen around them so that they could interact in any way they wanted.

Throughout my playing, Salvador started looking for random people of the audience to talk to. He asked them questions like, where were they from, how long they have been in town, what do they miss most from their home, and how they felt about the performance. At the same time, he was writing some of this information down in the book. The idea behind this was to start planting the idea in the audience that they are migrants too, by having them say where they come from, explaining why they left, and realizing what they miss the most. These are common questions migrants share while travelling to their destination, to find

support and empathize with others. This was a constant all through the concert. Every time I was playing the guitar accompanied with animation, Salvador would be choosing random people and asking these types of questions to write in his notebook. He would also take the time to ask them if they could help by reading part of a poem, which would happen later in the performance. Intentionally, we tried to split the poem between people from different races and nationalities, so when the moment of reading arrived, we would have different accents resonating on the stage. This was intended to exemplify and demonstrate how we migrate, and that even in this small space we find people from all over the world, pursuing their dreams and desires just as any other migrant in this world.

Between the first and second piece, Salvador recited a poem. All the poems presented during the performance were either written by migrants or talk about it or about the dehumanization aspect of life. Each one of them had different moods and they were all selected according to the climactic intention that we wanted to show at different moments during the performance, but at the same time, that reflected the mood of the next piece.

The first poem was "*Man*" by Jorge Debravo (Costa Rica). This poem describes the man as a construction of body and emotions, not as a super human or God, and demands for equality such as food and house, which followed the mood and plot of the concert at this moment..

The second piece, *Junto al Generalife* by Joaquin Rodrigo was contrast to the first one in terms of character. This piece depicts a palace in Granada, Spain that it served as the summer palace of the Nasrid rulers. It is surrounded by beautiful gardens and fountains. It is a restful and peaceful place which is what the music evokes in the melody and harmonies. This also matched the plot because at this moment we wanted to represent the momentary peace a person finds after leaving the conflict and forgetting for a moment the horrendous past.

While designing this concert, I was advised by a fellow artist, Dr. Joe Williams, that in this type of concert, less is more for the audience at times. Since the first piece and text were both long in duration, I preferred to choose a poem that was short in contrast with the first intervention. Another reason was its character. The first piece ended with an outrageous character that filled the entire stage, hence I felt the text matched that character. Salvador was instructed to perform it with a strong voice in a demanding way but leaning to a more passive attitude towards the end of the poem, to align with the character of the second piece, and serve as a transition between the pieces.

The first two pieces of the concert were accompanied by animations. However, while the first piece was played in front of the screen, for the second, I moved to play in a spot inside the audience. This had two intentions. First, to have for the first time in the performance the musician playing within the same

personal and social space as the audience in order to further humanize me in their perception. The idea was that they could listen to my breathing and see all my movements and expression while playing, which is one of the first experiences we lose in a normal concert setting. While we may be able to see some of these reactions at a longer distance, having them performed in front of you at a very close distance creates a more personal connection with the artist. It is a vivid way of reminding us of the human aspect of the performers. The second intention was to add to the multifocal experience of the concert. By performing inside the audience, they needed to choose between watching me play or watching at the animation projected in front of them. Also, I intentionally positioned myself with my back to most of the audience, automatically excluding many of them from seeing my reactions and playing. This was intended to arouse the curiosity of those who couldn't fully see me, who may have felt incited to move to another place where they could see me. But it was also done to create a more personal connection with those seating in front of me. In this sense, Adam Alston points out that immersive theater experiences can foster the idea of "narcissistic participation" where the audience members, especially those who attend the same performance more than one time, become a type of entrepreneurial participants who want to enhance their experience more, by not following the groups at times or just wandering around the stage to see what they can find by themselves (Alston, 10). Like most of the authors, I don't think

this is a problem; this type of participant gets to boost their experience at a higher level in comparison with the rest who are less adventurous.

The animation used in this part of the performance involved recording real dancers. For this purpose, we worked with two dancers, who improvised based on the music. Their movements were tracked using sensors and computer-based tracking software and then adding effects to them. While the audience may not have been aware of this fact while watching the animation, the important thing was to keep the liveness and humanization, as mentioned before, that can only be honestly and purely transmitted by having real humans as part of the entire process.

The third piece of the concert was conceived as a duet, between me and the actor. Along with my playing, Salvador recited the poem “*A song*” by Ernesto and Vicente (Central Americans) which is written as a questioning to God on why he allows so many suffering for the migrants. There was no projection for this piece, rather, lights were used interactively to depict the poem being performed. In this piece, the actor was sitting on the floor and praying next to candles and a rosary. He grabbed the rosary and started writing a poem in his book, while I was playing behind him. What I pretended to represent, was as if the music I was playing was, in fact, coming out of his head. *Usher’s Waltz* by Nikita Koshkin is based on Edgar Allan Poe’s tale of *The Fall of the House of*

Usher. The piece depicts the mysterious house of Usher, where crazy things happen. Usher can be heard improvising with the guitar, doing crazy scales and sounds. The waltz is also distorted in comparison to how a waltz should sound to reaffirm the sense of craziness and mysteriousness throughout the tale. This mood matched with the character of the poem, full of outrageous statements, with a desperate and hopeless character to describe the feelings of a migrant who experience negative situations throughout the journey. There were a lot of references to God, so every time the word "Lord" was mentioned, lights would illuminate the stage, varying the colour and intensity according to the mood of the phrase.

In the next phase of the concert Salvador invited the audience to join us by saying the following statement:

Every day, thousands of people around the world have to leave their houses. They are displaced. Some by their own will, but others because they have no choice. When I see these pictures (pointing at the pictures hanging around the stage) I see hundreds of interrupted or incomplete dreams. I only see good people trying to improve their lives and make at least their world better. For them, I want to pay respect right now and invite you to pay tribute with me, to all those who couldn't finish their journey or are doing it right now. Because today they are, but tomorrow anyone of us could be. Please, feel free to sing with me in this ceremony.

The audience followed Salvador and me while we sing in front the pictures of migrants that were hung around the stage. This was the representation of "the stations of the cross" discussed earlier. We chose fragments of the Mexican piece "La Llorona" (the weeping woman), to sing for

every picture. Also, people were free to sing along with the actor, as each one was handed a copy of the lyrics at the beginning of the concert. Each of the pictures was matched with the verses of the song that most related to it to add to the character and emotions represented in them. Each piece was illuminated with a spotlight as we sang to them, unveiling each of them one by one. The way the concert was designed in terms of building climax, was also conceived in a different than a traditional music concert. Usually, in classical music concerts, the last piece tends to be the more dramatic, virtuosic, well known and captivating piece. Of course, there are exceptions to the rule, but this tends to be the typical construction. I wanted to create a performance that felt like a flow of energy. Building tension and relaxation at different moments. However, I did visualize a climax point which was the procession ritual. This was the fourth piece out of six in the performance. To me, this piece represented the strongest and clearest message. This was the moment I planned would soften the soul of the people and help erase any unwillingness to participate in the performance and be more open and receptive to it. Since this piece involved having the audience move around the stage, accompanying the actor singing a song if they wanted to, and following him through the procession in front of each of the pictures, people would have already been out of their comfort zone if they already had one. They would have already been mixed with other participants they didn't know, allowing themselves to more interaction.

The song was performed in this order and with the following images:

“La Llorona” – Oscar Chavez versión



*Ay de mí, Llorona, Llorona
Llorona, llévame al río
Ay de mí, Llorona, Llorona
Llorona, llévame al río*

Figure 3. Theater picture 1.

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*Tápame con tu rebozo,
Llorona
Porque me muero de frío
Tápame con tu rebozo,
Llorona
Porque me muero de frío*

Figure 4. Theater picture 2.

¹⁵ Figure 4 "Kibati villagers" by Julien Harneis is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

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*Todos me dicen el
negro, Llorona
Negro, pero cariñoso
Todos me dicen el
negro, Llorona
Negro, pero cariñoso*

*Yo soy como el chile
verde Llorona
Picante, pero sabroso
Yo soy como el chile
verde Llorona
Picante, pero sabroso*

Figure 5. Theater picture 3.

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*Dicen que no tengo duelo,
Llorona
Porque no me ven llorar.
Dicen que no tengo duelo,
Llorona
Porque no me ven llorar.*

*Hay muertos que no hacen
ruido, Llorona
Y es más grande su penar.
Hay muertos que no hacen
ruido, Llorona
Y es más grande su penar.*

Figure 6. Theater picture 4.

¹⁶ Figure 5 "Bogota desplazados" by Trevor Schwellnus is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

¹⁷ Figure 6 by Frank C. Muller is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0



Figure 7. Theater picture 5.

*No sé qué tienen las flores,
Llorona
Las flores del campo santo
No sé qué tienen las flores,
Llorona
Las flores del campo santo*

*Que cuando las mueve el
viento, Llorona
Parecen que están llorando
Que cuando las mueve el
viento, Llorona
Parecen que están llorando*



Figure 8. Theater picture 6

*Yo te soñaba dormida,
Llorona
Dormida te estabas quieta
Yo te soñaba dormida,
Llorona
Dormida te estabas quieta*

¹⁸ Figure 7 "There are no illegal children!" by Roi Boshi is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

¹⁹ Figure 8 by Mstyslav Chernov is licensed by CC BY-SA 4.0



*Pero en llegando el olvido,
Llorona
Soñé que estabas despierta
Pero en llegando el olvido,
Llorona
Soñé que estabas despierta*

Figure 9. Theater picture 7. Reprinted with permission of Omar Castelazo.

After finishing the procession, we asked people to look for a partner who you didn't previously know and share your own personal migrant story. It was important to do it until this moment because we used all the performance to create the mood and plant the idea that we are all migrants, no matter if you don't come from a different country. Also, we needed to build the interaction little by little, a thing we did by talking to random people during the performance and by playing next to them, trying to break that virtual separation between audience and artist that dehumanized them. We assumed that since the conditions were already built and established, this was the moment when people would have been more receptive to participate and share their personal story with an unknown person.

The next part of the concert was to have the audience read the poem “*We depart*” by Issa Majluf (Lebanese) that Salvador handed out to some of the people he spoke with during the performance. The poem talks about the reasons on why some migrants leave their homes and the hope to find a new home where they could find again themselves. While they were reading it, I was playing a piece as background music. However, this piece was intentionally chosen because it holistically represented this moment. The piece is from the Brazilian composer Baden Powell and is titled “Waltz with no name”. This is a very intimate, introspective and sad piece at moments that added to the mood of the moment. Having people from different nationalities and accents read the poem, as mentioned earlier, was a way of personifying the title of the piece, as the readers, such as the migrants, have no name for most of the audience. They are unknown people. We can see their faces, watch them in front of us and interact with them, but at the same time, don’t know who they really are or even their name. This is the same as with migrants. We see and listen about them every day in the news, but we don’t know their names and reality, remaining totally unknown to all of us.

Thereupon, the actor would head towards the same spot as the beginning of the performance and read aloud the last poem “*Evicted is the one who has to leave, to live another different culture*” by Leon Gieco (Argentina). This poem also depicts some of the insight feelings felt as a migrant and what they miss

most, but with the hope to find a new and better future, to call the new place their home.. The idea of starting and ending the performance in the same spot is to represent the journey of a migrant, one where the migrant leaves home, collect new experiences, meet new people and ultimately reached the utopia, which is the final destination, but no matter how much we travelled, we continue being the same person, only loaded with new experiences. This symbolizes the end of a cycle and the beginning of a new one, by returning to the same spot.

Once finished, Salvador closed the book and left it in the same spot as where he found it. This was a representation of the end of the journey and cycle for his character. Then, the last projection began with me playing the last piece, also in the same spot as the beginning, marking the end of my cycle as a migrant in this story too. The last piece, Asturias by Isaac Albeniz, depicts the fight and clash of cultures between the moors who already habited Spain and the Catholicism that was brought and impose in Spain. The first part is a toccata style, that represents this drama with a fast melody in crescendo accompanied by heavy chords insinuating almost a battle. The second part in contrast represent the Moorish culture with a recitative and hopeful but languish character. The piece ends with a chords progression that depicts the idea that even after being conquered by a new culture, the Moorish essence still remains. I used this piece to exemplify the journey of a migrant, that even after too many

suffering and conflicts, they get into a different culture and accept it as theirs, but in essence they will always belong to where they come from.

The concert ended with the lights off for a moment, to give a sense of introspection, almost a meditative state in the audience, to give them time to think about the message of the performance and embody it.

3. CHAPTER III

SURVEY RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

3.1 Survey Results

At the end of the performance a survey was handed out to the audience members where they answered questions based on the experience to get an insight of their own experience and enjoyment, understand what the performance meant to them and also to review the effectiveness of the immersive and interactive techniques implemented. The sample consist of 42 participants. I wanted to see if their answers matched my own expectations as creator of the performance, but also to demonstrate the effectiveness of these techniques that are widely discussed by the different authors cited in this thesis, as an effective tool to enhance the audience experience and create empathy.

In term of the overall audience experience, I expected the people would enjoy the performance a lot because of the topic, which is still a current topic today, the engaging visuals and activities we exposed them to. The surveys demonstrated that 95% of the participants did enjoy the experience. 30 attendees mentioned they would choose to attend an immersive/interactive concert like this one over a traditional classical music concert. Only 6 of them indicated to not have preference over one or the other and 5 would rather attend

a traditional classical music concert. While I think this represents a high percentage of the attendees indicating their inclination to an immersive/interactive performance, this data also shows that for people who is maybe use to attend traditional classical music performances, they are able to identify or experience the same type of enjoyment, I presumed this is because they are able to draw meaning out of both type of performances that make them enjoy equally any of the performances.

When asked what aspect of the performance boosted their enjoyment, overall the audience replied that the images made a big difference. They described the visuals as provoking and disturbing, giving them something to focus on and helping them understand the narrative. The images they argued were effective at evoking emotions and provided an extra layer of interest. I think this has to do with the fact that the images, either visual animations and pictures, provided a live and vivid depiction of the story being told with the music and the poems, hoarding their senses not giving a time for break, because everywhere they looked there were visual cues feeding the drama.

I also wanted to find out how the audience felt immersed during the performance. Some attendees mentioned that all the parts of the performance immersed them into the experience, making them feel present “as someone experiencing”, one person mentioned “I am always non-immersive, but this

performance brought me into it”, showing that the performance and all the resources used definitely fulfilled their purposes and proved to be effective. However, throughout the survey I also identified three different ways in which the people mentioned they felt immersed: a) physically immersed, b) immersive narrative and c) audience engagement. Here are some of the answers that demonstrate how they felt immersed in these different ways.

a) Physically immersed:

- Screens and pictures
- Moving in the space
- Not having seats
- Being able to walk around the space and be close to the performers
- Proximity between performers and audience

b) Immersive narrative:

- Felt privileged as an immigrant
- As an immigrant from Mexico, music gave me a sense of home
- Like physically traversing dangerous, life threatening border to find a life worth of being human
- Felt very connected to the performance. Reminded me of friends and loved ones
- Made me feel like if it was my story
- The actor made me feel immersed

c) Audience engagement

- Reading out loud the poem was engaging. Telling a neighbor your story
- Talking to other people
- Walking together felt a part of a thing

These answers demonstrate the different ways in which an immersive/interactive experience like US can operate in the mind of the audience. It serves to reaffirm that there are different layers of immersion and interaction that go beyond the surface of what we can see in the audience as performers. It also serves to demonstrate that while meaning it is always subjective in arts because it always depends on the viewer, through immersion and interaction it becomes easier to create and get a unified or more universal meaning to the art, making our message clearer and effective in comparison to other forms of performances.

When asked what their opinion and perception was of having the performers interacting and performing very close to them, overall the audience replied that they felt nervous at first, uneasy not knowing how to respond. However, as the performance developed, people mentioned to have felt very intimate which made them felt as being part of somethings. It felt “communal and tight knit” a participant replied. Another participant even mentioned that “up close and personal is what we need in this day in age of cellphone addition and insensitivity towards one another”, and more interesting for me was this answer by another participant: “felt slightly nervous but I believe it is important to feel uncomfortable with the topic”. These answers show the effectiveness of delivering the message of the performance but also of the great value interaction and proximity have during a performance. While the sense of community and

From this image that visually represents the statistic of which words were predominantly mentioned by the audience, we can infer that the main emotions experienced were: empathy, sadness, anger, hope, melancholy, belonging, homesick and community to mention a few. I did expect to get answers as empathy and sadness because they were part of planned set of emotions I intended to deliver, but I was surprised to find emotions such as homesick, belonging and community because they represent in my perception, more intimate, personal and deeper levels of humanity that I didn't anticipate the performance would create at such levels in many individuals. This demonstrates once again that the message of the performance was effective but also that the audience was able to feel as a migrant throughout the performance, as these are some of the same emotions a migrant experience. I think this image summarizes very well the main outcomes out of this performance, by proving that through immersion and interaction we can create empathy, resulting in a wide variety of feelings that come with it, making the experience as real as it gets, reaching what I would describe as "a type of utopic performance" where we can get the majority of the audience engage and effectively create a common meaning that they can experience. I think it challenges somehow the notion that the meaning resides only in the viewer, but rather shows that a clear meaning can come out of a performance and be as clear and objective as possible that is easily assimilated by the audience. I presumed it has to do also with the

cultivation of the sense of community, that allow the audience to massively engage in an idea and accept it as such without much hesitation.

One of the surveys was interesting because the person stated did not enjoyed the performance, did not feel immersed and even argued that the message of the performance was a very polarized point of view of the topic and didn't agree with it, to the point that felt annoyed with it, which shows that even by creating the appropriate conditions in a performance to send a message and engage the audience, it won't always be 100% effective.

I think the survey results prove the capabilities and overall effectiveness of immersion and interaction during a performance by showing that the vast majority of the attendees reacted positively and as expected to it, but at the same time it shows that for the more we try to engage an entire audience into our message, there will always be members who will not be as receptive and open as others to welcome the message, making immersive and interactive techniques useless in some situations.

The survey results also make question whether immersion and interaction merely boost what the people already feel and believe in, rather than creating new meaning when it doesn't exist already in the viewer, which seems to insinuate the negative reception by some of the attendees. I presumed that

immersion and interaction can't perform properly or as expected when the message we are trying to convey is not already cultivated in the individuals, because they are not in themselves ideologies, but rather tools to enhance the ideology already existing in the individuals. Therefore, we can't expect them to change or create meaning where it doesn't exist.

3.2 Conclusion

As of today, classical music is still a field marked by traditions and conventions that shape and dictate the way this music is supposed to be performed. Breaking or challenging these rules is a hard and difficult process for most performers due to many factors and is always a big concern for an entrepreneur artist who want to innovate or explore alternate ways of performing music, because of the value and extreme respect musicians are trained to devote to it To escape from its boundaries, means in a way to flee from the protection this tradition offer to its devotees and followers and embarking into an unknown place where you can be considered a rebel and where your knowledge and value might be put into question. On one side, there is always the risk of not being accepted by academia and other professionals of classical music, but on the other side, there is also a risk of not being accepted by traditional audiences who are used to the conventional way of performing classical music and may

find any innovation or addition a nonsense act or disrespectful to the music and its composers.

While exploring alternative ways of performing classical music my idea is not to challenge or undervalue the tradition. Instead, throughout this project, I realized and acknowledge that the tradition has an important value in preserving a historical memory of some of the values of the past society, but at the same time, it should be seen as a departing point towards new and different ways of performing music.

As a student and performer, I consider it is important to learn this tradition to better understand how this style of music has worked through centuries and to acquire this language as a part of our performance because these are colors and layers we can add to our own interpretation. However, as a young performer who has grown up in a society marked by technology and different social dramas, I think it is important to reconsider the use of the tradition and find new ways on how to perform and present this music, to fulfil our duty as artists to keep preserving it and bringing it closer to new audiences. This is where I think adding immersion and interaction into classical music concerts can play an important role in the preservation of classical music and cultivation of a new generation of audiences.

While the theater field has predominantly explored immersion and interaction in its performances, classical music seems to be way behind this exploration and still very attached to the tradition, which in my opinion, might be harming its development and exposure in this new century. The performance described above is my first attempt in adding immersion and interaction into a classical music concert. While there are many things to be improved, the outcomes taken from this performance point out that such techniques can enhance the classical music concert experience, especially for non-classical music attendees which was my main objective when creating this performance. The interdisciplinary approach proved to positively enhance the experience of the audience.

My own experience during the performance made me realize the value of using the space in different ways. I felt more easily connected with the audience in comparison when playing in a traditional setting. Being able to feel and hear the audience next to you, gives you an added layer of enjoyment and immersion as a performer. It reminds me of the sensation when playing with a chamber group, where you completely aware of your peers to create unity as a group to make music. I could feel and experience more vividly the energy of the audience, that shaped my playing throughout the performance. It was like doing chamber music but with the audience. While it is true that as musicians we always try to connect with the audience and receive their energy, I must say this

style of performing boosted my experience and also made me feel more comfortable while performing. More than my own experience, Eman stated she enjoyed participating in this project, because she was able to learn new things about music and art, but also because it was challenging and engaging to work with another artist and discover other ways in which she can use her own work that maybe did not dimension before. This project set a platform for her to explore new ways to develop her art. Salvador as well recalls the performance as a positive and enriching experience, not only because he was able to explore and engage with a different form of art, such as acting that was unknown for him, but also because it opened his eyes to new and different possibilities on how to make art and enhance his musicianship too. He also found out that because of the qualities of this performance, the immersion and interaction made him feel more comfortable at the stage. He enjoyed the proximity and categorized it as positive for his enjoyment and engaging during the performance, making it more enjoyable than other performances he has done before as a musician, even when performing a completely new role for him.

The free roaming experience provided in the performance was widely mentioned in the surveys as something positive that enhanced their experience. On one side, the ability to move around made the concert more engaging and comfortable. But on the other side, the free-roaming resulted in an excellent tool to exemplify the migration and the look to move freely around the world in a

small setting such as the Blackbox theatre, providing a vivid emotion and experience to the audience.

In terms of emotions, which was one of the main components and goals of this performance, immersion and interaction proven to be a good and effective tool to engage the audience and enhance their experience. They are also good in creating empathy in the performance. However, I must acknowledge along these lines that the empathy created during the performance was a fabricated empathy, to fulfil the goal of the performance, which is something that Boal and Brecht discuss and criticize about because we can create a fictitious world full of contradictions that may not be loyal to the reality. While I see their point, I can say by the experience of this performance, that while this empathy was fabricated, it really ends up being a “real experience” for some of the attendees who felt more engaged with the topic and wishing to do something.

Alston criticizes that in this type of performances people can feel momentarily motivated and empowered to do something, but once it ends everybody comes back to their normal life, so no real change is provoked. I think this is very true and a performance like “US” is one of those examples. However, I don't think this diminishes the value of the performance and the message we exposed the audience to. Rather, it shows how we can use these tools to create a form of activism and awareness and touch the feelings of the audience in a

very personal way, by providing a personal experience that one can remember afterwards and maybe last longer, than just watching the news or reading a newspaper. While I must acknowledge that maybe none of the people involved in the performance will participate in any type of activism as a result of the performance, this was not the goal my goal, but rather to make them feel and think more about the issue presented and possibly at least change their own perception of it.

In general, most of the audience acknowledge that they enjoyed more this performance in comparison with a traditional classical music concert, but it is also worth mentioning that many of the participants recognized this was the first time they had attended a classical music performance. For future research, it would be important to do the performance many times with different type of audiences, to get more varied answers and perceptions of the show to compare them.

If there is one important account taken out of this performance, in my opinion, is the fact that we can use art, in this case, classical music, to recontextualize its original message and translate it into the actuality to create awareness and empathy of a social issue. Thanks to this performance, most of the audience mentioned in the surveys that it raised their awareness and/or felt

more identified with the issue exposed, making the message and intention a success.

An interesting outcome to highlight from the performance was the mere coincidence that on the same day it was performed, the president of the United States, Donald Trump, declared a national emergency to construct a US-Mexico border wall, which unintentionally added to the realism of the drama and maybe made it more engaging for some of the attendees who were following the news on the media. This may have shaped the way in which some attendees experience the performance and enhance it too. One of the surveys even mentioned that it was “sad to know the national emergency was declared today too,” I also presumed this was the reason why some emotions such as enragement, fear, frustration, discomfort, concern and pain were mentioned in the surveys because they were a vivid reflection of the moment some people were experiencing it. I would say this is also one of the magical aspects of immersion and interaction, that coincidences that serve to boost or enhance the experience can happen at any time and people would end up making a connection between the performance and the reality in a more vivid or stronger way than others.

In general, this performance serves as a good sample of the effectiveness of adding immersion and interaction into classical music concerts,

to not only attract new audiences into this field but as a way to enhance the concert experience and proposed alternative successful ways of presenting classical music without underestimating its value.

The main challenges I find with this type of performances are two: the interdisciplinary approach and the amount of technical resources that can definitely make it inaccessible to produce for an average performer with a small budget, as it requires a team of people from different disciplines and a stage with the required technology to make it happen, which may be hard to find or difficult to rent.

However, this does not necessarily mean that immersion and interaction are techniques accessible for a few elites, but rather that it is our duty and creativity to find ways of making them accessible to everybody interested in doing these types of performances. Techniques such as performing proximity and multimodal don't require any major investment, rather the willingness to play and get out of our comfort zone as performers. And while technology can be a limiting factor for someone with no experience in this area, finding a partner willing to collaborate may be an easy solution to the problem.

In my opinion, immersion and interaction respond to this need of the 21st century of innovating our work as performers and make it more accessible to our

audiences who have not been educated to appreciate the music as the canon would presume. Rather, instead of blaming the education system for not giving the necessary tools to our audiences to enjoy and appreciate the music as intended and stand crossed arms, we need to find new ways of bringing this art to them.

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APPENDIX A
ONLINE VIDEO LINKS

If you'd like to watch the performance discussed in this thesis, it is available on YouTube through the following links:

"US" 2D version

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zGcWd7qz4c>

"US" 360 version

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-hdBiZFBik>