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Composition as Commentary: Voice and Poetry in Electroacoustic Music

Abstract

What is the role of a spoken or sung text in an electroacoustic composition? Does it represent anachronism, assigning the role of communication to the voice and thereby depriving more abstract electroacoustic material of its rhetorical force? Does the disembodied, electroacoustic voice distance the audience from the communicative power of the words that are heard? Although Simon Emmerson argued that the disembodied human voice in acousmatic music can often seem frustrating, this sense of disembodiment might be turned to the composer's advantage, as the basis of a methodology for creative practice. In the process of developing a methodology to address questions of text, language, voice and electroacoustic technology, I created two musical compositions. Both works used the untranslated words of an enigmatic Old English poem known as *Wulf and Eadwacer*. At first glance, the idea of using a text in an obscure or ancient language that carries little or no semantic meaning for the listeners might raise further questions. Is this a deliberate attempt at obfuscation, hiding the paucity of the composer's ideas behind a veneer of archaism or even naive exoticism? As my investigation progressed, I began to envisage the process of electroacoustic composition as a type of non-linguistic commentary on a text. Rather than hindering the listener's understanding of a composition inspired by literature, the electroacoustic voice might help to reveal different interpretations of a text, allowing multiple ideas and identities to be heard.

1. Introduction

The use of the human voice in electroacoustic music presents a paradox. As an audience, we instinctively recognise sounds with a vocal origin as human, organic and living. However, in the context of an electroacoustic composition, it is technology, rather than the human voice, which amplifies, transforms and diffuses vocal sounds. This is particularly apparent in pieces for electroacoustic fixed media, or 'tape', in which the only visible performer silently operates a laptop or mixing desk. In this context, the human voice, with its implicit character, age, gender and 'grain', as a sonic embodiment of the human form that produces it, is both present and yet disconcertingly absent.¹ When the voice (either live or recorded) utters words that

¹ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 188.

have little or no semantic meaning for the listener, a further layer of ambiguity is added.²

In the face of such potential ambiguity, what is the role of a spoken or sung text in an electroacoustic work? Does the inevitable distancing effect of the disembodied voice impede the listener's engagement with what they hear? Or does the potentially fluid, changeable nature of **electroacoustic vocality [popover window]** open up multiple different interpretations? In attempting to address these questions through my own creative practice as a composer, I was keen to develop a methodology whereby both process and artistic outcome could be seen as integral, complementary components of my research. Throughout this exposition, I use the term 'practice-based research' to refer to the various activities that constitute my methodology, in full awareness of the variety of ways in which different practitioners apply this terminology to their processes. Some of the complexities and questions surrounding the language of practice-based research are discussed in greater detail in relation to the two musical compositions that form the focus of this exposition. Although the methodologies of my practice-based research are built on a cyclic model of research questions and investigative processes, the outcomes do not provide definitive answers. As artistic productions, they are necessarily subjective and speculative, suggesting open ended conclusions that could form the basis of future work.

Image popover:

Performance of electroacoustic music by Formuls (Dr James Dooley) at the Integra Lab showcase concert, Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, Birmingham City University, June 2019.

As in many concerts of electroacoustic music, light levels are deliberately low, encouraging the audience to focus their attention on the sounds emanating from the surrounding speakers rather than on the electronics performer.

(Image reproduced here with the permission of Dr James Dooley)

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² The idea that the voice can recall phenotypical characteristics has been thoroughly debunked elsewhere. See for example Nina Sun Eidsheim's *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre & Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). However, the notion that voice can both call to mind and subvert the listener's assumptions of its identity, such as the voice's gender, is a significant element in the creative process of this exposition.

'Electroacoustic Vocality' popover:**Definitions**

Throughout this exposition, I apply the following definitions to my discussion of the voice in electroacoustic music:

The electroacoustic voice refers to the human voice, diffused through loudspeakers. The electroacoustic voice may be entirely acousmatic, emanating from an unseen body (as in a pre-recorded work for electroacoustic media or 'tape'). It may also occupy an ambiguous area between presence and absence, such as when the voice of an on-stage singer is transformed and diffused electronically, becoming perceptually separated from the body that produced it. While 'voice' here refers to the sound that emanates from the human vocal fold, the immaterial nature of 'voice', as discussed in voice studies (for example, in the work of Nina Sun Eidsheim), is also relevant to ideas of expression and identity that are discussed later in this exposition.

Electroacoustic vocality - refers to the 'electroacoustic voice' as described above, and to the more abstract, metaphorical ways in which the listener perceives sounds of vocal origin when these sounds are transformed and diffused via electronic media.

2. Developing Methodological Approaches

As a composer who frequently draws on untranslated, early medieval poetry, the interplay of text, language, voice and electroacoustic technology has formed a continuous thread through more than a decade of my work. To explore the questions that are raised by my use of these elements, this exposition focuses on two works: *We Are Apart; Our Song Together* for mezzo-soprano and electroacoustic fixed media, and *Ungelīc is Ūs* for electroacoustic fixed media alone. Over time, the reflective, reflexive nature of my work has resulted in continually evolving methodologies, developed as a result of the research questions that arose with each new project.

As my practice developed, I became increasingly aware of the ways in which the complexities surrounding the terminology of research and creation in musical composition might influence my emergent methodology. On one hand, terms such as 'practice as research' have sometimes been used to emphasise the extent to which artistic creation might be seen as research in and of itself.¹ Conversely, others have emphasised the importance of the distinction between practice and research, stressing the need for a causal relationship between the two, in the form of 'research-creation'.² When developing my own approach, Anthony Gritten's discussion of the boundary between practice and research suggested a useful meeting point between the two poles outlined above.³ The idea that the practitioner might allow the relationship between practice and research to develop freely, without too many predetermined conditions, helped me to envisage a more malleable and flexible methodology. Similarly, Hazel Smith and Roger Dean's deployment of the term 'practice-led research', whereby the work of art is treated both as a form of research and as a potential source of subsequent insights, helped me to formalise some of these ideas in relation to my work.⁴

In the course of my creative practice, the idea of commentary has been invaluable in allowing me to construct research frameworks within which to develop my musical ideas. As a descriptive term, commentary carries an implicit reference both to vocal utterance and to text, suggesting fruitful parallels with the materials and processes that underpin the musical works of this exposition. To comment on a text implies aspects of parsing, paraphrase and interpretation, directing the attention of the reader or listener. In this exposition, 'commentary' also refers to the ways in which the composer's treatment of sound might suggest connections or images in the mind of the listener. Such processes suggest a degree of subjectivity, mirroring the way in which the composer's personal preferences for sounds and timbres determine both the choice and organisation of musical material. In this exposition, the vocal analogy is further extended by the way in which all sonic material is ultimately derived from recorded samples of a single Old English poem. Nonetheless, the idea of musical commentary is itself loaded with potential ambiguity and subjectivity. As a musical trope, it reflects a perennial concern among composers who have worked with text. Writing in 1976, Luigi Nono alluded to a centuries-old debate in Western music when he stated that he intended 'to make the text become music and communicate as music. To be composed, and not simply to be applied'.⁵ On reading Nono's words, I was struck by the similarity, more than forty years later, with my decision to focus on

the phonetic sounds of Old English when considering my approach to commentary in music.

Why, then, would a twenty-first century composer choose to develop a research methodology via such a well trodden path? What new insights could such an approach reveal? I acknowledge that the idea of composition as commentary is only one of countless possible approaches to my research questions. However, it is evident that methodology is not an end in itself; in practice-based research, a methodology provides a framework to facilitate the transformation of source materials into an artistic production. By focusing on the development of my research methods, I have hoped to establish the ideal conditions in which new insights might arise, even when aspects of my methodology appear familiar and well used. My intention has been to create works that could stand on their own, free of the methodological scaffolding that enabled their production, while at the same time pointing towards future possible investigations. This is not to say that the means of production are purposely hidden from the listener or performer in my work. However, if I choose a particular sound based on my perception of its timbral, emotional or dramatic qualities, my aesthetic judgement adds a layer of subjectivity on top of my methodological framework. It is this subjectivity that differentiates the outcome of my process (as practice-based research in musical composition) from a purely literary or linguistic project. The end result becomes an artistic production, rather than simply a catalogue of sounds. As a composer, my creative 'voice' becomes an integral element of the listener's experience.

At this juncture, it would be useful to clarify how and why this exposition uses 'practice-based research' rather than terms such as artistic or creative development to describe the work that is presented here.⁶ If research is defined as 'a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared', then a key element of this project's contribution to knowledge rests on its cross-disciplinary nature.⁷ Its processes and outcomes both depend upon, and contribute to, scholarly research within the fields of music, literature and linguistics.⁸ More broadly, the project demonstrates aesthetic and creative aims in which the research content is emergent, rather than definitive. In this context, the open-endedness of artistic research allows the possibility for the ongoing development of new insights among the wider community of creative practitioners.

To explore the commonality between the fields of language, literature and music, I began by directing my practice towards the sonic properties of spoken and sung text. Unsurprisingly, voice became the unifying factor at the centre of my methodology. However, I was soon confronted with inevitable questions of identity, emotion, utterance and discourse when using sounds of vocal origin. Even the smallest audible vestige of a human voice is rich in meaning and symbolism. As the composer Trevor Wishart has noted, the human voice often remains recognisable even when its spectral characteristics have been altered.⁹ For listeners, the voice carries traces of the body that produced it; as Miriama Young noted, 'we can hear the body in the voice that sings'.¹⁰ Consequently, the idea of a Schaefferian mode of reduced listening, summarised by Michel Chion as 'the listening mode that focuses on the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning', seemed

increasingly at odds with my sonic materials.¹¹ Joanna Demers' outline of post-Schaefferian theories of listening, in which the importance of a sound's perceived origin is acknowledged, drew my attention to the creative possibilities of such a philosophy when applied to my own work.¹² Similarly, Simon Emmerson's discussion of the ways in which the link between a sound and its source might be developed into narrative ideas, exemplified by numerous electroacoustic works composed since the 1960s, helped to shore up the methodological foundations of my project.¹³ Central to much of this discussion is the premise that voice is experienced differently when diffused through loudspeakers. As Michel Chion has noted, when the voice is separated from the physical body that produced it, it can assume an omniscient quality, becoming an *acousmêtre*, akin to 'a talking and acting shadow'.¹⁴ In my work, the multilayered ambiguity of the *acousmêtre* further highlights the ways in which my process mirrors the stratified nature of the text. Drawing on the Old English poem, the artistic choices that comprise my compositional 'voice' are conveyed through the singer, whose voice is further mediated by electronic transformation and diffusion.

Throughout this exposition, the terms 'electroacoustic voice' and 'electroacoustic vocality' do not simply refer to the transformation of a vocal sounds. Instead, these descriptors refer to the various ways in which sound technology can mediate the listener's experience of a voice. Alexa Wolosyhn's discussion of the electroacoustic voice highlighted its propensity to blur conventional, binary distinctions such as those that exist between voice and environment or speech and song.¹⁵ In the context of my exploration of an ambiguous, multivalent Old English text, Wolosyhn's work suggested that electroacoustic vocality could afford a creative open-endedness. The disrupted, unsettled 'third space' between the bodies of voice and listener was not a barrier to be overcome by the composer, but rather a sonic environment, rich in potential, in which the ambiguity of voice and text could flourish.¹⁶ The idea of commentary, as a means to explore a multitude of possibilities without providing definitive answers, seemed especially pertinent in this context.

As my methodology developed in the light of these ideas, I came to regard the process of analysing and transforming my electroacoustic source material as one of transcription; an intermediate stage in the process of developing a commentary on the Old English poem. Here again I was drawn into long-running debates regarding music and text. In an interview published in the 1980s, Luciano Berio stated that 'music is a further machine that amplifies and transcribes that meaning [of language] onto a different level of perception and intelligence – provided that it respects all the aspects of language, including the acoustic one'.¹⁷ In the context of my emergent musical material, Berio's approach to music and text was a timely reminder of the centrality of these ideas to much twentieth-century (and earlier) musical thought.

The idea of transcription in relation to the musical treatment of an early medieval text points to an issue at the heart of the two works presented in this exposition: namely, an untranslated text was used to express something which, as a complex of phonemes, emotions, metaphors and ideas, is fundamentally untranslatable. It was precisely this mercurial, untranslatable essence that stimulated my imagination as I developed a methodology that would allow me to explore possible approaches to these ideas. As I will discuss in the course of this exposition, aural qualities of alliteration and syllabic stress informed my process as much as the text's meaning

and interpretation. It is precisely the sonic properties of a text (such as rhyme schemes or syllabic patterns) that are altered or lost when a poem is translated. Indeed, Dr Johnson's frequently cited assertion that 'the beauties of poetry cannot be preserved in any language except that in which it was originally written' seemed to provide an eighteenth-century vindication of my decision to prioritise the text's phonetic sounds.¹⁸ Theodor Adorno's statement that '[music] constantly poses a riddle, and yet, as nonsignifying language, never answers it' lends a poetic beauty to the idea that that electroacoustic music might simultaneously explore multiple layers of meaning and ambiguity within an enigmatic ancient text.¹⁹

Image popover 1:

Preparation for a concert of electroacoustic music performed by members of Integra Lab, Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, Birmingham City University, in June 2019.

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Image popover 2:

Excerpt from the composition process of *Ungelīc is Ūs*, for electroacoustic fixed media. At this point in the piece, samples of the man's name, 'Ēadwacer', sung by a mezzo-soprano, have been transposed to a lower pitch. The 'Ēadwacer' material has been variously fragmented, stretched, speeded up, layered and recombined, such that the name becomes subsumed within a larger cloud of low-pitch phonemes. By doing this, the material alludes to the man's identity; the transformed text allows Ēadwacer's voice to be heard. Other sounds in this example include material derived from the word 'giedd' (song) from the last line of the text, and some high upper partials, derived from a spectral analysis of the 'Ēadwacer' material.

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Footnotes for section 2:

1 Christopher Bannerman, 'Reflections on Practice as Research: The University, the Artist, the Research Endeavour', *Digital Creativity*, 15.2 (2004), 65–70
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/14626260408520166>>

2 Sophie Stévançe and Serge Lacasse, *Research Creation in Music and the Arts: Towards a Collaborative Interdiscipline* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p.146.

3 Anthony Gritten, 'Determination and Negotiation in Artistic Practice as Research in Music', in *Artistic Practice as Research in Music: Theory, Criticism, Practice*, ed. by Mine Doğan-tan-Dack (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 73–90 (pp. 88–89).

4 Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, 'Introduction: Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice – Towards the Iterative Cyclic Web', in *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, ed. by Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 1–38, ProQuest Ebook Central [accessed 5 June 2019].

5 Luigi Nono, *Nostalgia for the Future: Luigi Nono's Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. by Angela Ida Benedictis and Veniero Rizzardi (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), p. 182.

6 The extent to which musical composition could be described as academic research was vociferously debated among prominent, university based composers in the UK during the 2010s. For two examples, see John Croft, 'Composition Is Not Research', *TEMPO*, 69.272 (2015) and Ian Pace, 'Composition and Performance Can Be, and Often Have Been, Research', *Tempo*, 70.275 (2016), 60–70.

7 Guidance on Submissions (Bristol: REF, 2019) <<https://www.ref.ac.uk/publications/guidance-on-submissions-201901/>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

8 See, for example, Stef Conner's discussion of Edmund Hunt's work in relation to the analysis of Old English poetic metre:

Stef Conner, 'Early Words to Late Music: The Value of Practice-led Research in Composition as a Companion to the Analysis of Old English Poetic Metre', in *Principles of Music Composing: The Phenomenon of Rhythm*, ed. by Rimantas Janeliauskas (Vilnius, Lithuania: 13th International Music Theory Conference, 16 October 2013) <<http://zurnalai.lmta.lt/wp-content/uploads/2013/Muzikos-komponavimo-principai-XIII-Conner.pdf>> [accessed 5 June 2019], 86–99 [pp. 95–97].

9 Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art*, new edn, ed. and rev. by Simon Emmerson (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1996), pp. 150–151.

10 Miriama Young, *Singing the Body Electric: The Human Voice and Sound Technology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), p. 28.

11 Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 29.

12 Joanna Demers, *Listening Through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 21–42.

13 Simon Emmerson, *Living Electronic Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 7–14.

14 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, ed. and trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.21.

15 Alexa Woloshyn, 'Electroacoustic Voices: Sounds Queer, and Why It Matters', *Tempo*, 71.280 (2017), 68–79.

16 Woloshyn, 68–79 (p. 78).

17 Luciano Berio, *Luciano Berio: Two Interviews with Rossana Dalmonte and Bálint András Varga*, ed. and trans. by David Osmond-Smith (London: Marion Boyars, 1985), p. 113.

18 James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. by David Womersley (London: Penguin, 2008) p. 537.

19 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Music, Language, and Composition', trans. by Susan Gillespie, *The Musical Quarterly*, 77.3 (1993), 401–414
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/742388>> [accessed 6 August 2016] (p. 410).

3.Composition As Commentary: Text

The two works presented in this exposition are based on a strange, fragmentary and enigmatic Old English poem, generally known as *Wulf and Eadwacer*. The text is preserved in a tenth-century codex which has acquired the name of the *Exeter Book*.¹ The opacity of *Wulf and Eadwacer* is borne out by a quantity of scholarship offering varying interpretations, leading at least one scholar to propose that it is 'generally acknowledged as the most perplexing poem in the [Old English] language'.² In the manuscript, the poem does not have a title, and is presented without notes or explanation. It is as though the text begins partway through a (now lost) narrative, or is based on a tale that was 'familiar to the poet's audience but unknown to us'.³ Even the manuscript of the *Exeter Book* is fragmentary. Crossley-Holland has drawn attention to the ways in which the stained, fire damaged manuscript is missing at least seven folios.⁴ As far as we know, whatever text was preserved in these folios has not survived in any other manuscripts.

The folio on which *Wulf and Eadwacer* is written is followed by a collection of riddles, many of which seem ambiguous and have numerous possible interpretations. Like *Wulf and Eadwacer*, most of the riddles are written in the first person. In the light of the context in which it is preserved, it has been proposed that *Wulf and Eadwacer* might be better interpreted as a riddle.⁵ However, it has also been argued that the ambiguity of *Wulf and Eadwacer* enhances, rather than limits, its merit as a work of literature.⁶ To use Eco's terminology, the poem's resistance to dogmatic interpretation gives it a high degree of dynamism and 'openness', since the recipient of the text must discover and choose from 'a continuous generation of internal relations' in order to perceive the work in its totality.⁷

We can only be certain about a few salient points in the text. [Word endings](#) show that the text is spoken by a woman; it is in fact one of the earliest texts in a female voice in English. She is being held captive on an island in the marshes. She describes complex emotions; sadness, loneliness, longing, fleeting joy and hate. The text follows many of the conventions of Old English poetry. Most lines are divided into [two half-lines, separated by a caesura](#). Each half-line contains [two stressed syllables and any number of unstressed syllables](#). Unusually for Old English poems of this period, there is a [refrain](#).

[Old English text, literal translation and glossary not included here]

‘Word Endings’ popover:

þonne hit wæs rēnig weder and ic **reotugu*** sæt,

(When it was rainy weather and I sat, mournful)
(line 10)

***reotugu** – Adjective, nominative singular feminine form of **rēotig**, ‘mournful, sobbing’

Text from metre and alliteration boxes (JPEG files):**Key to Symbols**

x unaccented syllable

/ accented syllable

**** syllable with secondary accent

[image graphic] ‘resolved stress’ (two short syllables that count as a long syllable according to the conventions of Old English poetry)

l anacrusis (an unstressed syllable that is not counted within the scansion of the line)

For further explanation of the five types of Old English poetic metre, see for example Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 5th edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp.163–167

Alliteration

According to the rules of Old English poetry, the **first stressed syllable** in the **second half-line** must alliterate with a **stressed syllable** in the **first half-line** (note that all vowels alliterate with each other).

Alliteration of unstressed syllables is irrelevant to scansion and is therefore ignored.

Note that the alliteration of the penultimate line appears anomalous and has been interpreted differently. Similarly, the alliteration in line 12 also appears somewhat anomalous.

For further explanation of alliteration in Old English poetry, see Mitchell and Robinson (above), p. 162.

Note: A number of features of this poem are unusual in the context of Old English poetry (such as the refrain, and lines that consist of only one half-line). For this reason, there are differing interpretations regarding the poem’s metrical structure.

Seiichi Suzuki, 'Wulf and Eadwacer: A Reinterpretation and Some Conjectures', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 88.2 (1987), 175–185
<www.jstor.org/stable/43343808> [accessed 13 June 2019] (p. 182).

Poetic Translation

It is as though someone gave a present to my people;
They want to oppress him if he comes with a troop,
We are apart (we are different / there is a difference between us). [*different possible translations]
Wulf is on an island, I am on another.
That island is secure, surrounded by marshland.
There are cruel men there on the island.
They want to oppress him if he comes with a troop.
We are apart.
I endured far-wandering hopes of my Wulf;
When it was rainy weather and I sat, mournful,
Then the one bold in battle laid his arms around me,
There was joy to me in that, but it was also hateful.
Wulf, my Wulf, my hopes of you caused me to fall sick,
Your infrequent visits, a mourning spirit, not at all lack of food.
Do you hear, Eadwacer? Wulf (or 'a wolf') carries our wretched whelp to the wood.
People may easily separate that which was never joined,
our song together.

Footnotes for section 3

1 Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS Exeter Dean and Chapter 3501 [The Exeter Book], fols 8–130.

2 Donald K. Fry, "'Wulf and Eadwacer": A Wen Charm', *The Chaucer Review*, 5.4 (1971) 247–263 <www.jstor.org/stable/25093167> [accessed 24 April 2019] (p. 247).

3 Kemp Malone, 'Two English Frauenlieder', *Comparative Literature*, 14.1 (1962), 106–117 <www.jstor.org/stable/1768636> [accessed 25 April 2019] p.108.

4 *The Exeter Book Riddles*, ed. and trans. by Kevin Crossley-Holland, revised edn (London: Penguin, 1993) p. xii.

5 John F. Adams, “Wulf and Eadwacer”: An Interpretation’, *Modern Language Notes*, 73.1 (1958), 1–5 <www.jstor.org/stable/3043274> [accessed 24 April 2019] (pp. 4–5).

6 Peter S. Baker, ‘The Ambiguity of “Wulf and Eadwacer”’, *Studies in Philology*, 78.5 (1981), 39-51 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174096>> [accessed 24 April 2019] (p. 51).

7 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) p. 20.

4. Early Medieval Text and Contemporary Musical Composition

The decision to use an early medieval text as the starting point for practice-based research in musical composition requires further scrutiny. *Wulf and Eadwacer* is a highly ambiguous, possibly fragmentary poem, preserved in a manuscript folio that survived when many others did not. If *Wulf and Eadwacer* is understood as a cultural and historical artefact, the decision to subject it to a composer's methodology might be seen as unnecessary interference, or even as an act of cultural vandalism.

In response to these arguments, my initial research questions were shaped precisely by the belief that valuable insights can be gained when the contemporary arts engage with material from the past. In my work, the justification for this approach is, in part, borne out by the fact that so little of the context for a poem such as *Wulf and Eadwacer* survives. There are no contemporaneous sources that describe how *Wulf and Eadwacer* would have been performed (as a song, or spoken, with or without musical accompaniment). Evidence of secular music from the Anglo-Saxon period is largely limited to fragments of musical instruments found at archaeological sites. Investigations such as the European Music Archaeology Project have focused on the reconstruction of ancient instruments rather than on the potentially more speculative process of reanimating an ancient oral culture.¹ In contrast, the composer Stef Conner has focused much of her research on both Old English texts and the composition of new music for reconstructed ancient instruments, demonstrating a creative approach which has more in common with my own.²

However, while the work of Conner and others is indicative of the many insights that can be gained from imaginative recreations of ancient music, this is not the focus of my practice. Instead, I was interested in exploring the more abstract aspects of the text's emotional, affective content. I was drawn to Lucile Desblache's idea that, in using untranslated medieval Occitan texts in the opera *L'Amour de loin*, Kaija Saariaho emphasised a sense of timelessness.³ I was keen to investigate the ways in which my use of Old English poetry might achieve similar aims. If the core of *Wulf and Eadwacer* relates to universal themes of interpersonal relationships and human emotions, why should my musical response be limited to an imagined idea of a particular historical moment?

Nonetheless, while much of the content of *Wulf and Eadwacer* appears timeless, its context is not. In their written form, early medieval texts arguably carry a far greater sense of orality than modern text based media. As Stephen Roger Fischer has noted, the idea of reading in most medieval European languages denoted reading aloud; reading was not a silent activity.⁴ Texts such as *Wulf and Eadwacer*, as sonic artefacts of an early medieval oral tradition, have become fossilised in the silence of the printed page. Consequently, my research questions arose from the desire to reclaim the orality of early medieval language and to engage with the vast spectrum of vocal sound.

Popover text for the two photographs:

Fragments of Anglo-Saxon stone carvings incorporated into a later medieval parish church in Wirksworth, Derbyshire, UK. Although these stone carvings might be contemporaneous with the oral tradition that produced *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the context and history of these images, and the identities of most of the figures depicted, are no longer known.

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Footnotes for section 4:

1 'Description', *European Music Archaeology Project* <<http://www.emaproject.eu/emap/description.html>> [accessed 2 April 2019].

2 Stef Conner, 'Very Early Music', *Stef Conner* <<https://www.stefconner.com/very-early-music/>> [accessed 2 April 2019].

***L'amour de loin* popover text:** Kaija Saariaho, *L'Amour de loin* (London: Chester Music, 2000).

3 Lucile Desblache, 'Tales of the Unexpected: Opera as a New Art of Glocalization', in *Music, Text and Translation*, ed. by Helen Julia Minors (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) pp. 9–19 (p.12).

4 Steven Roger Fischer, *A History of Reading* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003) EBSCOhost E-Book, p. 142.

5. Preliminary Research Questions and *We Are Apart; Our Song Together*

Having chosen to explore the idea of musical composition as a form of commentary on an early medieval text, I had yet to decide how to begin the creative process. Initially, the only predetermined condition of this piece was that it had to be for a mezzo-soprano and electronics, to fulfil the requirements of the singer who had commissioned the piece. As is often the case in practice-based research, the pressing desire to create seemed constrained by the sheer number of possible research questions, each of which had the potential to take the work in different directions. Faced with such uncertainty, Anthony Gritten's suggestion of allowing the relationship between practice and research to 'play itself out unbeknownst to its practitioner' was a liberating starting point.¹ In the light of this idea, my investigation began simply by reading the Old English poem to gain an understanding of its structural and thematic content.

On an initial reading of the poem, one of its most striking features is its [repetition of phrases](#). In particular, the words 'ungelīc is ūs' and 'ungelīce is ūs' (often translated as 'we are apart' or 'we are different') seem to disrupt the metrical pattern of half-lines. My curiosity was immediately drawn to these words, and to the identity of *ūs*. Although *Wulf and Eadwacer* is mainly written in the first person, much of the language describes the female narrator's thoughts and experiences in relation to the actions of others. The narrator refers to '[my people](#)', a person or people named '[Wulf](#)' and '[Ēadwacer](#)', an '[army](#)', '[cruel men](#)' and '[our wretched child](#)', which might also be the '[gift](#)' or '[present](#)' of the first line. Of all of these characters, Wulf is the one with whom the narrator is most preoccupied, expressing conflicting emotions of [joy](#), [hate](#), [longing or expectations](#), and a [grieving spirit](#) in relation to him. As so much of the narrator's state of mind seems predicated by Wulf, his presence casts a long shadow over the text, even during passages in which he is not mentioned by name. My initial research question arose out of the relationship between the narrator's words and the character of Wulf. How might intervallic material refer to a character, thereby developing musical responses that operate at a thematic and structural level in relation to the text?

In the process of considering this question, I developed a [musical motif](#) which occurs throughout the piece: an interval of three or four semitones followed and/or preceded by an interval of one or two semitones, heard each time the name 'Wulf' is sung. Transpositions of this motif are sometimes [joined together to form chains](#), often followed or preceded by a further interval of one or two semitones. There are obvious parallels with the Wagnerian *leitmotiv*. However, in my work, this process owes more to the twentieth-century 'generative cell', as seen in the work of composers such as Igor Stravinsky and described in detail by Julian Anderson in relation to the work of Oliver Knussen.² Moreover, in all my work, a personal preoccupation with harmony invariably results in the prioritisation of musical pitch during the early stages of the composition process. In the context of my existing compositional technique, the development of a generative motivic cell enabled the tools of my practice to serve a specific research question about the text's portrayal of Wulf. In this context, Gritten's advocacy of 'an essential contamination and porous free-flowing between practice and research' facilitated a sense of spontaneous

creativity that was nonetheless channelled within research parameters.³ Although the 'Wulf motif' provided ample material for a vocal line, the motif itself underwent relatively little transformation or development. In part, this is due to the brevity of the text and of the resulting musical composition. Moreover, it was my intention that the intervallic motif would remain clearly audible even when the narrator does not mention Wulf by name, thereby drawing attention to his role as both cause and object of the narrator's emotions.

Having developed a core of intervallic material, my attention turned to the surface detail of the Old English text. I read the text aloud, focusing on its patterns of [alliteration](#) and [stress](#) until I had memorised it.⁴ My undergraduate research specialism in Old English, combined with readings in Old English philology by scholars such as Bruce Mitchell and Fred Robinson, enabled me to reproduce a standardised form of Old English pronunciation during this stage of my creative process.⁵ The composer Jonathan Harvey drew attention to the ways in which, when setting a text to music, a meditative consideration of the words might lay the foundations for subsequent musical inspiration.⁶ As I read the text aloud, internalising its prosody and listening closely to its sound, another research question emerged: how might music for solo voice reflect and reinforce a poem's patterns of alliteration and stress? This led to the composition of a melodic line in which motivic material was repeated and developed in response to repeated words, or to alliterating syllables. Commentary became a metaphor for the process whereby the sounds of the text were re-appropriated and developed by pitch and rhythm.

In order to convey the text's structure, I chose to preserve [the caesura that occurs in the middle of each line of text](#) by using rests, with [one exception](#). Whereas in *Lonh*, Kaija Saariaho's seminal work for soprano and electronics based on a medieval Occitan text, the composer described how she created a collage of her poetic source material, my intention was to preserve the text in its unaltered form.⁷ Any repetition or fragmentation of the text would have interfered with the very patterns of stress and accentuation that I intended to explore. In my work, stressed syllables, of which there are two in each half line, were often given musical emphasis by being [lengthened](#) or [shortened](#) in combination with a tenuto. Alliteration was sometimes represented by a [shared rhythm](#), a [repeated interval](#), a [repeated pitch](#), or by [emphasis](#) (e.g. by assigning a melisma to each alliterating syllable), either within a melisma [or as part of a phrase that includes a following syllable](#). This resulted in a melodic line in which musical responses to stress and alliteration frequently overlap and duplicate each other. Just as the poem contains more alliteration than is formally required by the metre (such as examples of [alliterating unstressed syllables](#)), so the mezzo-soprano's line contains numerous instances of repeated intervals, rhythms and pitches that do not intentionally mark the poem's metrical features.

Having focused on the development of material in relation to thematic and sonic aspects of the text, my attention turned to the emotional content of the words themselves. How might musical material explore the text's complex layering and juxtaposition of emotions? As has already been mentioned, the precise meaning of the text is ambiguous and debatable. Indeed, since the text is widely regarded as lacking a clear narrative or logical framework, its emotional content and its

‘confusing, even troubling allusions’ are some of the only facts about which we can be certain.⁸

When contemplating this research question, I began by varying the melodic contour of phrases to reflect moments of of greater or lesser emotional intensity in the poem. [Ascending and descending patterns were used to represent increasing and decreasing levels of tension](#). Since my melodic line was interspersed with short rests to indicate the text’s caesurae, the final pitch of each half-line became a focal point of the melodic contour. For example, in [bars 37–42](#), ascending phrases, accompanied by a crescendo, draw attention to the anxiety of the [words](#). Comparison of these bars with the text shows that, before the climax of the phrase on [‘Ige’](#), two half-lines have been elided to form a longer phrase. In other words, the melodic relationship to the text, whereby each half line was separated by a short rest, has been stretched and modified at a moment of heightened emotion. A similar approach can be seen in [bars 59–72](#), during the vocal passage that precedes the climax in bar 88. Here, the alliterating words [‘rēnig’](#) and [‘reotugu’](#) do not use identical rhythm and intervals, but are [marked by semiquavers](#). However, as Kemp Malone has noted, the poem’s sometimes unusual metrics, irregular alliteration and use of a refrain set it outside the classical style of Old English literature.⁹ For this reason, the striking final words of the refrain, [‘ungelīc is ūs’](#) and [‘ungelīce is ūs’](#) are the only example of speech in the mezzo-soprano part.

At this point, my process had yielded a [single melodic line](#). My attempt at working creatively within a methodological framework had resulted in material which was, in my subjective opinion, insufficient and uninteresting on its own. More importantly, it seemed that the musical outcomes of this process had failed to comment on the multiple, fluid and ambiguous allusions to characters and landscapes in *Wulf and Eadwacer*. As Roberta Frank has noted, the text’s layered language, narrated in the first person, often ‘signals sorrow and transcendence in the same breath’.¹⁰ The apparent complexity and fluidity of the Old English poem led me to consider Bruno Bossis’ proposal that the use of vocal material in electroacoustic music (‘la vocalité électroacoustique’ – ‘electroacoustic vocality’) could facilitate both a poetic expression of the universal and, through the use of multiple structural levels, ambiguity.¹¹ Could electroacoustic music play a role in drawing attention to the complexity and ambiguity of the narrator’s inner monologue?

When contemplating this research question, I began by analysing the recordings of the spoken and sung text of *Wulf and Eadwacer*. As I considered how to develop this material, my preparatory listening ranged from pioneering works from the 1950s such as Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Gesang Der Jünglinge* and Luciano Berio’s *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, to Trevor Wishart’s [large catalogue of work since the 1970s](#), to recent projects by composer-performers such as [Andrea Young](#) and [Marta Gentilucci](#). I began to analyse recordings of the spoken and sung text of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, studying sonograms of words and sounds, isolating specific harmonic frequencies, and stretching and transposing phonemes. However, while this activity led to a large quantity of material, the question remained as to how to use the sounds to draw attention to the complexity of the narrator’s inner speech.

At this stage in the composition process, my attention shifted from the research question to the characteristics of the electroacoustic sounds that had been produced. The transformation and processing of transient consonants resulted in many sounds that were [reminiscent of natural phenomena such as water and wind](#). This material suggested further lines of enquiry regarding the relationship of the narrator's inner discourse to the landscapes that are conjured into being by her words. A web of interrelated questions, centred around the relationship between the narrator's voice and her environment, was beginning to emerge. How could electroacoustic sound, originating from samples of the singer's voice, allude to the environment that the narrator describes?

The relationship between the singer's mental and physical environment acted as a catalyst to the development of my electroacoustic material. Hazel Smith's proposal that the electroacoustic 'voicescape' could facilitate a fluid, multilayered relationship between voice and environment suggested parallels with the complex strata of *Wulf and Eadwacer*.¹² However, how could a collection of windy, watery, electroacoustic sounds acquire a structural integrity and coherence that would facilitate my attempt to provide a commentary on the text? My attention turned to the parameters with which I might define the work's imaginary landscape. Adrian Moore proposed that drones in electroacoustic music could create a canopied or rooted setting, alluding to an imaginary horizon.¹³ If the tape's sustained drones, such as the [D4 in bars 13–28](#), were interpreted as representations of such a horizon, then the vanishing point of the imaginary landscape was already in place. When considering how to populate the electroacoustic landscape, I began by drawing on the text's references to environmental realities such as [marshes](#), [rainy weather](#) and an [island](#), experimenting with the placement of electroacoustic sounds that seemed redolent of water and air. Stereo panning was used to create a sense of movement within the landscape. The inclusion of both closely recorded vocal consonants and reverberant, sustained vowels further alluded to perceptions of space, creating the impression of varying distances between the listener and sound source. In populating an imaginary landscape with material derived from the singer's voice, my process showed similarities with the way in which Barry Truax used words as 'raw sonic materials' to elaborate on their context.¹⁴ However, unlike Truax's use of contemporary English poetry, my work was based on vocal material which, for the majority of listeners, would have no semantic meaning. Consequently, correspondences between the meaning of a word and its sound would have far less immediacy, as for most listeners, the words themselves lacked the power to conjure mental images. The more abstract relationship between word and sound in my work turned my attention to the idea of sonic metaphor.

The idea of musical metaphor is rich in complexity. In her musical and philosophical investigation of vocality, Danielle Cohen-Levinas proposed that metaphor underlines the emblematic question of the morphology of the sound itself.¹⁵ According to Cohen-Levinas, the sound represents simultaneously the source and the purpose of the work, resulting in a vast spectrum of creative and interpretative possibilities.¹⁶ In my work, my use of sustained drones, untransformed vocal samples, and sounds reminiscent of environmental phenomena, seemed to allude to the variety of interpretations suggested by Cohen-Levinas. However, what would prevent my work from becoming simply a series of disparate sonic tableaux? In his discussion of

fixed media electroacoustic music, Trevor Wishart's idea of the 'sound-image' served as a useful example to clarify my approach to metaphor.¹⁷ Wishart proposed that metaphorical interpretations might be established when a sound is transformed, or when contextual cues alter our interpretation of the sound-image, as illustrated in his composition *Red Bird (1977)*.¹⁸ During the opening twelve bars of *We Are Apart; Our Song Together*, sounds of indefinite pitch were used to create an ambiguous, metaphorical relationship between gestures with a clear vocal origin and more abstract material reminiscent of wind or waves. The text's refrain, 'ungel[ic]e] is ūs', was speeded up, filtered and transposed to create a gesture that might be indicative of twittering birds or bubbling water, as from around [bar 8](#). The name 'Wulf' was slowed down and filtered to create a motif suggesting a gust of wind or a breaking wave, as in [bar 4](#). In developing a metaphorical relationship between vocal and atmospheric sounds, my intention was to allude to the internal nature of a landscape that was framed and articulated by the singer's expression of her thoughts.

The discussion of landscape draws attention to a paradox. Fixed media electroacoustic music (often described as 'tape') customarily has no live visual element, other than the presence of a sound technician, who might be monitoring levels somewhere within the performance space. In concert, visual stimuli are often deliberately minimised by plunging the audience into darkness. In such circumstances, it might seem contradictory to rely on descriptive, visual imagery to frame aspects of the work's methodology. However, as Wishart has noted, the idea of landscape in electroacoustic music does not require a straightforward correspondence between a sound and its real-world source; the landscape is 'the source from which we *imagine* the sounds to come', even when the landscape itself is surreal and impossible.¹⁹ In the context of *We Are Apart; Our Song Together*, the presence of a mezzo-soprano foregrounds human expression and performativity when the work is presented in concert. Since the sonic landscape of *We Are Apart; Our Song Together* is formed entirely from sounds derived from the singer's voice, the on-stage mezzo-soprano is, in effect, performing a duet with herself whenever she presents the work. This issue raised a number of questions that fed into the cycle of my work. Who did the electroacoustic voice represent? Where was the temporal or physical location of the electroacoustic voice within the imaginary landscape? What was the relationship between the two (or more) electroacoustic voices and the on-stage performer?

These questions underline issues of ambiguity and disjunction that form a continuous thread running through my work. In particular, the paralinguistic elements of the singer's performance, such as her posture, physical gestures and expression are in marked contrast to the distance and ambiguity of the electroacoustic voice. In his discussion of electroacoustic vocality, Emmerson drew attention to the disjunction between the live and recorded voice, noting that:

Human presence in acousmatic music is often fundamentally frustrating even when joyous and celebratory rather than threatening or cruel. It represents a displaced "other" – the other side of an impenetrable curtain. We hear (and hence observe) but we cannot communicate back. This will increase our unease – our frustration even.²⁰

Even without electroacoustic treatment, the singing voice itself is arguably richer in meaning and association than an acoustic instrument, further adding to the complexity of my research questions. As Natasha Barrett has noted in relation to Berio's *Sequenza III* for solo voice, analysis of the score can reveal the compositional structure, but 'the emotional energy and facial expressions of the live soprano may easily distract'.²¹

In working through these research questions, it became apparent that the disjunction between the live and the electroacoustic voices could become part of the piece's conceptual framework. Drawing on Bossis' proposal that the disembodiment of the electroacoustic voice has the potential to open up new perspectives, I began to investigate ways in which this disembodiment might highlight the poem's central themes of separation and dichotomy.²² Although the distinction between recorded and live voices is blurred when *We Are Apart; Our Song Together* is heard as a recording, the live performance draws attention to the relationship between the on-stage and electroacoustic voices. This distinction is further emphasised in performances in which the live part is performed by someone other than the singer whose voice was used for the electronics. The voice is simultaneously embodied by the on-stage singer, and disembodied in the transformed vocal material that is panned around the room. In this way, the medium of the performance itself became a representation of the poem's thematic concerns. I began to hear the pre-composed electroacoustic voice as an extension of the singer's inner monologue, reflecting the poet's use of the first person and alluding to the idea of memory. To imply a subtle distinction between the tape voice and the voice of the live performer, a sense of distance was created by adding some filtering and reverberation to the tape voice whenever it duplicated the singer's material. This is first heard in [bars 15–18](#), when the recorded phrase '[lêodum is mīnum](#)' provides a cue for the singer's initial entry.

Inspired by a series of research questions, the outcome developed into a work of just under eight minutes in duration, for singer and electroacoustic fixed media (commonly referred to by its historical antecedent, 'tape'). The title *We Are Apart; Our Song Together* was chosen to draw attention to the disjunction that is at the heart of the poem, and which informed so much of the work's development. It conflates two salient lines of the poem, the refrain '[ungelīc\[e\] is ūs](#)' and the text's final line, '[uncer giedd geador](#)'.

Footnotes for section 5:

1 Anthony Gritten, 'Determination and Negotiation in Artistic Practice as Research in Music', in *Artistic Practice as Research in Music: Theory, Criticism, Practice*, ed. By Mine Doğanatan-Dack (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp.73–90 (p. 89).

2 Julian Anderson, 'Harmonic Practices in Oliver Knussen's Music since 1988: Part I', *Tempo*, 221 (2002), 2–13 <www.jstor.org/stable/946777> [accessed 1 May 2019] (p. 5).

3 Gritten, p. 88.

4 Other well-known readings of the text, such as the Smithsonian Folkways recording ('Wulf and Eadwacer', *Lyrics from the Old English*, Burton Raffael and Robert P. Creed [Folkways, FL 9858, 1964]), are dramatic and expressive, but take an idiosyncratic approach to stress and pronunciation that is significantly divergent from more recent scholarship. See, for example, Richard M. Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English: Volume 1: Phonology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

5 Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 5th edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) pp. 15–18.

6 Jonathan Harvey, *Music and Inspiration* (London: Faber, 1999), p. 18.

7 Kaija Saariaho, *Lonh* (London: Chester Music, 2005), introduction.

8 Marilyn Desmond, 'The Voice of Exile: Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy', *Critical Inquiry*, 16.3 (1990), 572–590. <www.jstor.org/stable/1343640> [accessed 1 May 2019] (p. 588).

9 Kemp Malone, 'Two English Frauenlieder', *Comparative Literature*, 14.1 (1962), 106–117 <www.jstor.org/stable/1768636> [accessed 25 April 2019] (pp. 110–111).

10 Roberta Frank, 'Terminally Hip and Incredibly Cool: Carol, Vikings, and Anglo-Scandinavian England', *Representations*, 100.1 (2007), 23–33 <www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2007.100.1.23> [accessed 24 April 2019] (p. 28).

11 Bruno Bossis, 'Une écoute ambiguë ou la quête d'universaux: l'exemple de la vocalité électroacoustique', in *Musiques Électroacoustiques: Analyses↔écoutes*, ed. by Nicolas Marty (Le Vallier: Éditions Delatour France, 2016), pp. 139–154.

Gesang der Jünglinge popover: Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Gesang der Jünglinge*, Tape Composition (1955–1956).

Thema (Omaggio a Joyce) popover: Luciano Berio, *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, Tape Composition (1958).

Trevor Wishart popover:

See, for example, the following works by Trevor Wishart:

Encounters in the Republic of Heaven, Tape Composition (2011)

Globalalia, Tape Composition (2004)

Red Bird: A Document (York: University of York Music Press, 1977).

Vox 1–6 (York: University of York Music Press, 1982–1989)

Andrea Young popover: See, for example:

Andrea Young, 'The Voice Index and Digital Voice Interface', *Leonardo Music Journal*, 24 (2014), 3–5 <https://doi.org/10.1162/LMJ_a_00186>

Marta Gentilucci popover: See, for example, Gentilucci's research at IRCAM from 2017, which focused on voice and extended vocal techniques and electronics:

'Marta Gentilucci', <<https://www.ircam.fr/person/marta-gentilucci-1/>> [accessed 1 June 2019].

More information and audio examples can be found on the composer's website www.martagentilucci.com

and at IRCAM: <http://brahms.ircam.fr/marta-gentilucci>

12 Hazel Smith 'The Voice in Computer Music and Its Relationship to Place, Identity and Community', in *The Oxford Handbook of Computer Music*, ed. by Roger T. Dean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) pp. 274–293 (p. 274).

13 Adrian Moore, *Sonic Art: An Introduction to Electroacoustic Music Composition* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 158.

14 Barry Truax, 'A Voice for All Seasons', in *Playing With Words: The Spoken Word in Artistic Practice*, ed. by Cathy Lane (London: Creative Research into Sound Arts Practice; Cromford: Research Group for Artists Publications, 2008) pp.192–195 (p.194).

15 Danielle Cohen-Levinas, *La voix au-delà du chant: Une fenêtre aux ombres* (Paris: Vrin, 2006) p.161.

16 Cohen-Levinas, p.161.

17 Trevor Wishart, 'Sound Symbols and Landscapes', in *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*, ed. by Simon Emmerson (London: Macmillan, 1986) pp. 41–60 (pp. 52–56).

Red Bird (1977) popover: Trevor Wishart, *Red Bird: A Political Prisoner's Dream*, electronic download (Sub Rosa, 1977), available at <<http://www.apple.com/itunes/>> [accessed 7 June 2016].

18 Wishart, 'Sound Symbols and Landscapes', pp. 52–56.

19 Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art*, new edn, ed. and rev. by Simon Emmerson (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1996), p.136.

20 Simon Emmerson, *Living Electronic Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) p. 80.

Sequenza III popover: Luciano Berio, *Sequenza III per voci femminile* (London: Universal, 1968).

21 Natasha Barrett, 'Trends in Electroacoustic Music', in *The Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music*, ed. by Nick Collins and Julio d'Escriván, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 201–224 (p. 208).

22 Bruno Bossis, *La voix et la machine: la vocalité artificielle dans la musique contemporaine* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005), p. 287.

6. Interlude

Does this approach answer the general, introductory questions that were posed in relation to meaning and communication? If the audience needs to be given a context or a translation in order to appreciate a piece of music, does this not undermine the idea that the communicative power of the music is sufficient in and of itself?

Similarly, if the piece is performed without any contextual information such as a translation or programme note, what (if anything) can the audience be expected to gain, other than perhaps a generalised sense of emotion?

When considering how other composers have approached similar issues, it is apparent that the decision to use an untranslated text is often the most practical answer to a specific question or circumstance. For example, British composer Stef Conner has described her use of Old English texts as a form of practice-based research into Old English poetry.¹ Examples include compositions such as *Hord Songs*, from 2012.² In contrast, Gavin Bryars' use of Old Norse poetry in *From Egil's Saga*, from 2004, was intended for a specific singer from the Faroe Islands who had an affinity with the Old Norse language.³ Similarly, Tarik O'Regan's use of untranslated Middle Irish in a work such as *The Spring* (2008) and *Accalam na Senórach* (2012) had particular relevance for the National Chamber Choir of Ireland, who performed them.⁴ Kaija Saariaho's use of the Occitan language in works such as *Lonh* (2005) and *L'amour de loin* (2000) is a reference to the world of the Troubadours.⁵ Jonathan Harvey's opera ***Wagner Dream* (2006)** was translated into the ancient Pali language 'to enhance and clarify the cultural dialogue which is the centrepiece of [the] opera'.⁶ Natasha Barrett's use of untranslated Old Norse poetry in her electroacoustic work *...The Fetters of a Dream...* draws attention to a sense of place in relation to Norwegian Radio, who commissioned the work.⁷

What, then, is the relevance of Old English in *We Are Apart; Our Song Together*? Admittedly, my decision to focus on early medieval text stemmed from my interest in language and my subsequent undergraduate degree in this area. However, as my creative practice developed, I became increasingly aware of the layers of meaning that are evident when such texts are used in musical composition. The work of composer Chaya Czernowin was of particular interest to me in this respect. In her opera *Prima...Ins Innere*, composed between 1998 and 1999, the text consisted of wordless vocalisation.⁸ Although there were only two characters on stage, Czernowin used specific groups of instruments and singers to portray the two characters. She described how this was done in order to examine the different, sometimes opposed, plural voices that exist within a single voice, and 'to enact the processes underneath the character's mental states'.⁹ Czernowin's musical treatment of multilayered, multiple identities within a single voice suggested parallels with my approach to the complex, inner voices of the narrator in *Wulf and Eadwacer*. The idea of using the sound of a single voice to explore the fluid, ambiguous relationships between emotion, memory, landscape and character implied possibilities rich in creative potential. As my research questions began to crystallise around the layers of meaning and multiple voices within the Old English poem, my investigation focused increasingly on electroacoustic materials. The subsequent stage of the investigation led to a new, longer work for electroacoustic fixed media (tape), which eventually became *Ungelīc is Ūs*.

Footnotes for section 6:

1 Stef Conner, 'Early Words to Late Music: The Value of Practice-led Research in Composition as a Companion to the Analysis of Old English Poetic Metre', in *Principles of Music Composing: The Phenomenon of Rhythm*, ed. by Rimantas Janeliauskas (Vilnius, Lithuania: 13th International Music Theory Conference, 16 October 2013) <<http://zurnalai.lmta.lt/wp-content/uploads/2013/Muzikos-komponavimo-principai-XIII-Conner.pdf>> [accessed 5 June 2019] pp. 86–99.

2 Stef Conner, *Hord Songs*, (Unpublished: 2012).

3 Gavin Bryars, *From Egil's Saga* (London: Schott, 2004).

4 Tarik O'Regan, *Acallam na Senórach: an Irish Colloquy* (London: Novello, 2010); *The Spring* (London: Novello, 2008).

5 Kaija Saariaho, *L'Amour de loin* (London: Chester Music, 2000); *Lonh* (London: Chester Music, 2005).

Wagner Dream (2006) popover: Jonathan Harvey, *Wagner Dream* (London: Faber, 2006).

6 David Pountney, 'A Note about Language', in *Welsh National Opera: Wagner Dream* (Summer 2013 Programme Book), p. 52.

7 Natasha Barrett, ...*The Fetters of a Dream...* Electroacoustic Composition (2005).

8 Chaya Czernowin, *Prima... ins Innere* (London: Schott, 2010).

9 Chaya Czernowin, 'The Primal, the Abstracted and the Foreign: Composing for the Voice'. *Contemporary Music Review*, 34.5–6 (2015), 449–463 (pp. 453–454).

7. *Ungelīc is Ūs*

Up to this point, the methodology that gave rise to *We Are Apart; Our Song Together* had used the poem's linear structure to suggest musical form. However, although this approach retained the integrity of the text, it overlooked the layered complexity of the narrator's inner monologue as her thoughts move seamlessly between memory, contemplation of her present situation and consideration of the future. I was fascinated by Bruno Bossis' assertion that, in Luciano Berio's [Thema – Omaggio a Joyce](#), sonic phenomena generate long-range literary and musical processes, fulfilling a structural role rather than carrying exact meaning.¹ In focusing on the temporal layers within the poem, my first research question was simply to ask how I might free the text from its linear timeline, to consider it almost as though it were an object suspended in space. This approach was, in part, inspired by Pierre Boulez's discussion of the varieties of musical commentary that might arise in response to a poem. Boulez proposed that 'musically speaking there are two times, one for the poem as action and one for the poem as reflection'.² To develop a structure that was less dependent on the order of the lines of the poem, I turned to the last line of the text's refrain, '[ungelīc\(e\) is ūs](#)'. Using the spoken rhythm of the words 'ungelīc is ūs', the phrase was recomposed using a mixture of consonant and breath sounds, drawing on a technique that the composer Cathy Lane described as 'melodic or rhythmic extraction, translation and elaboration' in electroacoustic music.³ This created a motif, akin to a non-semantic commentary on the poem's refrain, heard at four points during the piece, at [30"](#), [1'01"](#), [1'59"](#) and [8'06"](#). This motif, together with markers such as a spoken or sung line of text, acts almost like a punctuation point before the introduction of a new section or idea in the music.

However, the mention of a sectional structure raises another fundamental research question. Given that the structure of *We Are Apart; Our Song Together* was determined by the order of the lines of poetry, what would provide the structural framework of the new piece? Was a formal model even necessary or desirable in order to facilitate commentary on the poem? *We Are Apart; Our Song Together* had treated the text's various strata of emotions, characters and images as synchronous components of a single movement work. My subsequent decision to move beyond a sequential reworking of the poem gave rise to the idea of a temporal separation of the text's strata. In attempting to free the text from its original time frame, I began to group the musical material according to its salient characteristics such as definite and indefinite pitch, tessitura, and harmonic content. In my electroacoustic composition *Ungelīc is Ūs*, the different types of musical material are summarised using graphical symbols (which are explained in the score's [preface pages](#)). The process of trial and experiment ultimately led to the development of six main sections that reflect different aspects of the text's thematic material.

At a purely symbolic level, the six sections correspond to the six syllables of the refrain in its second version, 'ungelīce is ūs'. The [introductory section \(up to 32"\)](#) uses almost entirely sounds of indefinite pitch, based on recorded samples of the spoken and sung text which have been transformed to allude to the watery, windswept landscape in which the poem is set. The [second section \(up to 1'04"\)](#) introduces material of a definite pitch, based on a sustained G, and introduces

the name of one of the poem's principal characters, Eadwacer. The [third section \(up to 2'03"\)](#) further develops material of definite pitch, based on spectral analyses of the singer's voice, in general no lower than the pitch of the G below middle C and thus within the average range of a female or juvenile male voice. In this way, this section alludes to the character of the female narrator and the unnamed child. The [fourth section \(up to 4'42"\)](#) develops cycling melismatic phrases based on 'Wulf', the other named character in the text. The [fifth section \(up to 8'08"\)](#), develops recognisably vocal material of a lower pitch, alluding to the voices of the poem's male characters. The [final section](#) was a deliberate attempt to combine elements that had already been heard, while introducing new ideas such as the opening half line of the poem ([at 8'26"\)](#), definite pitch material based on the motif ([from 8'30"\)](#), and repeated, recited lines of the poem ([from around 10'56"\)](#).

However, is the division of a composition into seemingly arbitrary sections really an example of a commentary on a text? Can such a process even be described as commentary when the source text is itself obscure and unknown to all but a handful of literary specialists? In *Ungelīc is Ūs*, the division of material into sections is perhaps more understandable as an underlying structural principle, rather than something that will have direct relevance to the listener's interpretation of precise words and phrases. It is a subjective response; one of many other possible solutions to the research questions that were posed during the process of this project. In each section of the composition, samples of vocal material are transformed into different pitches and timbres, to suggest a proliferation of voices. However, the material keeps returning to the relatively unaltered voice of the solo mezzo-soprano. At a structural level, the arrangement of different types of material was intended to highlight the duality of presence and absence, desire and abhorrence, nostalgia and regret that pervades the text, summarised by the contradictory sense of separation and intimacy in [the poem's final two lines](#).

The central issue of commentary draws attention to another issue regarding *Ungelīc is Ūs*. All of the sung material is taken from the vocal line of *We Are Apart; Our Song Together*. [Shared vocal phrases](#) and [some of the sounds that are reminiscent of water or wind](#) are duplicated in the two pieces. As in *We Are Apart; Our Song Together*, stereo panning is used to create a sense of movement and distance between different sounds. In a subsequent, quadrophonic version of *Ungelīc is Ūs*, voices frequently seem to move in a circular motion around the listener, to draw attention to the centrality of the listener's experience. However, given the evident similarities between the two works, *Ungelīc is Ūs* could also be understood as a commentary on the previous composition for voice and tape. The idea of a dialectical relationship between the two works is further implied by the way in which they are presented together in this exposition.

However, the discussion of commentary from the composer's perspective risks implying a causal link between artistic decisions and the listener's experience. Repeated listening during the creative process can blunt the composer's perception of a sound's emotional and extramusical connotations, creating a potential rift between composer and audience. Indeed, one of Jean-Jaques Nattiez's key criticisms of [Schaefferian reduced listening](#) is that it is essentially linked to creation

rather than interpretation, describing the type of listening that is undertaken by a composer when assembling sounds into a work.⁴ In contrast, Gary Kendall's discussion of the listener, focusing on the ways in which feeling and emotion can contribute to multi-layered interpretations of an electroacoustic work, draws attention away from creation towards reception.⁵ In the process of my creative practice, Kendall's idea of the listener's 'mental layers' of electroacoustic music suggested parallels with the layered nature of the Old English poem, and its potential for multiple, overlapping, divergent interpretations.⁶ However, the variety of approaches that have informed my practice suggest that different theories of listening and meaning need not be mutually exclusive. The web of relationships between voice and listener, meaning and interpretation, and sound and source, is itself conducive to a multilayered lattice of different theories and explanations. Istvan Anhalt drew attention to the complex relationship between composer, interpreter, hearer and 'questioner' in vocal music, noting that ideas of meaning and interpretation often overlook the potential differences between the knowledge, traditions and 'affective space' of each of these roles.⁷

As I developed my approach to commentary in the light of these ideas, the listener became the nodal point within a complex system of relationships that linked the Old English poem with the electroacoustic vocality of my compositions. The work of Nina Sun Eidsheim was crucial in this regard. In proposing that the source of the voice is not the singer, but rather the listener, Eidsheim drew attention to the agency of the listener in relation to meaning and interpretation.⁸ Rather than something imposed by an authoritative *acousmêtre*, commentary became an expansive, generous medium, capable of holding the sometimes conflicting and ambiguous voices of the Old English poem within an open-ended artistic process. Faced with sounds including definite and indefinite pitch, phonemes, and Old English words and phrases, the listener became obliged to navigate a largely non-semantic network of sonic materials, arriving at a subjective interpretation based on the totality of sounds that are heard. In many ways, this process mirrors the composer's journey through the multilayered strata of the Old English poem. As Lucile Desblache has noted regarding Kaija Saariaho's treatment of Occitan in [L'Amour de loin](#), the use of medieval text could emphasise the idea that meaning is not only expressed semantically, and that 'sound can play both a signified and signifier role'.⁹ In many ways, my approach to commentary encourages a type of listening which has more in common with the ways in which we perceive non-vocal music. As Rita Aiello has noted in relation to instrumental music, 'the lack of a specific semantic component leaves the listeners quite free to select from the meaning created by the combinations of the musical elements, and to attach their own meanings to the musical composition as a whole'.¹⁰

Graphic score of *Ungelīc is Ūs*

The graphic score was created primarily for the electronics performer, prioritising information such as timings and pitch cues (to facilitate live diffusion of the quadrophonic version of this piece).

Footnotes for section 7:

Thema – Omaggio a Joyce popover: Luciano Berio, *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, Tape Composition (1958).

1 Bruno Bossis, 'La voix des sirènes: *Thema – Omaggio a Joyce* de Luciano Berio', in *Le Modèle Vocal: la musique, la voix, la langue*, ed. by Bruno Bossis, Marie-Noëlle Masson and Jean-Paul Olive (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007), pp. 22–32 (p. 32).

2 Pierre Boulez, *Orientations: Collected Writings*, ed. by Jean-Jaques Nattiez, trans. by Martin Cooper (London: Faber, 1986), p. 196.

3 Cathy Lane, 'Voices from the Past: Compositional Approaches to Using Recorded Speech', *Organised Sound*, 11.1 (2006), 3–11
<<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bcu.ac.uk/10.1017/S1355771806000021>> (p. 6).

Schaefferian reduced listening popover: Reduced listening – listening to the sound itself, without considering its source or means of production.

See Pierre Schaeffer, *Treatise on Musical Objects: An Essay Across Disciplines*, trans. by Christine North and John Dack (Oakland, University of California Press, 2017), pp. 212–214.

4 Jean-Jaques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Towards a Semiology of Music*, trans. by Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990) p. 95.

5 Gary S. Kendall, 'The Feeling Blend: Feeling and Emotion in Electroacoustic Art', *Organised Sound*, 19 (2014), 192–202
<<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bcu.ac.uk/10.1017/S1355771814000132>> (p. 192).

6 Gary S. Kendall, 'Listening and Meaning: How a Model of Mental Layers Informs Electroacoustic Music Analysis', in *Expanding the Horizon of Electroacoustic Music Analysis*, ed. by Simon Emmerson and Leigh Landy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) pp. 31–57.

7 Istvan Anhalt, 'Pst...Pst...Are You Listening? Hearing Voices from Yesterday', in *The Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought*, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1992), II, pp. 977–992 (p. 978).

8 Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre & Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), p.178.

L'amour de loin popover: Kaija Saariaho, *L'Amour de loin* (London: Chester Music, 2000).

9 Lucile Desblache, 'Tales of the Unexpected: Opera as a New Art of Glocalization', in *Music, Text and Translation*, ed. by Helen Julia Minors (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) pp. 9–19 (p. 12).

10 Rita Aiello, 'Music and Language: Parallels and Contrasts', in *Musical Perceptions*, ed. by Rita Aiello with John A. Sloboda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 40–63 (p. 55).

8. Conclusions; Future Directions

Throughout this exposition, the complex relationships between commentary, electroacoustic composition and Old English poetry have been inextricably linked to considerations of the literal and metaphorical voice. In working through the research questions that led to *We Are Apart; Our Song Together* and *Ungelīc is Ūs*, the role and identity of the voice in electroacoustic music did not become clearer. Instead, the mercurial quality of the electroacoustic voice found its ideal counterpart in the ambiguous, fluid nature of the Old English poem. In the context of these compositions, voice is plural and multivalent, encompassing poet, composer, singer, and the electroacoustic transformations of her voice. Faced with such a diversity of voices, Nina Sun Eidsheim's proposal that the voice is located in the person of the listener, rather than the performer, helped to draw together the multiple ideas and identities of voice in my work.¹

In developing this exposition, its justification as artistic research, rather than as research informed practice, depends to a large extent on the contribution to knowledge arising from the project's interdisciplinarity. In bringing together music and Old English, in a specific synthesis between the arts and humanities, methodologies of practice-based research create the conditions in which new perspectives can be revealed more readily. The musical compositions build on enduring literary debates surrounding the meaning and characterisation of the source text, *Wulf and Eadwacer*. In contrast to the many chapters and articles devoted to this poem, my work opens up a number of different ways to interpret the text, not through literary paraphrase or precis, but directly through the medium of the phonetic sounds of Old English. In transforming, manipulating and exploring these sounds by means of electroacoustic music, the work foregrounds the sounds of Old English within a methodology that is based on the idea of commentary, drawing on philologically informed pronunciation to facilitate this process. The ambiguous, multi-layered nature of the resulting music necessarily reflects the same qualities in the poem. As a literary work, the poem's poignant beauty is arguably heightened by the ways in which its emotional complexity eludes clear definition. The intrinsic abstraction of the musical commentary, as described in this exposition, enables the text to be re-presented without diminishing its complexity.

Insights gained in relation to the text, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, are closely linked to the ways in which the project calls into question issues of voice and identity in electroacoustic music. As examples of artistic research, the musical compositions provide outcomes which are necessarily speculative rather than definitive. However, in the field of electroacoustic composition, the two works provide an illustration of the ways in which phonetic material might be used to explore the layers of meaning within a literary text. Since the dawn of electroacoustic music, composers have often drawn on fragmentation and collage to dissolve the semantic meaning of words and phrases, rendering sonic materials derived from text into more abstract musical compositions. In contrast, my work demonstrates how the phonetic sounds of an ancient language might be developed and explored not to create a purely abstract sound world, but to allude to the totality of a source text, including its sonic, structural and thematic content. Consequently, my methodology provides an exemplar for

others who might wish to explore the relationships between language, literature and the electroacoustic voice. In more general terms, the project demonstrates some of the ways in which the creative arts can engage with ancient or obscure cultural artefacts such as literary texts, not through historically informed recreation, but through contemporary artistic practice.

The two compositions that are presented in this exposition can only illustrate one composer's path through a series of research questions; the works are intentionally neither absolute nor conclusive. Moreover, the research questions that I chose to investigate were themselves the result of my own subjective preferences and decisions. The iterative, cyclic methodology that gave rise to my musical compositions is necessarily open-ended. As such, a key element of my methodology depends on its ability to stimulate further research questions, forming part of an ongoing process of practice-based research. With regard to the future directions of this research, Nina Sun Eidsheim's proposal that sound, music, singing and listening are not isolated phenomena but could be mutually important aspects of the totality of an 'event', called into question the ways in which my work had separated the voice into live and pre-recorded, electroacoustic components.² In confronting this disjunction, live electronics, whereby the on-stage performer's voice is transformed and diffused in real time, could suggest ways to reunite live and precomposed electroacoustic musical elements through more interactive processes.

It was in the context of new developments in live electronics, vocal processing and analysis that the continuation of this research project was born. 'Augmented Vocality: Recomposing the Sounds of Early Irish and Old Norse' centres on a programme of practice-based research and a methodology to analyse and explore the sounds of two linguistic corpora; Old and Middle Irish and Old Norse. Combining linguistic expertise with sophisticated voice processing technologies, the project aims to give new life to early languages and help reclaim the oral, performative quality at the heart of medieval literature. In particular, vocal music composition with live electronics can provide a powerful tool to develop new insights and reanimate texts from early languages for audiences well beyond the field of literary studies.

In providing the conditions for unforeseen outcomes to grow and develop into new lines of enquiry, my methodology had fulfilled a key condition of its role. In his discussion of artistic practice as research, Anthony Gritten proposed that artistic work can arise most productively when 'the relationship between its practice and research components cannot be defined in advance with full and absolute clarity'.³ As my research continues to develop and evolve, I look forward to the questions, ambiguities, contradictions and problems that will give rise to new musical compositions.

Footnotes for section 8:

1 Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre & Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), p.178.

2 Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing & Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 181.

3 Anthony Gritten, 'Determination and Negotiation in Artistic Practice as Research in Music', in *Artistic Practice as Research in Music: Theory, Criticism, Practice*, ed. By Mine Doğantan-Dack (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp.73–90 (p. 89).

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Kaija Saariaho, *Lonh*, Dawn Upshaw (soprano), Reijo Kiilunen (producer), Franck Rossi (engineer), David Poissonier (engineer). [CD] Recorded at IRCAM, Paris, March 1997. In: *Private Gardens* (Ondine ODE 9062, 1997).

Trevor Wishart, *Globalalia, Imago* [CD] (OTP 0066, 2004).

Trevor Wishart, *Encounters in the Republic of Heaven* [CD] (2010).

Trevor Wishart, *Red Bird: A Political Prisoner's Dream*, electronic download (Sub Rosa, 1977), available at <<http://www.apple.com/itunes/>> [accessed 7 June 2016].

ii. DVD and Video

Chaya Czernowin, *Pnima... Ins Innere*, Richard Beek, Philip Larson, Tom Sol, Elias Maurides, Ute Wasserman, Silke Storz (voices), Anthony Burr (clarinet), Rico Gubler (saxophone), Andreas Eberle (trombone), David Shivley (singing saw, percussion), Mary Oliver (viola), Frank Cox (violoncello), Munich Chamber Orchestra, André Richard, Michael Acker, Reinhold Braig (sound direction), Johannes Kalitzke (conductor), [DVD] Recorded at 7. Münchener Biennale, 2000. (Mode 169, 2006).

Kaija Saariaho, *L'Amour de loin*, Gerald Finley (baritone), Dawn Upshaw (soprano), Monica Groop (mezzo-soprano), Finnish National Opera Orchestra, Finnish National Opera Chorus, Esa-Pekka Salonen (conductor), Peter Sellars (stage director). [DVD] Recorded at the Finnish National Opera, Helsinki, Finland, September 2004 (Deutsche Grammophon 00440 073 4026, 2005).