

My Theatrical Sensibility: Theatricality as Metaphor and Tool for Composition

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music The University of Sydney

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Declaration

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work.
This thesis has not been submitted to any other degree or other purpose.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Ian Whitney

Abstract

This thesis and accompanying portfolio of compositions are the work of one who identifies as a composer with a *theatrical* sensibility, whether I am writing for the dramatic or the concert stage. Theatricality as a process in musical creation has been little examined; through parsing theatricality as a discourse in Chapter Two I assemble a number of manifestations relevant to me. I analyse how these tropes occur within my work as outlets for my sense of theatricality, and, in particular, how they impact upon the key triadic relationship between composer, performer, and audience. In Chapters Three and Four, I study these tools and this relationship in two instrumental works: *A Painting by Magritte* and *Five Scenes*. In Chapter Five, my analysis moves from a metaphorical consideration of theatricality to theatricality as constitutive feature as I examine a dramatic work, my chamber opera *David Davis@*. I argue that although this shift is important, the underlying traits and concepts within my process remain the same as they were in the concert works. This study closes with a post-compositional and post-analytical reconsideration and reframing of my relationship with theatricality, and how this relationship has matured within, and traces a future path for, my ongoing artistic practice.

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1. Introduction

This chapter both introduces me as a composer, including pertinent biographical information that shows an early, if uninformed, interest in theatricality. It then details my methodology, which initially began with autoethnography and the reasons for the subsequent expansion of method to include a hermeneutic component.

1.1 Background

Why do I write my music the way that I do?

The journey to considering my own composition practice through a lens of theatricality originally began, as does much of my composition, in French music from the first half of the twentieth century. This music has always had a prominent influence on my own, and, as someone who has been somewhat a Francophile since primary school, I am gratified when told that my music ‘sounds’ French. I began to consider what does this mean: how does an Australian composer in the twenty-first century sound like a French composer of almost a hundred years earlier while not working solely in pastiche? My initial understanding was that it related to my use of suggestive rather than declarative textures, of a shifting but largely tonal harmonic language rooted in modes and ambiguous chords, and perhaps a reliance on woodwind writing to provide colour and movement. I also questioned why my interest in French music also waned with the start of the Second World War. For someone fascinated by French culture, why was I unable to (readily) name a single living contemporary French composer?

Through various casual conversations, I was subsequently introduced to the French composer Guillaume Connesson (b. 1970). While I find Connesson’s music charming, it was in fact a slim promotional interview on YouTube which resonated and formed the genesis of my thinking over the next several years. His comments, were as follows:

S'il y avait un mot pour moi qui résume mon approche de la musique, c'est le théâtre, c'est la théâtralité. Pour moi il y a vraiment deux grandes familles de musiciens: les musiciens de théâtre, et les musiciens purs, on va dire. Et quand je dis les musiciens de théâtre, c'est pas nécessairement des gens qui ont écrit des opéras; pour moi Beethoven est profondément un musicien de théâtre, et bien sur il a écrit Fidelio, mais enfin c'est pas peut-être le point le plus fort de sa production. Donc il y a une façon d'articuler le discours musical qui s'appuie sur une théâtralité, et il y a une autre façon, qui est une façon plus abstraite, Fauré par exemple ou Brahms d'ailleurs qui est un peu l'anti-théâtralité, qui est une musique géniale naturellement. Mais c'est pas ma famille, clairement je me sens vraiment appartenir à une famille théâtrale. Si vous me regardez les grands chocs que j'ai eu dans ma vie, c'est quasiment que des opéras, pour moi c'est l'aboutissement de ma vie. Ça, l'opéra est quelque chose, cette, euh, ce fantasme, c'est un fantasme bien sur, mais de l'art total qui réunirais le geste, la danse, la parole, le décor, tout l'aspect spectacle.

If there was one word for me that sums up my musical approach, it's theatre, it's theatricality. For me, there really are two large families of musicians: theatre musicians, and pure musicians, let's say. And when I say theatre musicians, it's not necessarily people who wrote operas; for me Beethoven is profoundly a theatrical musician, and of course he wrote Fidelio, but it perhaps isn't the strongest part of his output. So there is a way to articulate the musical discourse that relies on theatricality, and there is another way, which is a more abstract one, Fauré for instance or Brahms even, a kind of anti-theatricality, which is great music naturally. But it's not my family, clearly I feel like I belong to a theatrical family. If you look at the great shocks I have had in my life, they are almost all operas, for me it's the outcome of my life. Opera is something, this fantasy; it is a fantasy of course, but a total form of art that would gather motion, dance, speech, the set, the whole show aspect. (Classical Social Club, 2013)

What immediately struck me was how obvious his observations were, and how I immediately identified myself with the theatrical side of this binary taxonomy.

Two brief caveats before proceeding. First, it should be noted that in the context of the video, Connesson most likely had not intended to lay out a grand philosophical framework for the consideration of all composition. In any case, my attempts to contact him for further comment via his personal website and his university outside Paris were unsuccessful.

Nonetheless, as a spark, his comments provide an important context for my own work, both my compositional practice and this subsequent reflective analysis.

Second, I would also like to note that in this introductory chapter, my use of the seemingly cognate terms ‘theatre’, ‘theatrical’, and ‘theatricality’ will be relatively un-nuanced and will, partly, indicate a usage that is in common everyday parlance or reflective of my understanding at the time. I will take up a more considered analysis of these terms in Chapter Two.

The early to mid-1990s were a particularly fertile time for the musical theatre extravaganza in Australia. This marked the peak of the Andrew Lloyd Webber boom, when his latest production was a national event that demanded a package holiday to Melbourne. My grandmother took one of these holidays from her home on the Gold Coast to see *The Phantom of the Opera* in 1990. She returned with the full souvenir programme set and double cassette recording which, as an eight-year-old, I purloined and devoured. This began a love affair with something that, while its musical merits may be subject to debate, was, by any measure, a highly successful piece of theatrical entertainment.

It was shortly after that I wrote my own full-length libretto adaptation of *David Copperfield*— suitably epic in scope for the period— which is sadly (or perhaps mercifully) lost. For some reason writing music had drifted away at that point of my young life, perhaps it was too abstract a pursuit, replaced by the more at-hand task of creative writing, which I explored through a brief but busy period of short story writing.

By the time I eventually saw *The Phantom of the Opera* on stage it was 1996. Oddly, despite the impact it had on me only a few years earlier through the double cassette recording, I have not a single memory of this production, which was the iconic original touring production with crashing chandelier presented in Brisbane’s Lyric Theatre, at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC). What is memorable, however, was the physical context of the experience. The following evening, I was back at QPAC for my high school’s Speech Night where I had performing duties in the choir and band. Our Speech Night was in the Concert Hall, the auditorium adjacent to the Lyric Theatre. Although, obviously, I understood the performance

occurred repeatedly on subsequent occasions, I was absolutely fascinated to see, over internal television, *The Phantom of the Opera* occurring in parallel next door, completely identical to the experience I had had the previous night but without me in the audience. This began a fascination with the liminal tensions between the experiences of front-of-house and back-of-house that continues today.

At the same time, I was discarding the first serious career I had considered— an architect specialising in hotels— an ambition beaten out of me by a compulsory technical drawing subject at high school. With the benefit of context and hindsight, the love I had (and still retain) for large-scale, luxury hotels indicate an ongoing fascination with how public and private spaces are delineated. I would not go so far as to claim that this mere divide is *prima facie* evidence of theatricality, but it does suggest that I have long had an intense interest in *how* a space is framed to present a story or experience and to engage, or less charitably, to manipulate, a spectator. The semiotics of a grand hotel lobby— the uniforms, the high ceilings, the abundant foliage, or the glass bubble elevator ascending skyward— present just as convincing setting of the scene as the dimming of house lights and the oboe playing the A in the pit.

With architecture now lost to death-by-set-square, music emerged as my keenest interest, even though a sustainable career in it was ill-defined. My mother twigged to my emerging interest in composition long before I did and enrolled me in composition lessons at the Queensland Young Conservatorium with Stephen Leek. Apparently, I loathed the first term of these lessons in 1999, to the extent that I repeatedly asked her to withdraw me as soon as possible. Fortunately, she ignored me, and it speaks to the importance of these lessons in my development as a composer that I have absolutely no recollection of this early misery, instead retaining only overwhelmingly positive memories. One of many debts I owe to my parents that they allowed me to wholeheartedly pursue music in high school— and, indeed, made significant investments in my musical education— without a tangible career objective in sight.

Subsequently, I became a student at the tertiary Queensland Conservatorium for a Bachelor of Music with Gerard Brophy. During these three years, I was repeatedly drawn, however naively or simplistically, to what I conceived of as ‘the theatrical’. This included my literature studies: while my composing colleagues took a unit on modernism, I jumped ship to opera studies. But more importantly, in my second year, I wrote a thirty-minute operatic work adapted from a Japanese folk tale (unfortunately most memorable for the rudimentary set catching ablaze in the first performance, necessitating an evacuation and a change in the Conservatorium’s naked flame policy). This was followed in my final year with a fifty-minute monodrama for soprano, dancer, and mixed ensemble based on the story of Dutch spy Mata Hari. This had well received (and pyrotechnic-free) public performances and was favourably reviewed in the now-defunct *Opera News*. In my third year, I received a fellowship from the Australian Youth Orchestra and the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) for a six-week residency at NIDA writing music for a second-year production of *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Jennifer Hagan. Outside my burgeoning composition career, I had planted myself in the theatre world with a casual job in front-of-house at QPAC, which allowed me even more fully to enjoy the transition between front-of/back-of house spaces I had first encountered the night after *The Phantom of the Opera*.

This pursuit of opportunities to work in theatrical contexts afforded me two different development programs themed by the seven deadly sins: another Australian Youth Orchestra project in early 2005 for which I wrote operatic scenes based on Gluttony and Lust; and then again in 2015 for the Victorian Opera when I wrote companion scenes to Kurt Weill’s *Seven Deadly Sins*, returning to Lust, and replacing Gluttony with Sloth.

Following completion of a Master’s degree— in arts management, as a hedge against the precarity of a career in music— I began a ten-year stint of working outside of music. This began with five years in Washington DC, working in the cultural affairs office of the Embassy of Australia. During this period, I continued to dabble in composition, entering the occasional

competition. Without the structured tuition or the support of a network of musicians, the music I wrote during this period was generally not hugely compelling or effective.

Following my time in Washington, I moved to Sydney to and worked in various roles at the Australia Council for the Arts. It was this role, and particularly a happy period with the (no longer extant) Music Board, that began to bring me back to the world of Western Art Music. There was a sense of possibility in a highly bureaucratic role and the good fortune of having a well-paid job which required me to listen to vast scopes of new Australian music of all genres. I would spend my day in headphones 'discovering' genres as diverse as the heaviest of death metal, computer-generated chiptune, bringing myself up to speed with the state of Australian musical theatre, Australian folk country, electronic dance music, the latest developments in Australian jazz, and, most importantly, the current state of Western art music.

This proved fundamental. There was a great deal of music which I would listen to in relation to which the idea of being a composer seemed impossible: this was so good and new and interesting that my role as bureaucrat and competent compositional dabbler seemed a more appropriate calling. However, there was also enough music in response to which I, as a classic armchair critic, thought 'well I could do that'. The inevitable question began to percolate: 'why am I *not* doing that?'

I subsequently decided to test my abilities with what I viewed as a significant challenge—a 'put up or shut up' moment. I applied for the Symphony Australia/Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra Composer Program in 2013 and, to my great shock, was accepted with my piece *Hippocampus Dances*. A few smaller opportunities followed, each incrementally building both my craft and my confidence. 2015 proved to be the pivotal year. I was accepted for a second visit to Hobart and, in parallel, to the aforementioned Victorian Opera program. This felt seismic, a fork in the road, at which I had to make the decision on just how seriously I was going to take composition.

The primary reason I applied for a second visit to the Tasmanian program was the involvement of Matthew Hindson, with whom I had previously worked during his tenure as the Chair of the Music Board at the Australia Council. During that time, I had been impressed by the vigour, insight, and openness to genre he had brought to the role and the opportunity to work with him on composition was attractive. It was Matthew who, towards the end of the week in Hobart, floated the idea of formal study.

I had resisted any return to university for years, but now with the opportunity of improvement to craft it seemed the obvious next step. It is appropriate, considering this project, that the decision to take this step was made in the context of the theatrical work I was doing with Victorian Opera at the time. However, with the commencement of formal study, the thorny topic of a research question emerged.

1.2 The Research Question

Like many artists who return to university after a period outside of formal study I have discovered that the formulation of a central research question has had its challenges (Harrison & Draper, 2011; Hodges, 2017; Vincs, 2017). However, the central questions posed by Robert Vincs have proven the most useful: why do I compose the way that I do and how does the audience experience it? (2017, p. 53). As someone who is not a performing-composer like Vincs, I would also add the performer to the second half of the question: how do the audience *and the performer(s)* experience the music I compose? Vincs proposes this formulation as the source from which all artist-research questions flow, a position with which I agree.

The function or development of the binary taxonomy quoted earlier from Connesson (theatrical vs antitheatrical), whilst interesting and important as a developmental step, is not the focus of my work. Nor do I stand in any particular judgement as to which half of the binary is 'better' (neither, for that matter, does Connesson). While I certainly consider myself to be on the theatrical side of the ledger, a sweeping taxonomic approach to Western Art Music, predicated upon the distinction between the 'theatrical' and the 'non-theatrical' is of little interest to me.

Nonetheless, there has been a tradition of attempting to create such compositional taxonomies. Richard Strauss, in a 1944 letter to Roland Tenschert, produced a clear ‘family tree’ of compositional lineage to himself. In this letter, he considered himself a ‘dramatist’, along with Mozart, Berlioz, and Wagner (and others), but company from which he explicitly excluded Brahms, Bruckner, and Tchaikovsky. While stage works featured in the outputs of most, but not all, of his list of ‘dramatist’ composers, a clear thread emerges of programmatic scope in both stage and non-stage writing (Larkin, 2017). Curiously, Tchaikovsky’s ballet scores do not form part of Strauss’s consideration. When I see compositional taxonomies, and notwithstanding my comfort in putting myself on the theatrical/antitheatrical ledger, I do share some sympathy with the American composer Nico Muhly’s observation that it is creatively fatal for a composer to self-categorise into a Linnean taxonomy of music (2016).

Rather, the putative distinction between what might be categorised, on one hand, as being ‘theatrical’, and on the other non-theatrical music provides the context for how I am choosing to respond to Vincs’s central question: how does an understanding of ‘theatricality’ as a compositional tool lead me to write the music that I write, and how does it shape the way in which the audience/performers experience it? As will be examined further in the next chapter, the triadic relationship of author-audience-performer in ‘theatricality’ provides a productive connective tissue between Vincs’s formulation and my own work.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 In and Out of Autoethnography

Andrys Onsman and Robert Burke (2017) argue that in any kind of musical-artistic research the subjectivity (that is, personal biography) of the composer/musician is an unavoidable factor. Such a researcher cannot, they suggest, be an objective observer who collects data and dispassionately analyses it in order to draw a disinterested conclusion. This is my position: my identity as a composer is inseparable from my research objectives. Indeed,

rather than this constituting a methodological problem, I argue that my relationship to my practice constitutes an inherent benefit in this research rather than an obstacle to be overcome.

In considering this benefit, I originally sought to adopt an autoethnographic approach both to acknowledge (and, perhaps, to allow for) this personal subjectivity but also to recognise the analytical and interpretative value of that subjectivity. The strengths of this approach for artistic research can be found in its inherent relationship with artistic practice: as noted by Phoebe Green (2018), the reflection and self-critique which are deeply embedded within successful autoethnography are also foundational to successful artistic development and growth. Indeed, it is arguable that all effective practice based research is impossible without some elements of autoethnographic practice (Skains, 2018) but curiously it is a method which has not been taken up with much enthusiasm in studies of Western Art Music. This is perhaps due to a historical, although evolving, emphasis on written objects such as scores rather than what is seen as the 'subjective' dimension of the performance or of the moment of creation (Aszodi, 2018; Bartleet, 2013).

One approach to autoethnography which I found compelling was the writing of Peter Knight (2009), in which he clearly links his first-person narrative to creative practice. Knight recounts his own journey towards improvised music, drawing upon childhood and student memories and key events. He also makes the connection between jazz improvisation and autoethnography as two tools to allow one's own identity to 'speak'— an idea which Bartleet further touches upon in acknowledging that the written work may be redundant as the artistic object is autoethnographic in itself (Bartleet, 2009, 2013). Accepting the written exegesis as a necessity in my present case, what particularly strikes me in Knight's account is how through the use of autoethnography he can answer his artistic question: how does an Australian musician find "authentic expression in the context of idioms and forms imported from America and Europe" (p. 81). This centring of artistic practice also helped to counter some of my concerns with autoethnography: the focus on intense introspection that is often seen as a

cornerstone of successful autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Denzin, 2014; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). To successfully interrogate my own work, I found that I also needed to create a distance: to establish an identity as an analyst, apart from my identity as a composer. In other words, I could not achieve the required level of introspection when operating as a composer focused on creative problem-solving.

R. Lyle Skains (2018) proposes a methodology that she calls 'auto-ethnomethodology' which affords the analyst the means with which to focus on creative practice while establishing and maintaining a critical distance. This methodology acknowledges subjectivity and the role it plays within a creative-analytical process to capture an ethnography that can explore process and is intrinsically linked between the triad of identities of self, researcher, and writer (for which I can substitute 'composer'). Skains acknowledges the importance of this subjectivity, but adds rigour to the research process by proposing the addition of time and perspective, which addresses the common criticism of autoethnography as being overly reliant on uninterrogated personal memory (Chang, 2008; Pugh, 2006). Skains advocates the taking of notes, through journaling or drafts or whatever other form feels appropriate to the artist (or similar), during the act of creation but defers the process of analysis until a period of time has elapsed. This post-process approach allows a broader perspective removed from the actual consuming act of creation. In my analysis this was important. The role of chronological distance for effective research analysis is also a key argument of Onsmann and Burke (2017), albeit with a strong focus on performance rather than the broader genre-agnostic approach of Skains.

With auto-ethnomethodology as a foundation, I maintained a parallel compositional journal, a practice that has been reconceptualised as data-gathering as non-traditional research/creative research further embeds into an academic context (Arnold, 2007; Haseman & Mafe, 2009; Skains, 2018; Sullivan, 2009). However, as this project developed, I found I was instead drawing more on the post-compositional viewpoint, rather than on the autoethnographic materials developed in parallel to the moment of creation, such as the journal.

The auto-ethnomethodological process did not, and indeed could not, disappear in its entirety but receded in importance. Throughout the following chapters, I will still refer to my evolving states of mind during the creative process, for which the journal is the source, but the project developed more into a hermeneutic study of the finished works.

1.3.2 Hermeneutic Approach

With the prioritisation of the post-compositional viewpoint in my analysis, a hermeneutic approach became key to explicating how I understood my music as exemplifying aspects of theatricality. Debates over the musical hermeneutic approach have been vigorous since the late twentieth-century emergence of the 'New Musicology', and it is not my intent to re-litigate these arguments (see, for example; Clarke, 2011; McClary, 1991; Pontara, 2015; Savage, 2009).

The hermeneutic approach has been more commonly applied to music of the long nineteenth century than contemporary art music. This can be attributed to several causes such as the dominance of this repertoire in performance and study, the prevalence of program music that provides a particular inducement to this analytical approach, and, more broadly, a shared musical language that allowed the establishment of communally recognised semiotic connections. Klein and Reyland (2013) argue that the role of tonality is one such shared language and that the increasing subversion of tonality in twentieth century modernism made the focus of interpretation shift (see also McClary, 1997). This is not to say the consideration of tonality disappears entirely: for example, in a series of analyses of twentieth and twenty-first century music edited by Klein and Reyland, several authors refer to tonalities utilised within the work they are studying, but also draw upon a wider range of discourses from the political, social and cultural milieux in which the work was written (Everett, 2013; Gopinath, 2013; Leydon, 2013).

Lawrence Kramer laid out four key claims (1990) that subsequently form a basis for his model of musical hermeneutics. In brief, they can be summarised as 1) music has meaning that

can be approached discursively, 2) that these meanings are substantial enough for analysis and interpretation, 3) that they are intimately bound up within the music, not extrinsic to it, and 4) that meaning is inescapably part of the broader culture. It is the last two of these claims that attracted the most vigorous debate, not least in the response by Carolyn Abbate (2004). Abbate posited that a hermeneutic approach required a “metaphysical distance” (p. 511) that was impossible to achieve when one was involved in what she calls ‘real music’, by which she means the act of listening, creating, or performing music as a temporal experience. But even within this approach, she draws a sharp distinction between *low hermeneutics*, in which the analyst finds extra-musical meaning within the material itself, and *soft hermeneutics*, in which analysis acknowledges the “messy collisions” (p. 516) between the interpreting subject (the interpreter) and the interpreted object. Abbate, however, forcefully argues that the natural state of musical hermeneutics is *low* and that even well-intentioned *soft* approaches eventually become what she sees as the weak analysis of *low hermeneutics*.

Kramer, in his later writings (2020), responds to the critique of Abbate and others, and suggests that their observations are based on an understanding of musical hermeneutics that is too restricted. One instance of what he argues is a foolish limitation— and this will come into sharper focus later in this study— is the role of paramusical information such as a title or program note. Critics of hermeneutics argue that without these tools, an audience has little chance of accurately perceiving what the music, and particularly program music, may represent (Kramer’s example is that without a title, *Ride of the Valkyries* could just as likely be about a steam engine; I would add that for cinephiles it could just as easily be about American military helicopters in Vietnam). Kramer’s response to the suggestion of excluding this paramusical information is “Why play guessing games?” (p. 389): this is, in many cases, information provided by the composer so why would it be excluded from analysis? In the absence of clarifying information, Kramer then makes the subsequent distinction that if the audience hear the ‘wrong’ representation it is not due to an inherent flaw in the music, but due to the nature of

perception, and that the interpretation of music only occurs in tandem with some kind of descriptive information.

The hermeneutic approach I will be taking in this thesis involves an analysis of my works through the lens of discourses that, in my view, constitute the slippery concept of theatricality (which will be addressed in the next chapter). I am conscious of Tia DeNora's succinct warning on this approach: "Identifying abstractions... and perceiving these things 'in' the music has no ground outside of what the analyst says. It is therefore indistinguishable from simple assertion, from an 'I'm telling you, it's there' form of analysis." (2000, p. 29). As a caution about the analysis of music deliberately divorced from any consideration of the act of creation, this is a position with which I share some sympathies. However, my analysis can claim special ground in elucidating *my* creative intentions as I am in the unique position (in respect of this repertory) of being both composer and analyst. Importantly, I have identified concepts and processes in my analysis of which I was unaware while creating: this research is the product of Ian The Composer and Ian The Analyst, who are two equal halves of an identity separated by time.

During the earlier stages of this project, I was concerned that knowing there would be future analysis would impact my creative output: would I find myself writing a portfolio to fit an exegesis? Answers to this concern were found within both the autoethnographic and hermeneutic literatures. Skains refers to the "special motive" (p. 87) for creation: this "special motive" refers to what a layperson would call 'inspiration', with this 'inspiration' given a prominence due to its potential as research material. Ultimately, as Skains writes, this should not be of undue concern: influences come into creative work from all directions, and it would be pointless to try and ring-fence my composition from the reading and thinking I was doing at the time. DeNora, in paraphrasing Kingsbury (1991), offers a succinct observation from the perspective of hermeneutic discourse: "all discourses 'about' the musical object help to constitute that object." (2000, p. 30).

The potential baleful influence of 'writing to the thesis' as I composed my music was also somewhat addressed in the evolution of my methodology: with the post-compositional viewpoint of hermeneutics taking precedence over attempting an autoethnographic capturing of the moment of creation, the analysis was occurring after a significant passage of time had elapsed after the act of creation. Indeed, perhaps the division between these approaches, of the sort I have just done to show how my thinking evolved, is somewhat artificial. The role of the influence of my reading upon my compositional output will be addressed again in Chapter Six.

This thesis argues that my own interest in, investment in, and experience of theatricality manifests in my compositional practice. The next chapter will examine theatricality in more detail as the master-trope for this portfolio, and the analytical foundation for subsequent chapters. Chapters Three and Four take a similar approach to one another: each focuses on a single instrumental work from my portfolio and provides a contextual and musicological analysis of the kind of theatricality the work exhibits. In Chapter Five, I analyse a work written for the theatrical stage and an important shift occurs as the approach transforms from understanding theatricality as a metaphor to theatricality becoming the purpose of existence of the piece of music. In the concluding chapter I will bring in a final work that was written more contemporaneously with this document than the earlier three works. In this, I will demonstrate how my conception of theatricality has evolved within my compositional practice and how my work can move forward.

2. Theatricality

This chapter begins by considering the vexed difficulties in defining theatricality as a concept, then briefly identifies some key definitions which have proven useful, in various degrees, to my own understanding. These definitions are drawn from writers and theorists who examine theatricality in both positive and negative lights. It concludes with a broad overview of how theatricality as a concept has been applied to Western Art Music, introducing some of the approaches I will apply to my own compositional work in following chapters.

2.1 What is Theatricality?

The concept of ‘theatricality’ is slippery and elusive, the subject of significant scholarly debate in the field of theatre and performance studies. Indeed, theatre itself was the subject matter at the inception of literary theory, in Aristotle’s Fourth Century B.C.E. *Poetics* (Aristotle, 2006). The cognate terms ‘theatrical’, as an adjective, and ‘theatricality’, as a quality associated with the idea of the ‘theatre’, are loaded with historical weight, symbolism, contradictions and contested meanings, taken up in a rich scholarly literature (Sauter, 2000; Weber, 2004). On the other hand, as Glen McGillivray has argued, ‘theatrical’ itself might be very simply understood as referring to “a constellation of ideas and practices associated with theatre as an art form”, and which “can operate either descriptively or as a value.” (McGillivray, 2004, p. 116). This position aligns with the elegantly simple formulation offered by Roland Barthes: theatricality is “theatre-minus-text” (1972, p. 26).

If theatricality can be either complicated or straightforward, there are also arguments that theatricality is by its nature incapable of being reduced to a fixed definition (T. C. Davis & Postlewait, 2003), or that it is a tacit concept (Féral & Bermingham, 2002): a version of the ‘I know it when I see it’ definition made famous in the United State Supreme Court definition of pornography (“*Jacobellis v. Ohio*,” 1964). This is a view of theatricality with which I find myself in some agreement: note how difficult it is for Connesson, quoted in Chapter One, to articulate

the conceptual 'other' against which theatrical music might be defined: "there is another way, which is a more abstract one . . . a kind of anti-theatricality". However, while I can acknowledge that there is possibly some validity in taking such a position, it does limit investigative inquiry.

Etymologically, theatricality, and theatre, are derived from the Greek *thea*: a place to see/observe (T. C. Davis & Postlewait, 2003; Weber, 2004). As will become evident, this seeing/observation will emerge as fundamental to any kind of definition of theatricality. While 'theatrical' in English dates from 1558 (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021), Tracy Davis observes that the first use of the word 'theatricality' in English was in 1837 when it was used by Thomas Carlyle: fascinatingly, this was not in a study of performing arts but of the French Revolution. For Carlyle, the performative ostentation of both the *ancien régime*, and, subsequently of the various revolutionary governments constituted something of a sham: an artificial conduct of politics vulnerable to Sansculottism, which he characterised as a "genuine outburst of Nature" (as cited in Maitzen, 1993, p. 44). This relatively recent appearance of the word 'theatricality' in English is intriguing, not only in context of the rich tradition of English drama that had been established over the previous centuries, but also the well-established method of using tropes of theatre, performance, and acting in European philosophy. The key, however, is the manner in which Carlyle mobilised the term in order to draw out a tendential opposition between Nature and artifice. I will take up this opposition below, in terms of what Barish calls 'the anti-theatrical prejudice'.

In her seminal 1972 monograph Elizabeth Burns, taking up a sociological perspective, defined theatricality as "...a mode of behaviour perceived and interpreted by others and described (mentally or explicitly) in theatrical terms... theatricality itself is determined by a particular viewpoint, a mode of perception" (p. 13). Burns places the responsibility of determining theatricality on the observer, who also must have a sense of the theatrical/dramatic conventions of their own time and place to make this determination.

The role of convention, and of being aware of one's role as a spectator, is also important in Tracy Davis's definitions of theatricality, where she cites a draft essay, circa 1843, by Kierkegaard in which a magnificent ram is to be exhibited at a country fair. During the morning, the ram grazes placidly in a neighbouring field where it attracts no attention. However, in the afternoon it is moved into the fair and, with the addition of an admission fee, becomes the centre of attention for the visitors who, only a few hours earlier, had shown no interest in the very same animal. For Davis, theatricality is not just the event but the "exceptionalness of a circumstance" to the extent that if a performance is so naturalistic or hypnotic that a spectator forgets they are spectating, the quality of theatricality is lost (2003, pp. 128-129).

The role of spectator, along with the "exceptionalness of a circumstance", feature in Josette Féral's 1988 definition of theatricality, translated into English in 2002. Féral outlines three scenarios in which theatricality could, theoretically, be identified. The first is straightforward: an audience member enters a theatre to take their seat, and the presence of objects such as a stage curtain or orchestral pit provide a "semiotization of space" (2002, p. 96).

Féral's second scenario increases the complexity, and is developed from the perspective of a commuter, observing an argument between two other passengers in regard to the no smoking rule onboard the train. At the next station, the arguers alight, and the smoker, for the benefit of the remaining passengers, points out the size disparity between the No Smoking placard and a billboard advertising cigarettes. Is this ostensibly un-staged, every day, 'real' event characterised by an innate theatricality? Féral then adds a further complexity, in which passengers who alighted at the same time as the two 'arguers' discover that they were actors performing a short dramatic piece. In this, she suggests, the observers become, retrospectively, *spectators*, reviewing— reframing— what they had taken to be a non-theatrical event as a theatrical event, a reframing which includes, to an extent, the transformation from the quotidian subway car into a theatrical venue. In this scenario, theatricality only emerges when the spectators become aware of the theatrical intention behind the exchange.

Féral's third scenario is, by comparison, seemingly simple. This takes a common activity— people-watching— and considers how it could be reconsidered as a theatrical event, or, perhaps, an instance of theatricality. In this case, the act of observing, whether the observed are aware of it or not, can redesignate a quotidian space or experience as a theatrical space. Here, she concludes that theatricality is a *process* that divides space, her formulation elegantly translated as “a cleft in quotidian” (p. 97), (re)positioning a spectator in relation to an event, separating the theatrical event from the everyday within a conscious environment. This process can be prompted or controlled by the spectator or by the ‘actor’ (for example, someone tapping a microphone before making a speech). Her closing words highlight the active role of the spectator: “...theatricality is the result of a perceptual dynamics linking the onlooker with someone or something that is looked at... the spectator creates an “other” space, no longer subject to the laws of the quotidian...” (p. 105).

The translation of Féral's article, which has been fundamental to my own conceptualisation of theatricality, was published in a 2002 Special Issue of the journal *SubStance* (Vol. 31, No 2/3). In his contribution to the collection, Joachim Fiebach provides an explicit and unambiguous declaration of theatricality:

Any concept of theatricality should be based upon the structural essentials of the specific cultural production of theater [sic], in its most comprehensive sense. Theater is a type of social communication whose specificity is, at first, the ostentatious display of audio-visual movements. (p. 17)

As summarised by Féral in her Introduction, Fiebach also takes the position that theatricality is “...foremost a process of production geared towards a spectator who consumes it, and once it has been consumed, it disappears” (p. 7). To a composer, such as myself, who prefers the rehearsal room to the recording booth, the anticipated presence of an audience is fundamental to my practice and will be taken up in subsequent chapters.

Burns, Fiebach, and Féral all are included in Willmar Sauter's attempts to define theatricality (2000). He begins with a brief survey, grouping other writers into four schools:

those who use the idea of theatre metaphorically (theatre as a stand-in for life, such as the writing of Victor Turner); those for whom ‘theatrical’ is descriptive (describing the cues we absorb from context— for example an empty stage— with Roland Barthes as the named example); those who develop a binary relationship between ‘the theatrical’ and the ‘natural’ (generally in terms of a reactive positioning of theatricality in opposition to the real, such as the case of Antonin Artaud); and those who take up what he calls an ‘epochal’ position, in terms of which theatricality is indivisible from temporality and culture; Sauter places Burns and Feibach in this camp.

Ultimately, Sauter defines theatricality in terms of the interaction between performer and spectator. His analysis departs from Féral, and specifically the third scenario she proposes, in that he requires that *both* performer and spectator be active participants and aware of their respective roles in relation to one another.

Sauter’s earlier work with Jacqueline Martin (1995) developed a linear scale of theatricality from 0 to 1 (via the decimal points). Martin and Sauter’s intention was to develop a typological heuristic which moves beyond the customary breaking down of theatre production into various ‘-isms’— naturalism, realism, absurdism, avant-gardism and so on. Defining ‘theatricality’ as the concept of how “exhibitory, encoded and performative actions of the performer... are transposed into communicative actions” (p. 99), Sauter and Martin identify, at one end of the scale (and allocated a value of ‘0’) “pure extra-theatricality”, the paradigm of which is absolute ‘naturalism’— and, at the other end, with a value of 1, “pure intra-theatricality” which might be understood as absolute artifice.

Martin and Sauter acknowledge that while their scale assigns a value to genres and sub-genres of performance, any given performance may move about the scale. Further, artistic style is highly contingent with relation to time, culture, and place. While there is some appeal in being able to categorically give my work a numerical score indicating the degree of theatricality, assigning a discrete value or definitive quality of ‘theatricality’ to my own compositional

practice is not my intention. Where Sauter and Martin's scale *is* of interest, however, is in its explicit consideration of musical forms, such as opera, which are often absent from other studies of this nature. Within their scale, operetta is scored 0.7; opera and ballet 0.8, and experimental opera (alongside modern dance) at 0.9. Importantly, their analysis suggests that any kind of sung musical performance is inherently more theatrical than other more traditional 'dramatic' or spoken forms (as many of us do not spend our days in song): for Martin and Sauter, the implication is that musical performance relies on conventions that have an implicit shared understanding between performer and audience and this, in turn, generates a heightened theatricality.

2.2 Anti-theatricality

Criticisms of the concept of theatricality— and in particular those framed in terms of the discourse 'anti-theatricality'— offer an alternative means by which to develop our understanding of what and how theatricality might entail.

As noted above, from its first use in English, the word 'theatrical' has carried negative connotations which were highlighted in the seminal examinations of "anti-theatrical prejudice" by Jonas Barish (1969, 1981). Barish draws a line from Platonic allegories to everyday contemporary usage grounded in a suspicion of acting, pretence and mimicry. For my purposes, perhaps the most important observation is that with which Barish opens his 1981 revised edition: that while we generally use musical and artistic adjectives in a complimentary fashion ("it was poetic", "it was symphonic", "pretty as a picture"), the adjectives from the theatre are nearly always negative ("what a drama!", "melodramatic", even the key word "theatrical" is often used as a criticism). This is also reflected in the historically negative view of actors and acting that saw these professions kept on societal fringes in many cultures, particularly for women. These suspicions casually continue in common turns of speech— 'putting on a show', 'making a scene', even 'showing off'— that suggest that one is doing *more* than one ought in self-

presenting in daily life. There are implications of vulgarity, immaturity and deception which can have significant impacts in unexpected contexts, such as the legal system.

Observing me at work one morning, my partner, a lawyer, offered to search for the use of the word 'theatricality' in the Australian case law database (AustLII) of court decisions. While the search yielded several examples of the term— and its cognates— being used by expert witnesses in the technical diagnosis of histrionic personality disorder, it was otherwise used negatively. For example (with my emphases): "She has a *dramatic* manner and turn of phrase... Her theatricality could make one think she is prone to *exaggeration*, and indeed she *probably* is, but her emotions *nevertheless* appeared authentic." ("Department of Community Services & Parry," 2010). The judge's discomfort with spectatorship and witnessing a performance are evident in the commentary: the tension between the "dramatic manner" and "nevertheless appear[ing] authentic" is obvious. Based on the 'performance' of a witness, the judge has considered this witness, a child, as being theatrical, but *in spite of this*, believable (see also, for example, the work of Kate Rossmanith (2013), who has studied how defendants 'perform' remorse for the 'spectator' of a judge).

Marvin Carlson highlights the perception of this sense of 'performance' when considered in terms of the negative tropes of theatre. He identifies a "doubleness":

a "play between two types of reality... between 'life' and its mimetic double'... which has privileged 'life' as the primary and grounding term of this binary, with theater viewed as secondary, derived, and for some, even deceptive and corrupting. (2002, p. 243)

Carlson identifies the historical logocentrism inherent to anti-theatricality in the primacy of the written artefact— the script. He uses the paradigmatic example of Goethe, who— notoriously— claimed that Shakespeare is best enjoyed when listening to it read as poetry, with one's eyes closed, presumably unthreatened by the unruly, potentially distorting vicissitudes of décor, set, costumes and questionable acting choices. There are parallels here to the traditional primacy of the musical score as the ideal, Platonic form of a given piece of music (for example, Heinrich Schenker opens his unpublished treatise on musical performance with the scarce

believable words “a composition does not require a performance in order to exist” and then treats all performance elements as superfluous obstacles to be managed (trans. 2002, p. 3)).

Carlson also briefly considers the role of virtuosity in creating a theatrical experience: for example, he observes that when watching an elite performance whether circus, music, or sport, audiences become aware that the performer is a human like them, but doing, with apparent ease, something that they would find impossible to do. I will return to the question of virtuosity later in this, and subsequent chapters, as a key marker for my own understanding of theatricality.

The awareness of the spectator, and of a moment in time, is at the core of the work of visual art theorist Michael Fried. Fried, in a body of essays and writings from the second half of the twentieth century, identified theatricality as a quality of art that bears an awareness of the spectator— or, as Fried prefers, “the beholder”. For Fried, a lesser work of art is incomplete without this presence, while the intention of ‘good’ art should be to exist without it. Arguably, of course, the visual arts— in the ‘traditional’ sense of painting and sculpture— are at the furthest remove from more temporally-based performance forms such as music (if one momentarily puts aside recording). However, the clarity, incisiveness, and subsequent influence of Fried’s writing make it a highly relevant examination of the anti-theatrical sensibility.

This is particularly the case in his 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood”, which holds an almost-totemic position in the consideration of anti-theatricality, explicitly separating out work that is “fundamentally theatrical and work that is not” (p. 157). The arts— among which he specifically cites music— must, Fried claims, aspire to a permanent, continuous, and perpetual state to avoid the ‘corruption’ of theatre. Fried frames the tension between theatre/theatricality and visual art as nothing less than a war, in terms of which the very survival of the arts will require the “defeat” of theatre. He claims that theatre is unique among the arts in that it “exists” for an audience; at the same time, he observes that film— even the most purely commercial dreck— escapes this condition purely by its nature. Fried does not elaborate on this, but the

context suggests that this nature consists in the formal stability of the film once its production concluded (pp. 163-164). Music is briefly mentioned by Fried, as he draws a diametric distinction between Elliott Carter on one hand and John Cage on the other. Cage is, for Fried, the very paradigm of his central claim: that “art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater [sic]” (p. 164). Even temporality, essential to any kind of live performance art, is seen by Fried as a pernicious theatrical influence upon the arts. He maintains this theme in his 1980 examination of eighteenth-century French art, drawing upon the writings of Diderot, who denounced the vain artifice of theatricality, the primary objective of which was to excite or please the beholder in order to win their applause.

As also noted by Martin Puchner (2002), Fried’s concern with the beholder/spectator was not simply that their presence could unduly induce the work to ‘perform’ to curry favour, but with their presence itself. Puchner states that the presence of a group of beholders— in other words, an audience— constitutes a threat to the modernists’ preferred level of concentration on the art and, thus, is to be treated with suspicion. Like those quoted by Carlson, Puchner finds in the modernists a preference to *read* the script rather than *watch* it, again the logocentric approach, and that the purity of the art is somewhat spoiled by the presence ‘theatrical’ dressing such as sets, an audience, and, above all, actors.

2.3 Theatricality and Music

Any consideration of the anti-theatrical prejudice, particularly in the context of this current thesis, must attend to the work of the most significant musician-philosopher of the twentieth century, Theodor Adorno, and in particular his sustained critique of Igor Stravinsky. Anja Nowak (2014) highlights how Adorno’s work only obliquely references the theatre, with the notable exception of his engagement with the work of Brecht and Beckett. It is the temporal nature of performance, she observes, that places theatre outside his scope of theory. He does, however, regularly draw upon another performing art— dance— in the criticisms of Stravinsky

found in his *Philosophy of Modern Music*, first published in German in 1948. For example, he argues that:

[t]he weakness of Stravinsky's production during the last twenty-five years— which can be detected even by the most insensitive ear— is not just a matter of the composer having nothing more or new to say. It rather arises out of a chain of events which degrades music... That weakness... is the price he has to pay for his restriction to the dance... it imposed upon his music an aspect of servitude which required the renunciation of autonomy (p. 196).

Adorno further uses his critique of theatre and performance as cudgels against Stravinsky in his *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, originally published in 1963; that is, even after Stravinsky's stylistic embrace of the twelve-tone system and abandonment of the early 'Russian' and neoclassical styles that had so exercised Adorno. Adorno maintain his attack on Stravinsky's earlier work:

This is the element of mimicry, of clowning- of constantly busying himself with something important that turns out to be nothing at all; strenuously working at something without any result (p. 152).

Adorno also refers to Stravinsky's use of parodic forms in his composition, and simultaneously critiques the audience:

These would give pleasure to modest listeners who have reached the point where they can enjoy a laugh at the expense of the polka and the galop... This is why there is damage instead of development... This is the formal, unliterary significance of the parodic style of Stravinsky (p. 153).

The (translated) usage of 'unliterary' here points to the perceived primacy of the written object: the score.

While Adorno considered music from an anti-theatrical perspective, there have been surprisingly few contemporary writings which explicitly link theatricality with composition. This is somewhat startling due to the long history of using analogy and metaphor from drama and literature to describe music. One early example is an 1805 analysis by Jérôme-Joseph de Momigny of the fugue from Handel's Harpsichord Suite No 6 in F# Minor. This analysis is in two

parts: the first is the typical structural and harmonic analysis; however, the second part superimposes a dramatic scenario, complete with completely fictional characters, as a way of further elucidating the construction of the work (as cited in Almén, 2008).

The absence of a sustained literature dealing with theatricality and composition may be, as Auslander suggests (2006), because of the institutional separation of the respective disciplines. Theatre studies, performance studies, and music as fields of research, training, and study, are typically separated (in the case of my academic institution by geography and disciplinarity). Even when music and theatre are intrinsically linked, such as scores written for opera or ballet, they still rest within the music discipline due to a perceived primacy of the score as an object of study.

Indeed, opera has rarely been of interest to theatre studies, or any subsequent consideration of theatricality, instead it has, in the mainstream companies, in Sam Kinchin-Smith's account:

consistently refused to absorb and respond to the discoveries of 20th century performance practice. It hasn't sufficiently proved to people with serious thoughts about theater [sic] that it's not just hysterical melodrama.

In the same online article, Kinchin-Smith relates this to his experiences of opera audiences, recalling a performance marketed to a major house's audience as 'experimental', but which deployed theatrical techniques almost a century old. "I realized" he reflected, that "opera audiences and critics hadn't seen most of this stuff on stage before" (2018).

Readers familiar with narratology may have found some common terrain so far, and in the chapters to come, such as the role of temporality and that of the audience. There is a significant body of research devoted to music and narrative (Almén, 2008; Hatten, 1991; Klein, 2018; Klein & Reyland, 2013; Nattiez, 1990), and many parallels in the work of these scholars to those outlined in this chapter studying theatricality. However, while musical narratology typically draws upon literary metaphors, my focus is on theatricality, as metaphor and

otherwise. This distinction between literary and theatrical metaphors in analysis is, for my work, important as the former don't encompass as full a suite of influences (such as the role of the performer) as the latter, nor has literature had the impact on my life as theatre (as discussed in Chapter One). Subsequently, my reading has focused on work that explicitly identifies theatricality and it is these works of scholarship which are considered in the next section.

2.3.1 Janet Halfyard: Berio *Sequenzas*

Musicologist and contemporary art music performer Janet Halfyard is one of the few writers to attempt to define theatricality as a musicological concept in her analysis (2007) of the Luciano Berio *sequenzas*, primarily *Sequenza III* for female voice and *Sequenza V* for trombone (I, in turn, will focus on *Sequenza II* in the next chapter). She identifies three elements in the music that indicate theatricality, singularly, or in combination. These are, first, the presence of a scenario or narrative; second, the presence of an indicated character; and third, the "inclusion of behaviours beyond the usual actions of playing an instrument" (p. 99). Compared to the definitions examined earlier in the chapter, this has the appeal of a pleasing simplicity; at the same time, it potentially lacks analytical bite.

Halfyard's discussion of 'character' and 'narrative' is most persuasive in the analysis of the trombone work, including the interesting quirk that a performance practice has developed involving trombonists performing the work in costume as Grock, the clown from Berio's childhood, despite there being no instruction in the score to do so. Halfyard suggests that a classically trained musician finds it easier to 'act' the physical instructions of the score when they are in costume. Central to her position is that 'character' in theatrical music does not always imply the presence of a persona; rather, she argues that by donning the attire of Grock, performers are missing the nuance that Berio wrote a piece for trombone, a piece which expressly addresses the duality of the public performance and private practice (as suggested by the two opposing halves of the work).

Discussing the *Sequenza III* for voice, Halfyard argues that notions of ‘character’ take on a different meaning in vocal music as, in almost all cases, the singer is *performing* a text that provides a non-biographical narrative. Consequently— and here I am in strong agreement— it is practically impossible for any kind of vocal music in performance to be separated from theatricality (see also the earlier discussion of Martin and Sauter’s scale of theatricality). Arguably, if one were to take the modernist position, the only way a work of vocal music could not be theatrical would be when it is studied solely as a written artefact, the score.

The behaviours referenced in this introductory definition are later defined by Halfyard as, among other things, constituting the presence of virtuosity. Here, she is drawing a conclusion similar to those of Carlson and Davis, noted above. This is heightened in the complete *Sequenza* series, as, except *Sequenza X* for trumpet and piano (in which the pianist, however, is silent), all are for a solo performer. In performance, the virtuosity of the performer is highlighted, sometimes at the expense of the composer, and this can tend to attract any number of the negative ‘theatrical’ criticisms. Halfyard posits that Berio embraced virtuosity despite, or perhaps because of, these risks and also exerted his compositional control through the specific use of notation in the *Sequenzas* which makes the virtuosity an embedded, integral part of the work rather than ‘showing off’ for the sake of it. Virtuosity is an artistically complex subject, and its role as a magnet drawing the attention of the spectators towards the performer will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

Halfyard also draws on the concept of ‘action’ as a marker of theatricality. Related to the concept of virtuosity, she defines action as unexpected behaviour or gesture from a performer which draws attention to its separation from normal concert practice. Here, Berio is explicitly drawing upon the theatrical theories of alienation first articulated by Brecht. In the *Sequenza III*, the female vocalist enters the stage, muttering, the piece already underway in an immediate departure from the recitalist striding purposefully to centre-stage and striking a formidable pose by the piano in expectant silence. More intriguing yet, the 1995 *Sequenza XII* for bassoon

surprises its audience in a more subtle, slow way. The piece, like all its companions, foregrounds significant virtuosity: in this case, through its requirement for multiphonics. These would not have been wildly out of place for the contemporary music audience of the time; however, more unusual is the dawning realisation that the performer has to be using circular breathing in the long, extended phrases. Generally, we expect wind players to draw breath to play their instrument and when this is absent, as Halfyard argues, it creates theatricality as “the sense that the physical capabilities of the player are being pushed to such an extreme that there is the danger of the performance ending in disaster.” (p. 112)

2.3.2 Philip Auslander: Glam Rock

Theatricality has also been considered in musicology dealing with popular music and particularly in its performance. This has included the blues (Lacava, 1992) and, more thoroughly, the study of glam rock by Philip Auslander (2006) that will be the subject of this section. Auslander, as a performance theorist, naturally focuses his attention on the performance, rather than the musical compositions, of glam rock. Several key markers of theatricality emerge which are salient for my project.

Glam rock emerged as a form, Auslander argues, in direct response to the countercultural music of the 1960s and, in particular, psychedelic rock. Psychedelic rock prioritised ideas about, and practices framed as, markers of authenticity: performers and audiences dressed and looked alike; any kind of ‘performance’ by the musicians was kept to the bare minimum, with only essential staging and nothing that could resemble any kind of special effect or choreography. The use of any kind of visual element was considered to veer dangerously close to ‘spectacle’; indeed, performances were studiously non-visual in their appeal, construing any such elements as being potentially distracting, if not actively detrimental to the music itself (a position not dissimilar to the modernist exaltation of the written score).

Early pioneers of the glam rock genre such as Marc Bolan and David Bowie, however, drew renewed attention to the importance of the visual dimension, enthusiastically embracing

the idea of the spectacle. They also recreated the traditional division between performer and spectator, through elaborate costuming and, at times, choreography harking back to performance tropes from the previous generation— backing horn sections, for example lifting their bells in unison— an effect that is, for amplified instruments, entirely visual in significance. Early glam rock was, in Auslander’s choice of word, “primordial” (p. 50) in its desire to return what was construed as a heightened version of the ‘classic’ post-war rock. The extended, improvisatory guitar or drum solo in psychedelic music was rejected as being self-indulgent and, worse, boring. Hence, glam consisted of shorter songs using less complex melodic and harmonic material, and emphasised voice and beat much more emphatically than its predecessors while using repetition more frequently. Interestingly, despite deliberate faux-sexual and gender transgressions, early glam lyrics were largely apolitical, reverting to more ‘wholesome’ pursuits— girls and fast cars— in reaction to the engagement of late 1960s popular music to civil rights and countercultural movements. On this analysis, theatricality substitutes for a more serious set of politicised, if not political, aspirations and vocations.

Musically, however, Auslander positions glam rock in a striking opposition to an important component within Halfyard’s interpretations of theatricality in Berio’s *Sequenzas*. In the rejection of what was seen as the self-indulgent instrumental focus of psychedelic rock, this theatrical sensibility in glam rock is at first glance *rejecting* virtuosity.

However, on closer examination, it can be argued that glam rock *did* embrace virtuosity: a virtuosity of vocal, rather than instrumental, performance. Auslander writes at length at how glam rock performers like David Bowie manipulated their voice in performance, using unnatural ranges or over-emphasis to give a more theatrical rendering. He connects this to the play of performing queerness in glam rock, which is a focus of his work, yet does not seem to consider these vocal manipulations to be ‘virtuosic’ in the same way as an extended psychedelic guitar improvisation presented itself as an extraordinary technical achievement. At the very least, such vocal virtuosity could be considered as being ‘inauthentic’ or ‘unnatural’— thus

separating the performer from the audience. Importantly, this is not to criticise Auslander's viewpoint in favour of Halfyard: the viewpoints of a performance theorist and a performing musicologist on virtuosity are expectedly different shades of grey. For Auslander, this vocal virtuosity is part of the importance of a fabricated persona in glam rock: a character the performer can adopt or drop or change at will. Here, he shares a more comfortable common ground with Halfyard's positioning of the clown, Grock, in *Sequenza V*.

2.3.3 David Roesner: Musicality in Theatre

David Roesner's work *Musicality in Theatre* (2014) takes up the inverse to my own approach, in that he seeks to examine further how musicality has impacted upon theatrical development rather than the effect of theatricality on music— that is, the impact of musicality on *all* theatre, not just opera/musical theatre. As Roesner points out, theatrical creators (such as Robert Wilson or Katie Mitchell) have drawn, sometimes metaphorically and sometimes literally, from music in the development of their work for many years. Roesner's approach is important, as he treats 'musicality' not as a precise term with a fixed set of criteria by which it is defined it, but "...as an umbrella term which covers a range of aspirations of one art form (theatre) towards another (music)" (p. 9). Subsequently, he considers musicality in terms of what he calls an 'aesthetic *dispositif*', drawing from the Foucauldian definition of an "absolutely heterogenous assembly which involves discourses, institutions... in short: as much the said as the un-said" (as cited in Roesner, 2014, p. 10).

Roesner explicitly writes of his intention to encompass not just aural qualities of music within his conception of musicality, but to also encompass the non-aural, such as gesture and staging. Here, he draws upon concepts of music as an embodied artform with strong parallels to the work of theatre theorists such as Stanislavski. Pertinently, he notes that the transferability of musicality has been an important driver of many aesthetic movements of the twentieth century: the visual art of Kandinsky and Klee, for example. Later, he analyses how Meyerhold's conception of effective theatre was heavily influenced by what are perceived as two intrinsic

qualities of music: immediacy and abstraction. Indeed, he quotes Meyerhold observing that “If a director isn’t a musician, then he isn’t capable of developing a real production” (as cited in Roesner, 2014, p. 61). In staging *La Dame aux Camélias*, a production that involved minimal music per se, Meyerhold used musical tempo indicators— Allegro grazioso, Scherzando and so on— as shorthand against the list of scenes. (That the play *La Dame aux Camélias* is now much more frequently produced as *La Traviata* the opera, is a pleasing link with the operatic stage). For Roesner, Meyerhold uses musicality as a process to separate life from theatre, as an aid in defining the rules of art (p. 94).

Finally, Roesner offers a cautionary observation about applying musicality to the act of playwrighting: an observation that was worth bearing in my own mind as I set about integrating elements of theatricality into my compositional practice. “Musicality” he writes:

becomes a potentially more metaphorical (and for the purposes of this book, slippery) ground, since looking at dramatic writing rather than acting, training and directing means that we are no longer confronted with an activity that shapes time with the same level of determinacy as music does. A spoken monologue creates a definite musical shape... a *written* monologue bears the *potential* of this musical shape” (p. 122).

Roesner’s work is complex, and firmly rooted in a theatre studies discourse that is not always readily redeployed in service of my own understanding of compositional practices. However, in eliding playwrights and composers, Roesner’s analysis of musicality at the stage of playwrighting, rather than in dramatic performance, provides a potential road map for my own undertaking. He considers both the metaphorical application of musicality— playwrights who talk of their work as a ‘score’, for example— but also playwrights for whom musicality is a bedrock from which they build their own work. This is instanced through scripts that notate— similar to scores— issues such as timbre, silence, spoken pitch, and tempo.

Are these elements enough *prima facie* evidence for the presence of musicality? Similarly, a theatre studies scholar may question whether Halfyard’s premises for the existence of theatricality, as outlined earlier, are enough to justify the presence of theatricality. While acknowledging the potential issues that could arise in these transdisciplinary applications of the

different ‘-alities’, there are benefits in both approaches for my own understanding of theatricality in my work.

2.3.4 Everyday Musical Discourse

In contemporary everyday discourse, ‘theatricality’ in musical contexts is regularly cited, broadly unexamined, in marketing copy and concert reviews. In some cases, this is handled as a form of the tacit concept first outlined at the beginning of this chapter— ‘I know it when I see it’— such as in advertising copy from the Melbourne Recital Centre, extolling the value of “ a composer who represents the epitome of Baroque theatricality and flamboyance, Arcangelo Corelli” (MRC n.d.): Or, as another example, this extract from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra: “The vivid theatricality of its first movement curtain-raiser draws us to the edge of our seats...” (SSO n.d.). In both cases, what ‘theatricality’ actually refers to is unexplained, and rests on a comfortable assumption that the reader— the broad audience for marketing copy— will have an immediate and innate understanding of the term. Its close proximity to the words ‘flamboyance’ and ‘vivid’ are certainly suggest that the potential audience will share something of a heightened experience.

The term is also used in reviewing classical music, appearing, for example, as a headline in a *New York Times* review of the Verdi Requiem— “Verdi's Requiem, in All its Theatricality and Resonance” (Oestreich, 2016). The text of the review elaborates on this with more explicit examples than in the marketing copy cited above (it is worth mentioning that, as this is Verdi’s only non-operatic work in the repertoire, theatrical tropes perhaps come more naturally to a reviewer than for other composers). He writes: “Verdi, writing in his best operatic style but without benefit of stage trappings, conjures a terrifying sonic image...”, combining the paradox of the “benefit” and “stage trappings”, but also the “sonic image” of music and staged drama. In closing, the reviewer squarely frames the concert performance as inherently dramatic: “...with trumpeters positioned in opposite balconies joining those onstage, sounded for all the world like the Triumphal March from ‘Aida’.”

Placing instruments in unusual positions, lighting, video projection, and special effects in staging tend to be framed as being ‘theatrical’ in quotidian music discourse. Although the performance and presentation of my work is an important part of my process, I separate my understanding of theatricality from the characteristic use of the term in contemporary, general-audience music writing where it is often refers to forms of presentation.

2.4 A Personal Theatrical Sensibility

I intend, then, to consider theatricality not as a fixed concept or definition, but instead as a sensibility, a certain ‘feel for the game’, with a lineage steeped in my own autobiography—which, certainly, has been a naïve understanding at times— through to the present time of writing with a fuller understanding of how scholarship has wrestled and debated with the term. This encompasses theatrical metaphor in my process, but also how I ‘visualise’ (and the choice of word is deliberate) a composition as it develops. My understanding of theatricality doesn’t prioritise an eventual audience but includes an equal awareness of them in a triadic relationship between myself and the eventual performer/s. I am consciously writing music for performance and all the associated discourse and experience around it. Indeed, I have always considered that any piece I write does not ‘exist’ until it has been presented in front of an audience. This is both broad in its credo but also narrow in that my sensibility of theatricality cannot be separated from my own individualism. It is, perhaps, closest to Burns’s term— a “mode of perception” (1972, p. 13) that consciously rejects the anti-theatricalism as outlined earlier in this chapter.

Finally, a note on terms. In subsequent chapters, I will treat ‘theatre’ as the noun indicating the form of cultural production; ‘theatrical’ as the adjective indicating the tropes that have been adopted from the noun; and finally, ‘theatricality’ as the embodiment or sensibility surrounding a practice, in this case, primarily my own. I will also use ‘audience’ in its broadest sense, as both a physical audience, such as that within a venue, but also as a shorthand for all forms of artistic consumption such as listening to or watching recordings.

3. A Painting by Magritte

This chapter examines A Painting by Magritte for harp. It briefly examines the source material, then undertakes an overview of discourse on virtuosity the virtuosic elements that link to theatricality. The Sequenza II of Berio is studied as both the compositional model for A Painting by Magritte, and for how it creates a shared virtuosity between composer, performer, and audience.

3.1 Background

A Painting by Magritte is a ten-minute solo for harp, written for an advanced/professional player. Of all the pieces presented in the accompanying portfolio, it was the first written (September 2016–January 2017). It was written for, and premiered by, Alice Giles on 31 August 2017 at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, as part of the Canberra Symphony Orchestra’s Australian Series.

This chapter will argue that *A Painting by Magritte* is inherently theatrical, demonstrating how this is the case, and using the discussion to better understand the theatrical sensibility for which I am arguing. I will do this, first, through an examination of the original source material and my decision-making process in titling the work. This will be followed by an examination of virtuosity as an intrinsically theatrical phenomenon, and how the reframing of virtuosity undertaken in Berio’s iconic work for harp, the *Sequenza II*, provided a foundation for my piece. My work will then be discussed in further detail with a closer examination of these concepts and themes as they occur.

3.2 Source Material

I have always been drawn to the paintings of the Belgian surrealist René Magritte (1898–1967). Magritte was preoccupied with concepts that, in many cases, bear certain parallels with those explored in my discussions of theatricality in Chapter Two. In particular, Magritte had a fascination with how his images were received by a spectator, which dovetails with many of the concepts already outlined in the previous chapter. He often took realistic

imagery, replicated to an almost pedantic degree, then manipulated the viewer into perceiving this quotidian imagery in a new, sometimes unsettling, way. This is a mode of practice that can be understood in terms of Féral's understanding of theatricality as discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, this was a conscious effect for Margitte, who explained that he wished to "make the most everyday objects shriek aloud." (cited in Dupêcher, 2017 online). This 'shrieking' is further evidence for Magritte's preoccupation with concepts of false, or misleading, representation, of (re)framing an image for a spectator. It also has a pleasing congruence with concepts of theatricality outlined by Luciano Berio, which will be examined further in this chapter. Elza Adamowicz (2013) expands such an understanding of Magritte's use of imagery with an explicitly theatrical framing, observing that Magritte's visual composition in his painting is often arranged in a manner so as to suggest a narrative, and that this implied narrative is often presented to the viewer in a fully-frontal mode akin to a proscenium stage. Adamowicz's observations on the role of narrative in Magritte's paintings parallel those of Halfyard's on narrative in the Berio *Sequenzas*, also discussed in Chapter Two.

Initially, I had intended to write a piece that somehow connected two of his paintings: *L'assassin menacé* (1927) and *Golconde* (1953- known interchangeably as *Golconda*). The former painting, in **Image 1**, conveys a strong sense of narrative and action: a paradigm example of Adamowicz's observations of a proscenium setting. Inside the frame, upstage, a (presumably) dead, naked woman is stretched out on a sofa; just in front of her, mid stage, a suited man stands, hand in pocket, nonchalantly listening to a gramophone. Downstage, in the viewer's foreground two bowler hatted men with assault weapons stand either side of the proscenium frame, waiting to enter (or, perhaps, for their man to emerge). The heads of three almost identical men— perhaps triplets— pop into an upstage window frame adding an additional, ambiguously dramatic touch: are they an audience or active participants?



Image 1- René Magritte. (1927). *L'Assassin menacé* [oil on canvas]. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Golconde, reproduced as **Image 2**, attracted me for the sense of conveyed action: a series of mathematically spaced men (again, in bowler hats) suspended, in serried ranks, and in depth, against a skyscape anchored by a set of terraced buildings in the middle distance. At first glance, so strong is the assumption of the effects of gravity, I interpreted the men as falling from the sky like rain (itself an unsettling proposition). However, this is an assumption and there is no indication within Magritte's painting whether they are indeed falling. They could just as likely be rising up to the sky or be in suspension and not moving at all. While the former painting was compelling in its manifest sense of theatricality, the latter painting's attractions were more subtle. The ambiguity of the movement (or position) of the hatted men, to my mind, perfectly suited an instrument for which the topography is so intricately linked to the physical movement to play it: while all instruments require a certain physicality, there are few instruments like the harp that invite the audience to view the entire body of the performer with all four limbs of equal importance. In selecting the source material, I was already in full consideration of the performer, and how that performer is heard *and* seen by an audience. The physicality of the

instrument being on full view to spectators was a core component of the matching of painting and composition.

In January 2017, once I had a completed draft, I began to question, in my compositional journal, the relevance of the former painting to the piece, and instead began considering whether to adopt the latter painting as the sole reference. Given that *L'assassin menacé* is, as I suggested above, more explicitly theatrical in presentation than *Golconde*, the drift of my inspirational engagement towards the latter is significant, and worth reflecting upon. Firstly, I would confidently argue that, except in the most formula-driven of composition, what I characterise as 'inspirational drift' is a 'natural' part of creation: indeed, it could be argued that the potential for a project to veer is a marker of *creativity* itself. Freed from a contractual obligation to deliver a highly specific project, it would be a matter of my own discretion to decide upon completion of the work that the piece actually had nothing to do with any Magritte painting, and instead to name it *Sonatina*. This did not occur to me. Secondly, while *L'assassin menacé* may have the more explicit theatrical framing with its proscenium style presentation and strongly implied narrative, I would argue that *Golconde* is no less theatrical due to its implied sense of action. Indeed, that I perceived the theatricality to be no less visible in *Golconde* is further demonstration of the theatrical sensibility I assigned myself at the conclusion of Chapter Two.

On 1 February 2017 I wrote: "Not convinced about the title *La Golconde*. To simply take the title of the painting as the title of the piece feels like betraying Magritte's concepts of false representation". This suggests that I had already settled on abandoning one of the paintings but was still unclear on the relationship between the painting, title, and piece.



Image 2- René Magritte. (1953). *Golconde* [oil on canvas]. Menil Collection, Houston.

3.2.1 Authenticity in Title

My reluctance to betray one of Magritte's key principles— and indeed from my perspective one of the primary attractions— caused me significant tension as I set about finding a suitable title. This is not typically an aspect of composition with which I struggle.

Magritte's fascination with representation, with our perceptions of what is true or false— or to use the terms from the anti-theatrical discourse, *authentic* and *inauthentic*— are best realised in a pair of works from 1929, *Le faux miroir* and *La trahison des images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*). It is the latter painting that eventually resolved my uncharacteristic problems with the title of my piece:



Image 3- René Magritte. (1929). *La trahaison des images (Ceci n'est pas un pipe)* [oil on canvas]. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.

In this painting, Magritte lays bare his interest in false representation in a way that is both playful and innately theatrical. The words *Ceci n'est pas un pipe* ('this is not a pipe') under the precisely painted image of a pipe unsettles the usually unquestioned connection between text and image (the treachery of the title, and, indeed, the use of the word 'treachery' suggests some similarities to the anti-theatricalism discussed in Chapter Two), but also our sense of what is real and what is not. Magritte not only prods at the relationship of the word and object as ultimately arbitrary, but also leads us to interrogate what the real world *is*: what *is* authentic? (Meis, 2013).

Therefore, on 25 June 2017, I adopted the same principle as *La trahaison*, titling my work *A Painting by Magritte*. It is, in fact, a harp solo and not a painting; nor is it by Magritte.

3.3 Virtuosity

For Antoine Hennion, virtuosity is a term that is "... powerful in its critical load, albeit positive or negative: it enables the listener to qualify and disqualify an interpreter, to honour an artist or to despise another" (2016, p. 126). Anthropologist Anya Peterson Royce forms a similar

view, that virtuosity “stirs passions and controversies... [it can be either] a positive attribute and as a negative, in its latter mode, it implies a kind of misplaced pride” (p. 19). The parallels with the discussion of theatricality in Chapter Two are evident. Discourse on and about virtuosity— definitional difficulties notwithstanding— is overwhelmingly centred on the role of the performer and much of the scholarship on musical virtuosity is associated with the study of key nineteenth century figures such as Liszt and Paganini: for example, Maiko Kawabata (2004), David Larkin (2015), Zarko Cvejic (2016) and Hugo Rodriguez (2018). This is not my focus and although virtuosity is a term that has become somewhat cross-disciplinary, I will primarily limit myself to the specifics of virtuosity within Western art music.

Opposition to virtuosity as ‘mere’ showmanship— the sort of objection used ‘disqualify’ or ‘despise’ the phenomenon, as Hennion has indicated— was not unusual in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This can be neatly summarised in an oft-quoted 1918 article in *The Musical Quarterly* by J.N. Burk, an advocate for abolishing concerti, which opens with the claim that “People are growing more and more inclined to yawn at those unhuman creatures... [musicians who] perform balancing feats which are entirely inane and uninteresting” (p. 282). There are, in fact, important parallels between the polemics against virtuosity, of which Burk’s text is the very paradigm, and the anti-theatrical writing discussed in the previous chapter. Both regard art as being debased by showy tricks, for an audience which does not know any better. On the first page of his screed Burk describes these audiences as “puerile”, and often, in his disdain, draws explicitly upon theatrical imagery— such as his evocation of acrobats— to make his case.

In 1949, Marc Pincherle wrote a landmark historic survey of virtuosity that begins with the inherent tensions in the term:

...almost continuous controversy [is] served up by virtuosity. The general public, on one hand, favors it wholeheartedly; a considerable number of writers, critics, and composers, on the other, seem to see in it a kind of growing malady that has slowly crept on us, induced by Romanticism and inevitably resulting in a debasement of taste. (p.

226).

At the time of Pincherle's writing, the general view of virtuosity was that it constitutes a "...total and condemnable subjection of the work to the interpreter" (p. 227). Pincherle himself contests this, with the proposition that although the word itself is relatively modern, the concept of virtuosity had surely existed for as long as there have been performers and a spirit of competition. At the very least, the notion predates the assumed Romantic-era starting point of in the early nineteenth century. He relates the role and function of virtuosity to an audience—even during periods when 'audiences' were primarily in churches—citing the evidence of letters written by Frescobaldi (1583–1643) suggesting that players introduce a slight pause before rapid passagework to "show the nimbleness of your fingers to best advantage" (p. 230). The implication for Pincherle is that where there is an audience, there will always be some kind of virtuosity.

By the early twentieth century, Pincherle argues, audiences had developed a suspicion of virtuosity, a development he illustrates with evidence of public reactions. Concerti, he explains, were hissed in Parisian concert halls by the anti-virtuosity factions, who took great outrage at a consistent diet (then, as now, a concert program typically had a concerto before a symphonic work) of a form which they saw as a flimsy vessel for 'mere' showiness, an inferior music-making. These protests reached such a fervour in 1904 that lawyers were summoned and even the mild-mannered Fauré felt inclined to contribute to the debate on the role of virtuosity, defending the potential artistic value of a concerto despite never having written one himself.

Peterson Royce, quoted in the opening of this section, defines virtuosity in terms of nonchalance: a kind of studied performance of indifference. It is this nonchalance which translates virtuosity into great artistry: the great artist knows that they *can* do extraordinarily complex technical feats, has the judgement to choose *whether to* do them, and *if* they do it, they do it without the *appearance* of effort. In addition to nonchalance, she also applies the wonderful Italian term *sprezzatura*: 'effortless superiority'. On this account, technical mastery at

the highest level is the base standard; artistic decision-making applied over and above that quality of technical mastery yields artistic virtuosity. Royce is, it should be noted, predominantly writing about Western and non-Western ‘classical’ performing arts, such as ballet, classical music, and *Butoh*. She acknowledges that in other performance genres virtuosity might be understood in terms of the thrill associated with danger or risk (such as in the case of circus), or as the explicit demonstration or articulation of effort that makes a given accomplishment visible to the spectator: the public scoring systems on degrees of difficulty in, for example, figure skating.

More recently, a symposium at, appropriately, the Liszt Academy in Budapest, led to a special 2018 issue of *Musicae Scientiae* dedicated to the analysis of virtuosity, with an emphasis on contemporary performers. At this symposium, the music psychologist Jane Ginsborg reported her findings from a project involving a survey of 102 musicians, seeking to determine whether there was a shared understanding of virtuosity. A sense of technical excellence was frequently noted by respondents as a hallmark of virtuosity; differences, however, arose between students and professionals as to how this technical mastery was presented by a virtuosic performer. More professionals than students considered that the appearance of ease—“playing with *élan*, without apparent effort” (p. 463)— was a necessary feature of virtuosity, a view that aligns with the Royce’s identification of ‘nonchalance’ as a key factor. The professionals were also more willing to define virtuosity as a tool in the service of musical expression. Conversely, students tended to rank personal expressivity and a sense of exceptionalism as features of virtuosity. The two groups agreed that a true virtuoso is confident in taking risks, and that, ultimately, musicality was more important than virtuosity. Interestingly, by a slim majority, students *and* professionals saw virtuosity not as being laden with any particularly strong value judgements, but as one of many *tools* at the disposal of a professional musician. This is a recurring theme with regard to virtuosity: when it contributes to the art it is a ‘good virtuosity’, but when it is empty showing off it is a ‘bad virtuosity’.

Ginsborg's survey was one of the data points for Daniel Leech-Wilkinson's afterword to the journal issue, in which he concluded that "virtuosity has become a problem" (p. 558) due to the ever-increasing demands on excellence placed upon emerging musicians. By this, he refers not only to a high level of technical mastery required merely to enter the profession, but also modern performance demands such as, pertinently for my study, "when song cycles are routinely theatricalised" (p. 559). Although this is a passing observation serving a broader point— Leech-Wilkinson does not elaborate on what he means by 'theatricalised'— the relationship between theatrical performance and virtuosity for musicians is demonstrably significant.

Leech-Wilkinson also points to the involvement of the composer. Too often, he laments, virtuosity is shaped to an acceptable paradigm of classical music: within many practical restraints (such as paid hours for rehearsal), a classical performer is expected to produce something more brilliant or beautiful than their peers and competitors, all the while honouring what the audience and critics understand as the wishes of the (often long-deceased) composer. Instead, Leech-Wilkinson proposes reframing virtuosity as a tool for more imaginative, innovative, and, above all, *creative* performances, rather than as a one-size fits all desideratum for any performer in any context. Here, he maps a path of a contemporary virtuosity similar to that developed by Berio, which will be explored further in the next section. At the same time, he creates a role for the composer, in collaboration with the performer, in setting the conditions of— and the requirement for— a particular virtuosity in service of the project and aspirations of a particular *kind* of music.

3.4 *Sequenza II*

In the series of fourteen solo *Sequenzas* written between 1958 and 2002, Berio consciously and explicitly embraced what he framed as a return to virtuosity. In 1981, Dalmonte quotes him as saying:

I hold a great respect for virtuosity even if this word may provoke derisive smiles... Virtuosity often arises out of a conflict, a tension between the musical idea and the instrument, between concept and musical substance... when a concern for technique and stereotyped instrumental gestures gets the better of the idea... anyone worth calling a virtuoso these days has to be a musician capable of moving within a broad historical perspective... My own *Sequenzas* are always written with this sort of interpreter in mind, whose virtuosity is, above all, a virtuosity of knowledge. (Dalmonte, 1981, pp. 90-91)

While I am an admirer of his work, I would not typically consider Berio as one of my major influences. However, the *Sequenza II* (1965) has been, and continues to be, an important influence on my harp writing. In this, I am far from being alone, as it appears to be the work most cited by composers when asked about their reference points for contemporary harp (Belugou, 2019). Apart from shared techniques, which will be discussed further, in my piece I was interested with activating a quality of virtuosity and challenging the tropes of the instrument while respecting its inherent nature. With the *Sequenzas*, Berio rejected mechanical manipulation of the instruments, such as prepared harp strings, as he considered it important to respect the inherent nature of an instrument. The harp today, he claims, is the result of a slow evolution, and has a lineage and a shared community of players; in the interview cited above, Berio argues against flutes that have been redesigned for multiphonics as they can no longer play the repertoire of Bach, Mozart and Debussy (p. 92). This position resonates with me, as I am a composer who is also interested in the practical limitations of an instrument and working within a lineage of the existing repertoire.

In writing for the harp, Berio was certainly aware of the tropes which have evolved in tandem with the lineage of the instrument:

French “impressionism” has left us with a rather limited vision of the harp, as if its most characteristic feature were that it could only be played by half-naked girls with long, blond hair, who confine themselves to drawing seductive glissandi from it. But the harp has another harder, louder and aggressive side to it. (Dalmonte, 1981, p. 99)

This “limited vision” of the harp is one evincing delicacy, the feminine, and, particularly in opera, religiosity, and purity. In the nineteenth century, the harp was primarily reserved for special effects such as Tchaikovsky’s cadenzas for the principal ballerina’s *adage* or Wagner’s

rainbow bridge to Valhalla (Zlatkovsky, 2005). Slonimsky, cited in Whatley (2007, p. 41), made the fascinating observation that in the original 1910 orchestral version of *Firebird* Stravinsky scored for three harps; he subsequently removed them as being unnecessary decoration. For Slonimsky, this points to the perception of the harp's redundancy in the modern music of the time. This view of the instrument carried through the middle of the twentieth century, coupled with an explicit feminising, with Boulez, for example, stating his (subsequently revised) opinion that the harp was a woman's instrument, since it was "all animation, virtuosity and no power" (as cited in Whatley, 2007, p. 41). As recently as 2018, a survey by Jason Cumberledge which examined data from 1981 onwards found that the harp was overwhelmingly considered as a woman's instrument with the implied associations of delicacy and femininity.

In seeking to 'reclaim' an instrument— which, it must be remembered, has a long and distinguished history— Berio is not alone in his aspiration to vary its perceived character. Other works which resist cliché have included *Marches* by Franco Donatoni (1979) and *Chamber of Horrors* by Elena Kats-Chernin (1995). For my purposes, it is also important to note that Berio also explicitly referred to the *Sequenza* series as being theatrical in nature on the grounds of the conflict that arises from transforming what he calls "standard musical behaviour" (Dalmonte, 1981, p. 93). This is a clear articulation of Berio's desire to respect the lineage of an instrument while not being artistically constrained by it. In discussing the relationship between composer and performer, he also expands on his ideal form of the theatrical, in language that continues the concept of 'transformation':

Well, it's to take two simple and banal forms of behaviour, say "walking in the rain" and "typing" and to put them on stage in such a way that they transform one another and produce by morphogenesis a third form of behaviour: we don't really know what this is because we've never seen it before... If this is to happen, either in theatre or music, the forms of behaviour must be recognisable. (Dalmonte, 1981, p. 102)

Berio's understanding of the theatrical here is consistent with the arguments put by Burns and Féral as discussed in Chapter Two (recall, too, earlier in this chapter, Magritte's interest in a similar transformation of the everyday). Féral's 'cleft in the quotidian' is re-

presented through the transformation of the “simple and banal” into something new and unfamiliar, a disruption in our experience as audience members. Berio links this transformation with those that are fundamental to those developed by Burns: that we, plural, must recognise this behaviour in order to sense the theatricality within it. In the same interview Berio explores this further in discussing his orchestral *Sinfonia*, in which the fifth part takes elements of the previous four parts and reproduces them, sometimes exactly but also, at other times, in a modified form. Of this latter state Berio notes that “The memory is continually stimulated and put to work, only to be contracted and frustrated” (p. 108). The fifth part also concludes material from the first part that was interrupted by the middle parts. Berio’s deployment of this structure is aimed specifically towards an audience, with its reliance on the audience responding to these structural cues, and any lingering memory on their behalf of the previous material. Although my focus in this section remains on the *Sequenzas*, it is noteworthy how Berio also explicitly addresses the audience in the text of the third part of *Sinfonia* which regularly refers to ‘the show’, reminding the audience that they are in a hall, and features a passage where one singer thanks each singer and the conductor by their actual names. This all occurs amid an exciting, virtuosic, whirlwind of quotations from the symphonic repertoire built around the same structure as the scherzo from Mahler’s *Second Symphony*, firmly placing the work in a lineage of repertoire.

Kirsty Whatley’s comprehensive study of the *Sequenza II* (2007) explicitly frames the work within a theatrical context. She defines this context as a product of the challenges of learning the complexities of the piece, and how this translates on to a performance stage as “a taut dramatic battle” that forces a, typically unnatural, series of clashes between player, instrument, audience, and the historical practices of that instrument (p. 43). She also identifies the role of character in performing the piece: many harpists are attracted to study the instrument due to a particular type of repertoire which this piece violently challenges, forcing the harpist to take on a new musical identity. One such example is the work’s use of rapidly repeated notes under a single hand, as illustrated in **Figure 1** below. These are, traditionally,

avoided in harp writing as re-plucking the string in this manner kills the resonance and can create what is generally considered an ugly buzzing sound. It is also physically difficult, requiring a high degree of manual agility. Berio, however, embraces this as a key motif, accompanied by complex pedal work. As Whatley observes, although the effect is quiet and strangely delicate it is also immensely demanding on the harpist. Rather than the “half-naked girl with long blond hair” the harpist is instead some kind of mechanical octopus, with every limb in motion.

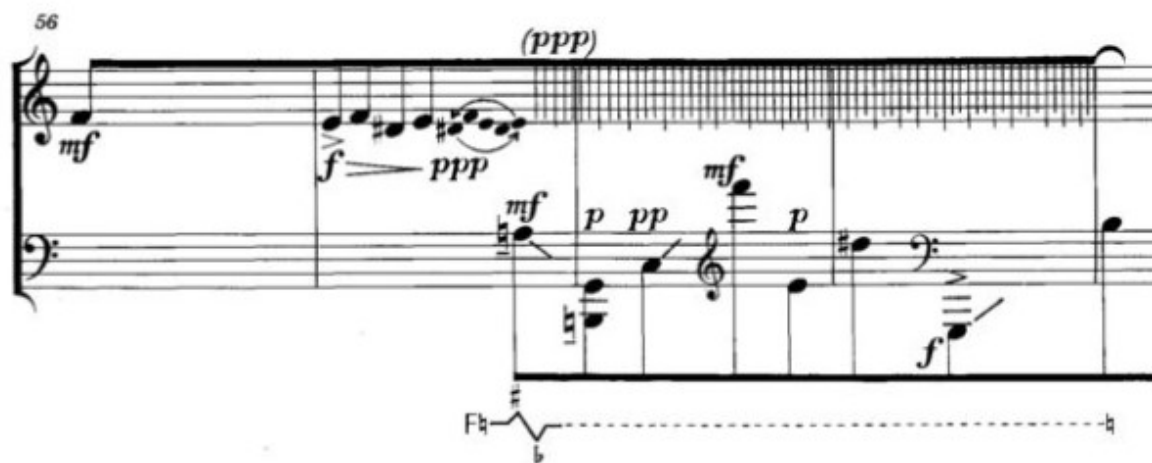


Figure 1- *Sequenza II* (Berio): bars 56–59

In bar 102, Berio introduces a new sound colour to the work, instructing the player to pluck the string lower and let the finger immediately slide to the body of the instrument. As the notation is the same as ‘Bartok pizzicato’ on string instruments, this is how it is commonly referred to and the nomenclature I will follow, the mechanical differences in the technique between the harp and other orchestral strings notwithstanding, as illustrated on the D# in **Figure 2:**



Figure 2- *Sequenza II* (Berio): bars 144–147

Berio typically uses this gesture in the middle ranges of the instrument. In my first meeting with Alice Giles, a noted interpreter of the piece, she sat and played the work solely from muscle memory, pausing only to check the pedal settings at the start. I was drawn to this particular sound and asked what it sounded like in the upper register of the piece. It had an eerie, slightly muffled but still clear, bell-like effect. This immediately provided the opening gesture of my harp work.

3.5 Theatricality in *A Painting by Magritte*

3.5.1 Introduction

The work is in an approximate ternary form opening with a *campanelli* motif, a passage of steady quavers then introduces the first thematic material, followed by a more delicate echo which exploits harmonics to extend the range of the material (bars 13–17). Interspersed in this section are more agitated, semiquaver-driven passages (such as bars 39–41). These, however, are often marked to be played relatively softly, giving the effect of a hurried urgency rather than flashiness. A brief, dance-like *moto perpetuo* concludes the first section of the work (bars 69–75). The second section begins with similar material but then changes to a slower tempo and processions of arpeggiated chords over ringing notes in the lowest register of the instrument (bars 85–92). These are also interspersed with flowing semiquaver passages more improvisatory in feel this time, with triplets taking on a jerkier character (bars 94–96). This

section ends with its own brief coda of rhythmic snippets over an uneasy, drifting glissando passage (bars 141–149). The third section begins with a straightforward recapitulation of the material from the first section, but soon takes off in rapid semiquavers towards a thundering chordal passage (bars 176–186). The coda uses rhythmic snippets from the second section, over the harp's resonant low notes, before the piece comes to an unsettling and ambiguous end.

3.5.2 The *Campanelli* and the Audience

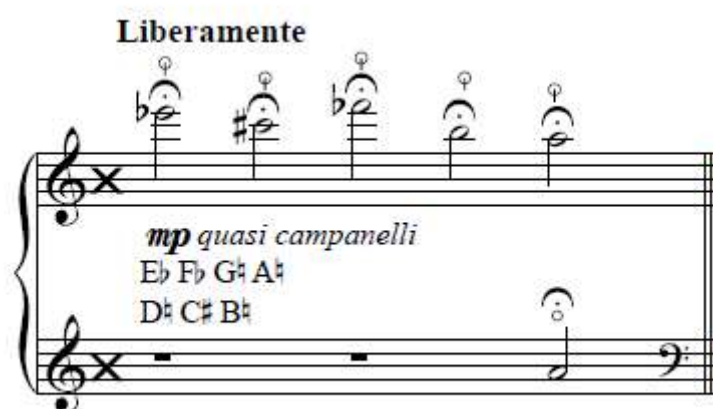


Figure 3- *A Painting by Magritte (Whitney):* bar 1

The bell-like effect, which I freely lifted from the Berio, became the opening gesture of my work (**Figure 3**), with the emphasis on the effect added through the addition of the *quasi campanelli* instruction. Completely free in time, the performer has significant liberty in this passage that allows them to fully embrace the resonance of the instrument and venue. The gesture closes with a unison A5 but coloured with the right hand continuing the bell effect and the left hand playing the same note as a harmonic (harp harmonics are written at the plucked, not sounding, octave).

Apart from being aurally striking, this gesture also forms an important structural device, breaking the full work into three sections. It recurs at bar 76 (transposed) and again at bar 150 (with identical pitches to the opening). In the second and third occurrences, the first beat of the bar is supported by a highly percussive, thudding *fortissimo* octave in the depths of the instrument. This is accompanied by instructions to let the strings crash through a pedal buzz- a

clanging, deliberately unpleasant effect. While each iteration is subtly different— in varied tonalities, with pedal buzz or without— the cell is an important and recognisable mooring point throughout the work.

The performer is also highlighted through one key passage at bar 75 (**Figure 4**). Immediately, preceding the second return of the *campanelli*, the performer is instructed to repeat a motif for “slightly longer than sounds right”. The effect I was seeking was that of disrupting the recital experience in a quiet way: I told Alice that it should almost feel like something had gone wrong, as if she had suddenly realised that she was missing a page of music mid-performance. Happily, she understood immediately.

Figure 4- *A Painting by Magritte (Whitney)*: bars 74–76

While the passage is not technically difficult, it is a fleeting play on the role of the virtuosic performer. Here I am playing with a fascinating tension for an audience: we want to see/hear something impressive but at the same time, there is only so much ‘evident effort’ we will tolerate (see also Royce’s ‘nonchalance’ as discussed earlier). We may appreciate it when something seems difficult and takes effort, but only to a point: if it looks like too much work, we lose the *élan*. To use a circus metaphor (*pace* Burk), the audience’s thrill in response to a tight-rope walker is in direct proportion to their height off the ground, and their exploitation of this height through ever-more-complex stunts and tricks. However, while there can be a pleasurable thrill for an audience in being nervous for a performer this thrill immediately evaporates when

the performer *appears* nervous or lacking in confidence. We want to be excited by virtuosity, but also feel safe in doing so.

A harpist is certainly less likely to break their neck in bar 76 than a tight-rope walker and this passage is a modest attempt at making the audience question the performance experience (ultimately, my intent was not malevolent). Yet in writing this passage, the audience was to the front of my mind. How long could a performer extend this passage? In a perfect world, I would love to hear a performance of this piece in which the performer extends this passage long enough to attract some shifty rustling in the audience's seats. Yet if it were carried on for too long, it could become comical. Humour is a regular feature in my output, and will be examined in the next chapter, but it was not my intent in this piece.

Incidentally, it is also worth noting that what the audience hears as virtuosic in this piece may differ from the performer's (and composer's) understanding. This is highlighted towards the end in the toccata-like semiquavers that build to thundering chords (bars 178–186). To an audience, this is a dazzling, rapid and showy passage of dexterous finger work. To the harpist, it is one of the easiest passages in the piece, falling smoothly under the fingers and without a single pedal change. This allows the performer to really embrace the 'show' of virtuosity in this passage by playing with tempo and interpretation.

3.5.3 The Characters of Chords and Glissandi

In traditional harp practice, chords are rolled to enhance the resonance, this is still how chords are played in much of the repertoire. The rich, rolling chords that are possible on the harp are symbolic of the instrument. As with the glissandi passages, arpeggiated chords are something the harp does well so I didn't want to avoid them solely on the grounds of cliché; instead, I chose to embrace them as their own motif. This occurs in the first significant way at bar 85:



Figure 5- *A Painting by Magritte* (Whitney): bars 85–88

In a passage suggestive of F minor due to the left-hand pedal tones, the right hand plays a steady progression of chords at a new, slower tempo. The passage is marked *con malizia* ('with malice') instructing the player to imbue the passage with a new character. These passages are never allowed to fully settle—they are constantly interrupted by scurrying, 'busy' material that sounds almost improvisatory or by the disjointed material that is recognisable from the opening sections of the work. At their final iteration (**Figure 6**), the left hand takes a more active role, in a rocking motion which is highlighted by the instruction for the player to play the quavers with their fingernail to generate a brittle, metallic sound. This is followed by a brief xylophonic passage, where the player uses the non-playing hand to deaden the string's resonance immediately and thus kills the resonance which is so central to the performance practice of traditional harp repertoire.

Figure 6- *A Painting by Magritte (Whitney)*: bars 130–139

Immediately following the above example is the first extensive use of *glissandi* in the piece. While the arpeggiated chords are strongly associated with the harp, there is no sound that is *more* associated, more of a trope, than the glissando. This is a technique that carries a huge volume of weight for a composer: it is the sound of Berio’s “half-naked blonde girl”, the sound of angels, even Bugs Bunny in Chuck Jones’ 1949 animation *Long-Haired Hare*. Yet, it is also the technique that is completely unique to the instrument, is not difficult to perform, and can be highly effective both as an acoustic effect *and* as a visual effect for an audience.

In the first section of the piece, most of the glissandi are instructed to be played with the fingernail (for example bars 25, 37, and 57–58), the aforementioned brittle sound used in **Figure 6**. However, the middle section of the piece introduces a new distortion of the glissando. This is a passage which skirts close to the ‘angelic’ trope of the harp: the left-hand glides up and down the instrument in a key reminiscent of F major (**Figure 7**). It is even marked *delicato* (delicate). The right hand, meanwhile, plays a sparse, occasional rhythmic figure. What disrupts and distorts this glissando though is the instruction for *près de la table* which, again, robs the

instrument of much of its natural resonance and instead produces a somewhat more percussive, drier effect. In the final bar of this passage, the harpist is invited to fully embrace the most basic of 'showy' techniques as the range of the glissando expands by an octave in each direction, accompanied by a large crescendo. This is a brief moment for the harpist to fully indulge what is sometimes marked in a score as a Broadway or Hollywood glissando where taste is secondary to an overblown style. However, before this effect truly has an opportunity to take flight, the piece crashes back to earth with a thundering low bass pedal buzz and the return of the *campanelli* figure to indicate a recapitulation of the opening material.

The musical score consists of three systems of music for harp, spanning bars 140 to 152.

- System 1 (Bars 140-145):**
 - Bar 140: Treble clef, key signature of one sharp (F#), time signature of 4/4. Bass clef has a C# note. Dynamics: *p*.
 - Bar 141: Treble clef has a glissando line. Bass clef has a glissando line. Dynamics: *p*.
 - Bar 142: Treble clef has a glissando line. Bass clef has a glissando line. Dynamics: *p*.
 - Bar 143: Treble clef has a glissando line. Bass clef has a glissando line. Dynamics: *p*.
 - Bar 144: Treble clef has a glissando line. Bass clef has a glissando line. Dynamics: *p*.
 - Bar 145: Treble clef has a glissando line. Bass clef has a glissando line. Dynamics: *p*.
- System 2 (Bars 146-150):**
 - Bar 146: Treble clef has a glissando line. Bass clef has a glissando line. Dynamics: *p*.
 - Bar 147: Treble clef has a glissando line. Bass clef has a glissando line. Dynamics: *p*.
 - Bar 148: Treble clef has a glissando line. Bass clef has a glissando line. Dynamics: *p*.
 - Bar 149: Treble clef has a glissando line. Bass clef has a glissando line. Dynamics: *p*.
 - Bar 150: Treble clef has a glissando line. Bass clef has a glissando line. Dynamics: *p*.
- System 3 (Bars 151-152):**
 - Bar 151: Treble clef has a glissando line. Bass clef has a glissando line. Dynamics: *p*.
 - Bar 152: Treble clef has a glissando line. Bass clef has a glissando line. Dynamics: *p*.

Annotations and markings include:

- Bar 140: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 141: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 142: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 143: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 144: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 145: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 146: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 147: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 148: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 149: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 150: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 151: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 152: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 140: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 141: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 142: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 143: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 144: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 145: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 146: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 147: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 148: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 149: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 150: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 151: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 152: *mp ben marc.* (above treble clef).
- Bar 140: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 141: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 142: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 143: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 144: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
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- Bar 150: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 151: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 152: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 140: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 141: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 142: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
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- Bar 151: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 152: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 140: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
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- Bar 147: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 148: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 149: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 150: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 151: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).
- Bar 152: *gliss. pdlt* (below bass clef).

Figure 7- A Painting by Magritte (Whitney): bars 140–152

3.5.4 Theatricality: A Shared Virtuosity

In writing *A Painting by Magritte* I consciously deployed in the composition several tools and devices which serve to create a shared platform that showcases the virtuosity of the performer, as enabled by a composer, to be performed to an audience (in its broadest sense). This 'virtuosity triangle' consisting of performer-composer-audience is essential to my understanding of how my work is innately theatrical, even when, as is the case in this piece, it is not written for a theatrical stage.

To examine each side of the triangle in turn, I will start with the audience. As noted by Pincherle and others, virtuosity demands an audience. The very etymology of theatricality also demands an audience. I am always conscious of an audience in my work. However, in this piece that consciousness has taken an active form by being woven into the compositional fabric where the performer is instructed to manipulate the audience's expectations through figures such as that in bar 75, and also the extended passages in free-time where the performer can exploit different venues and react to audience responses in determining how to play these passages.

Performer virtuosity has been discussed at length earlier in this section but can be summarised as an emphasis on the immediacy of *performance* rather than the written score: for example, the rapid finger work which sounds dazzlingly impressive but is among the most technically straightforward passages in the work, and the character of harp tropes such as the glissandi and arpeggiated chords. The piece has been deliberately written to allow the harpist to indulge in the *show* of performing: conversely, and perhaps cruelly, some of the more challenging passages in the work don't sound complex to a non-harpist audience.

Finally, the composer. While Vernon Howard (1997) explicitly excluded non-improvising composers from concepts of virtuosity, finding the concept limited to performance and performers, Halfyard (2007) argues that an acceptance of virtuosity was inevitable in the compositional milieu of the 1960s and 1970s, when the *Sequenzas* were underway. During this

period, several composers (such as the Darmstadt School) had an artistic goal of complete control by the composer. However, to successfully play these highly complicated scores, a performer was required to be virtuosic. Berio explicitly embraced this tension, and rehabilitated virtuosity as a legitimate artistic tool. He subsequently carved out the shared space for a composer-performer relationship in virtuosity, which I have followed.

It may seem as if I have made virtuosity and theatricality synonymous in this chapter and indeed, I have, up to a point. This follows a similar approach to Postlewait and Davis who incorporate the role of effort in their survey of theatricality, with language that shares several commonalities:

... [theatricality is] faulted not only for the *surplus* of emotionalism and spectacular dramatic action but also for the *lack* of truthful representation. And yet this surplus may be precisely what makes theatre (or opera and dance) gripping, providing the thrill of difficult accomplishment and uncommon talent that catapults a viewer into pleasures that derive from the abandonment of certain restraints. (2003, p. 21).

Here, the theatricality of virtuosity clearly relates to the viewer/audience: we are effectively— and somewhat deliriously— liberated from convention through the skill of the performer. Whether from the perspective of the composer, performer, or audience, the two concepts share traits in common. I consider the two concepts to be intrinsically connected and that, therefore, the presence of virtuosity indicates the presence of theatricality. It is this set of conditions which allows me to consider my work, such as solo piece for harp in a concert setting, as being innately theatrical.

4. Five Scenes

This chapter examines my work Five Scenes for wind quintet. It will start by developing an account of three key themes— those of program music, musical humour, and musical borrowing, considering the relationships between these themes and theatricality— before offering an analysis of Five Scenes in light of this thematic matrix.

4.1 Background

Five Scenes was written between July and November 2017 for Arcadia Winds, a Melbourne quintet. A ten-minute work for wind quintet in five movements, *Five Scenes* can be performed as one continuous piece or as discrete extracts. The odd-numbered scenes adapt musical tropes for the full quintet: a *moto perpetuo*, a Viennese Classical hunting song, and Americana ‘prairie music’. The two even-numbered, ‘inner’ scenes take sub-groupings from within the ensemble: a duet for flute and bassoon (movement two), and a trio for oboe, clarinet, and horn (movement four). Compared to the three character-piece movements, these inner movements are more austere, lacking the referentiality and humour of the others. While nominally they do constitute discrete scenes just like the odd-numbered movements, they rather function as scene *changes*. The premiere was given by Arcadia Winds at the Melbourne Recital Centre on 30 October 2018.

This chapter will demonstrate how *Five Scenes* realises a distinct quality of theatricality in my work. It will do this by assembling three concepts which I will then use to develop a reading of *Five Scenes* as theatrical. The first concept is program music, which I suggest partly, but not entirely nor sufficiently, captures the spirit of theatricality. The second is musical humour, and the third is musical borrowing. I will then use these concepts to analyse the music itself, through a series of examples which demonstrate how they manifest in and through what I have written.

4.2 Program Music

With *Five Scenes*' references to hunting music and other tropes, it is worth considering program music and why, while useful to a point, I do not consider it to be as adequate a term in conceptualising my practice when compared to theatricality. Put simply, program music is music of a "narrative or descriptive kind... often extended to all music that attempts to represent extra-musical concepts without resort to sung words" (Scruton, 2001).

I am conscious of that fact that, in subsequent sections of this chapter, the key markers of theatricality I identify in *Five Scenes* could be considered analogous to the characteristics of program music. There is, after all, an intrinsic connection between the theatre and program music— not least in the development of the concert overture from a form that originated in the theatre and was transplanted to the non-theatrical concert stage (Kregor, 2015). Such connections to the world outside of music have not always been appreciated. Indeed, there has been, in the words of Hepokoski, "...a sizeable component of cultivated musicians ready to cast a cold eye on art music that seeks to conjure up external images...For some, such practice was at best a symptom of the childish stage of the art, a debased or trivialised music..." (2014, p. 64). While Hepokoski's use of 'stage' is here in the context of childhood development, the similarities with the anti-theatrical writings of Adorno and Fried examined in Chapter Two are striking.

Program music is both a concept and a repertoire: the latter is vast and is mostly populated with works written in the 'long' nineteenth century. Primarily consisting of orchestral works and pieces for solo piano, many of these programmatic works by Beethoven, Berlioz, Liszt, and Strauss continue to be mainstays of the classical music performance repertoire. While program music existed before and after this period— for example, Vivaldi's *Le quattro Stagioni* of 1725, or Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux* of 1956–1958— the neoclassicist and modernist composers of the twentieth century increasingly saw it as a relic of a previous age (Kregor, 2015).

My focus, however, is on program music as a concept, which can be summarised as ‘music and x’ where the x represents something that the composer has indicated is drawn from outside the music. This external concept shares a rapport with the musical composition. This may be highly figurative, such as Honegger’s *Pacific 231* (1923) which conveys not only the motion of a steam locomotive but a specific type of locomotive gathering speed then grinding to a halt. Alternatively, it may function more connotatively, such as Adams’ *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* (1986) where the audience hears propulsion similar to the Honegger work, but the details of the propulsion, such as the choice of vehicle, are left to the performer and audience to interpret as they wish. To put it another way, in the semiotic language of Peirce, the program music in the Honegger functions as a sonic icon, a representation that relies on likeness, while the Adams work exists more as an aural index, where a steady woodblock pulse and glittery high piccolo figures can be easily associated with forward movement and velocity.

As was the case with regard to the question of theatricality, it is the role of the audience that is key to understanding how program music works. In Chapter Two, I showed that Féral understood theatricality in *processual* terms, whereby a spectator (for which read audience, or listener) reframes the quotidian into a different ‘space’. Program music forces the audience into this kind of reframing. Indeed, Honegger retitled *Pacific 231* from *Mouvement symphonique* in order to explicitly communicate the concept of the work with its audience.

This is central to my reflections on my own compositional practice. My work— including work that does not form part of the accompanying portfolio— is always, to some degree, program music. While it is never as narratively detailed as, for example, a Strauss tone poem, every work has an associated prompt or idea, the ‘x’ of the ‘music and x’ formula. There are no absolute sonatas, nor abstract preludes in my catalogue. The ‘x’ has taken different forms: multiple paintings (not least Magritte), obscure words (2015’s *Komorebi*, 2018’s *Knismesis and Gargalesis*), Latin riddles (2019’s *The Riddle*), and an architectural survey of public places (2020’s *Three Plazas*). The *Postcards I-IV* of 2020 took this further, a series of pieces built

around fictional postcards. The program notes for these pieces present a detailed description of the image on these postcards, which are presented as real places; however, the postcards are completely fictional.

Accepting, then, that program music is more theatrical than not, and that all of my music is program music, suggests that my music is, therefore, inherently theatrical. However, this syllogism is somewhat unsatisfying as this is, after all, a thesis on theatricality in my music, and not program music in my portfolio. As this is, indeed, *my* portfolio, at a personal level I have always been more drawn to the worlds of theatre than the giants of program music in the long nineteenth century.

More importantly, program music does not capture what it is that is specifically theatrical about my own work. This specificity can best be captured in the words of McGillvray, who was quoted in Chapter Two: theatricality as a concept is “a constellation of ideas and practices associated with theatre as an art form, and can operate either descriptively or as a value.” (2004, p. 116). The broad designation ‘program music’, while useful, is too situated within one particular area of practice: the shadow cast by those long nineteenth century giants is significant even today. I opened this section noting that program music was both a concept *and* a repertoire. Theatricality, however, is less encumbered by a repertoire (so far!), and as a constellation of ideas and practices, offers a more fruitful framework within which to analyse my work.

4.3 Humour

Curiously, as is the case with ‘theatricality’, the formal study of ‘humour’ as a discourse is, as Cristina observes (2017) a relatively modern project, despite comedy having a recorded history of millennia. Arguably, attempting to define humour encounters many of the same thorny challenges as do attempts to define theatricality, and developing a comprehensive theory of humour is far beyond the scope of this dissertation. While acknowledging the extensive bibliography on humour from a linguistic perspective (for example: Attardo (2017), Chlopicki &

Brozowska (2017)) or from a sociological or philosophical perspective (for example: Carroll (2005), Morreall (2009), Raskin (1984)) I intend to focus specifically on humour as a technique within musical composition, and how it forms part of the theatricality of my own practice.

In a study from 1949, Helen K. Mull sought to understand if an audience could detect humour in music, independent of any information provided by title or program note. In this, she sought to establish whether humour might be constituted intrinsically within the music. Mull's research involved surveying audiences who had listened to Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* and Rameau's *La poule*, along with a 'decoy' song by Strauss, *Ständchen*. She did not define humour for her subjects; rather, she allowed them to articulate *why* they found certain passages humorous. Mull reported that most of the subjects reported finding the same passages of the recordings to be humorous: most frequently these were passages which used strong contrasts as a compositional tool, such as the sudden intrusion of the jaunty horn solo into the wistful string opening of *Till Eulenspiegel*. Mull concluded that humour in music could exist independently of the title or extramusical information provided in advance, concluding that "a quick motor *volte-face*, in conjunction with an unpractical attitude, is the basic cause of humour" (p. 565).

While Mull focused solely on the reaction of an audience, Rossanna Dalmonte (1995) argues that musical humour comes in three forms, all of which are in control of the composer: first, the 'explicit' (the use of the title or in performance instructions such as *scherzando*); second, the 'implicit' (arising from composition itself, such as the use by the composer of what Mull called "a quick motor *volte-face*"); and third, the 'syncretic' (the combination of media such as comic ballet or opera). Only the explicit form offers a guarantee of something of a shared ground between composer and audience: the audience may not find the performance funny itself, but the title or some other useful piece of information indicates the composer's intent. The implicit form is more ambiguous: pieces presented using such devices may or may not be

interpreted by an audience as being humorous. The syncretic form will be addressed further in the next chapter.

In his 2001 survey of comedy in Western Art Music, Enrique Arias expands Dalmonte's three categories into twenty techniques for creating humour in music (Arias prefers the term 'comedy'; however, for simplicity, I will maintain the use of 'humour'). The following table is my representation of Arias's taxonomy (note that in some cases I have grouped a number of his techniques under one broader term). The table cross-references these techniques with two of Dalmonte's categorisations: explicit, or humour clearly signalled to an audience (for example the title), and implicit, in terms of which the humour may or may not be evident to an audience. Additionally, techniques through which we are likely to experience Mull's "quick motor *volte-face*" have been marked with an asterisk.

<u>Technique</u> (Arias, asterisk indicates Mull)	<u>Explicit</u> (Dalmonte: composer makes an explicit signal to audience, evident to audience)	<u>Implicit</u> (Dalmonte: within the notes on the page, may or may not be evident to audience)
Comic text	✓	
Title	✓	
Tempo modifier (e.g. <i>scherzando</i>)	✓	
Genre designation (e.g. <i>aria buffo</i>)	✓	
Unexpected juxtapositions*		✓
Musical descriptions (e.g. birdsong)		✓
Incongruency*		✓
Use of the unusual (e.g. timbre, dynamics, range, orchestral devices, modulations)		✓
"Visually curious notation"		✓
Chance		✓
Text set an instrumental work		✓
Musical cryptograms	✓	✓
References to other genres*	✓	✓
Allusions to a comic personage	✓	✓
Reference to past/historic styles*	✓	✓
Quotation*	✓	✓
Performer style		✓

Table 1- Adapted table of Arias's music comedy taxonomy

“Performer style” refers to music that becomes humorous due to the performer’s interpretation, intentional or not, and, as can be seen, does not fit into just one of Dalmonte’s categories. This is because it is the only technique in Arias’s list which is not in the direct control of the composer; further, such an approach has the potential to cut across anything the composer may put on the page (*any* piece of music, no matter how grave the composer’s intent, can become humorous if the conditions of the performance, intentionally or otherwise, make it so).

The other important cluster of techniques to note are those which can sit in either category depending on the actions of the composer. The relationship between these techniques, (all broadly forms of quotation and referentiality), and humour will be addressed further in the next section.

The three studies by Mull, Dalmonte, and Arias share two similar propositions, which have already been encountered in the concepts of theatricality as discussed in Chapter Two. The first is what Féral refers to as a “cleft of the quotidian” (2002, p. 97), the breach of the everyday, or what Mull calls the “quick motor *volte-face*”. This breach, as is wittily demonstrated by Morreall (2009), is fundamental to most joke telling, with its reliance on surprise, exaggeration, trickery, and ambiguity. These are qualities we are supposed to avoid in everyday discourse yet are the bedrock of jokes.

The second proposition is Burns’s conceptualisation of theatricality as involving a set of conventions shared by an audience. We typically experience humour through a specific cultural lens. Those of a given social group typically recognise humour as a genre, as it were, even if not every individual finds a particular instantiation of that genre funny. As a personal example, I have never found the *Gavotte* movement in the *Classical Symphony* to be even remotely hilarious but can recognise Prokofiev’s intent (aided, inevitably, by a program note that will draw my attention to it). The notion of a shared cultural knowledge also figures in theories of humour developed by Paul Clements (2020) who, writing of humour in visual art, articulates the

importance of what might be referred to as ‘insiderism’: the complicity between creator and audience which enables the latter to ‘get’, or at least to ‘recognise’, the joke.

The relationship between humour and theatricality can, therefore, be expressed simply as humour being one of the tools used to create theatricality. It does this through both the breach of the everyday and the exploitation of shared conventions between the composer, performer, and audience.

It will be recalled in **Table 1** that there was a cluster of Arias’s musical techniques that sat across both of Dalmonte’s explicit and implicit forms of musical humour. This demonstrated that they could be directly indicated by the composer to the audience, or not; if not, they could still be perceived by the audience (or not, of course). Having alluded to them several times in this section, the role of quotation and allusion in musical humour now warrant particular attention.

4.4 Quotation and Allusion

J. Peter Burkholder has written extensively (1994, 2018) on the role of quotation and musical borrowing and its role within musicological analysis. Of particular importance is his argument that ‘quotation’ is a broad spectrum of practices that dates from the earliest *cantus firmus* compositions of Western art music. A quotation, Burkholder suggests, “...forces us to think of another piece of music while we encounter the one in front of us” (1994, p. 859). In this consideration of ‘another piece of music’, the listener or performer is drawn away from the music currently being heard or played to an awareness of the repertoire beyond it.

Burkholder created an elaborate typology for musical borrowing, his preferred umbrella term for the various types of quotation and intertextual references. However, the simplified version of it developed by Angharad Davis is fit for my current purpose (2009). Her spectrum begins at ‘subjective reminiscence’ (an unconscious connection made by the audience) and ends with ‘exact quotation’ (a perfect reconstruction of another piece, or section thereof, within the

composition). In between, she identifies 'stylistic allusion' and 'referential borrowing' as being inexact quotation, while 'borrowing' and 'quotation' are both heard to be more literal resemblances of sourced material. I will refer to Davis's categories further in discussion of *Five Scenes*. I will also adopt Davis's analytical language: using 'quotation' to refer to 'transplanted' existing material, and 'allusion' to refer to material that is substantially my original work but suggestive of music by another composer or which echoes another style or genre.

Burkholder's approach involves analysing the formal features of the work in terms of musical borrowing: his focus on score analysis explicitly addresses his writing to musicology specialists. By contrast, in addition to its overall clarity, Davis's spectrum usefully takes up the perspective of the *audience* listening to music, not of the musicologist reading the score. This better addresses my own concerns with theatricality: musical quotation, for my purposes, involves, fundamentally, a recognition of the significance and importance of the world beyond the artefact of the score, not just by the composer or the musicologist, but also by the audience.

Quotation and allusion have an important role within musical humour, as indicated in **Table 1**. In the twentieth century, this was a device particularly enjoyed by Benjamin Britten—for example the quotation of the 'Tristan chord' in 1947's *Albert Herring* when Sid spikes the drink of the titular character; or the allusions to Donizetti in the opera-within-the-opera in 1960's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Britten underlines this allusion for the performers when the musical instructions in the score switch from English to Italian for the mock-Donizetti scenes). Several decades earlier it was unsurprisingly Erik Satie who pushed quotation to the point of absurdity in his *Embryons desséchés*. In this work, Satie marks a passage in the second piece of the set as a quotation from one of Schubert's 'celebrated mazurkas', thus creating the joke of a supposed quotation that is completely fraudulent, not least as Schubert did not write mazurkas (as cited in Burkholder, 2018, p. 241). I borrowed this technique in my own work, *Fantasy on Les Bijoux de Castafiore* (not part of the accompanying portfolio). This piece is a Lisztian paraphrase of an opera, with no indication to the audience that the opera being

paraphrased is in fact completely fictional and is based upon a Tintin comic book (which, in turn, is based on the Rossini opera *La gazza ladra*, which I also quote in the work).

As is the case with virtuosity discussed in the previous chapter, these devices can function to draw attention to the composer, demonstratively presenting and foregrounding a technical skill but also a sense of *sprezzatura* or *élan*. It is as if a composer is saying to an audience: “you thought you were listening to a new piece of Australian art music, yet here is some Beethoven peeking through the texture unexpectedly: surprise!” Indeed, this quality of quotation as surprise, of the sudden, forced, unexpected recognition of another work, is a form of Féral’s breach of the everyday, and may well trigger Mull’s “quick motor *volte-face*”.

As I have argued consistently, we must not overlook the role of the audience in these processes. In the case of Satie, as well as my own work *Fantasy on Les Bijoux de Castafiore*, allusion and quotation in both these works relies upon, and plays with, ‘insiderism’. Writing the work, I not only acknowledged the relationship of the piece to a broader repertoire, but also the cultural knowledge of the audience. No small part of the thrill of the joke for the audience is the recognition of one’s own cultural knowledge (“...but that’s the name of a Tintin book!”); a less charitable part of the thrill for the composer is the deception. Recall, too, that this ‘deception’ is a significant part of anti-theatricalism as examined in Chapter Two.

Having established and briefly considered the mechanics of the themes of humour, quotation and allusion, and how they serve theatricality, I will now draw upon this suite of themes in an analysis of *Five Scenes*.

4.5 Theatricality in *Five Scenes*

4.5.1 What’s In A Name

When encountering a title like *Five Scenes*, it is worth bearing in mind Schumann’s aphorism: “we are accustomed to judge a thing by the name it bears: we make certain demands upon a ‘fantasy’, others upon a ‘sonata’” (as cited in Beaumont, 2016, p. 95). Compared to *A*

Painting by Magritte, Five Scenes is, superficially, a more anodyne title. However, it is also a title that ‘does what it says on the tin’: the progression of movements (or scenes) underpins the construction of the work. Each scene can be performed on its own as a discrete unit; however, the piece is also written with instructions to stitch together scenes when the piece is performed in a continuous flow.

14

141

Stop here if movement being played separately.

II. Duet

molto rall...

Semplice c. ♩ = 120

Start here if movement being played separately. Bracketed notes in oboe & horn omitted.

mf

f

p

mf

pp

Figure 8- *Five Scenes* (Whitney): bars 141–146

The ability to extract each scene, or movement, was driven by two impulses. The first was entirely mercantile: the fifth movement could be played as a fun three-minute encore, for example, which would lead to more performances and more income. The second reason, however, as noted in my accompanying journal on 1 August 2017 was also pragmatic. This was my reaction to the behaviour of the classical music audience in a multi-movement work: the inevitable shuffling and adjusting that occurs between movements (with performers sometimes taking the opportunity to check their tuning, a practice I find particularly lamentable in terms of theatricality). This suspension of the performance and return to the quotidian (‘I need to cough’, ‘how much longer have we got to’ ‘I think I’m going flat’) was something I was determined to avoid by minimising the opportunity for breaks between each of my scenes.

I will now focus on two movements of the five in detail: the third and fifth movements, identifying how the use of humour and quotation further support the theatricality within the composition. This is not to say that these qualities are entirely absent from the other

movements, but rather a recognition that in these two movements these qualities are strongly foregrounded.

Note that the score extracts presented throughout this chapter are un-transposed, that is not at concert pitch.

4.5.2 Canzone di caccia (Movement III)

There is a rich vein of hunting in classical music, not least because, as Raymond Monelle (2006) reminds, hunting was a popular pastime for the aristocracy who were commissioning composers in the eighteenth century. I am far from the first composer, in recent years, to playfully interpret this in contemporary music, consider, for example Adams's *Absolute Jest* (2012) or, more explicitly, Widmann's *Jagdquartett* (2003). However, while Widmann's string quartet fully exploits the violence of hunting with screams and shocks (Armstrong, 2016), my interpretation is more comedic: more Warner Bros. cartoon, and less slasher film. The movement's title is Italian so as to place it within a lineage of classical music hunting songs and pastoralism. Elements of a chase are deployed throughout the movement, with instruments forming different groupings to chase another instrument.

The movement opens, appropriately, with solo horn playing a standard hunting-theme (Paul, 2000). The player can choose to play this natural, without valves, in the manner of a traditional hunting horn to further reinforce the stylistic link. This is subsequently echoed by the other players before it is again blared out by the horn. In the first 'attack' of the movement, the non-horn instruments seemingly overcome the horn, before it re-asserts itself and the other players splutter out.



Figure 9- *Five Scenes* (Whitney): bars 177–190

The horn's victory is, however, fleeting. The oboe and clarinet, echoed by flute and bassoon, chirp away at a motif similar to the hunting theme (bars 191–200), with small figurations. At bar 200, the oboe and clarinet utter agitated chirps in thirds, but with the clarinet voiced above the oboe to provide an unexpected colour.

The bassoon begins the hunt with a yodelling snippet alluding to the final movement of the Sixth Symphony of Beethoven (**Figure 10** below).



Figure 10- *Five Scenes* (Whitney): bars 203–208

The flute and horn eventually pick up the Beethoven quotation to overpower the oboe and clarinet. The latter are subdued, with the oboe pulse slowing to silence and the clarinet playing a long slow trill to *niente*.

At this point the flute takes on the role of the intended victim, chirping up high akin to some kind of mechanical bird. A muted horn and low bassoon, both marked *furtivo, tenebroso* begin a sinister, uneasy melody that swells beneath the oblivious flute (**Figure 11**). The oboe and clarinet squawk a warning, but eventually all four of the lower instruments join forces to extinguish the flute.

K

18

215

ff

pp

p

insert mute

mf

f

ff brioso

mf

con sord.

p furitivo, tenebroso

p furitivo, tenebroso

224

ff aggressivo

ff aggressivo

mf

mf

Figure 11- *Five Scenes* (Whitney): bars 215–229

Between figures L and M are found a series of quotations. Once the flute is ‘dead’, the bassoon plays a sinister minor second which immediately suggests the famous theme of the shark *Jaws*. My journal on 10 October 2017 shows some hesitation about the use of quotation—insofar as a ubiquitous interval like the minor second can be considered ‘quotation’— but I eventually decided that the *Jaws* theme was probably the closest piece of music in the late twentieth century that could be considered similar to the hunting motifs of the classical period (albeit in an inversion, with the humans not the hunters but the hunted). Curiously, I also noted that I was not going to do any more quotation in this movement. Yet, the evidence indicates I

changed my mind at some point as this is immediately followed by a *senza misura* pastorale of 'bird' sounds lifted from the Beethoven Sixth Symphony, as the four non-brass instrumentals tweet and trill away.

This is rudely interrupted by the horn with the return of the original hunting theme at rehearsal figure M. This time, however, the four non-brass players join forces in blasting the hunting theme. The horn mounts a counter-offensive, marked *bell up* for the aural and visual effect; however, there is no clear victor. The instruments stagger away and the horn, now stopped, extinguishes with a long *diminuendo* into the Trio (which, although not intentional, could be heard as a funeral cortège).

It is worth noting that all the quotations used in this movement conform to what Davis would classify as literal quotation: the Beethoven snippets have been renotated and transposed to fit the ensemble, but they are still more or less exact replicas. In the next section that discusses the fifth movement, my focus shifts from quotation to allusion.

4.5.3 Le voyage américain (Movement V)

The title of the fifth and final movement, *Le voyage américain*, is an example of Dalmonte's explicit humour, while also drawing on Arias's referentiality. My journal entry of 17 November 2017 indicates that I had been toying with the title *American Burlesque* but ultimately settled on the French as, like the Italian of the third movement, I wanted to reference a particular repertoire. In this case, as a Francophile, the usage of the French title was my personal in-joke to the rich tradition of 'Spanish' music being written from the nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries in Paris (for example Chabrier's 1883 *España* or Ravel's 1907 *Rapsodie espagnole*). This was music that, rather than offering any ethnomusicological accuracy, sought to capture an exotic impression of a foreign place. In this spirit, while I have lived in the United States for an extended period, I make no attempt at any accuracy in this movement. *Le voyage américain* is an allusion to 'American' music written entirely in Sydney, a sly snapshot which aims to create a façade of Americana.

The movement opens with a series of uneven chords comprising of stacked fifths to represent the ‘prairie’ sound of Aaron Copland before settling into what begins to sound somewhat like a hoedown. This sets a pulse that is then overtaken by a passage reminiscent of a fiddle tune, played in open fifths and then fourths, by the flute and oboe:

26 **R**

350

355

Figure 12- Five Scenes (Whitney): bars 350–360

This is unexpectedly disrupted by two 7/8 bars that give the impression of a missed step. This is the first example in this movement of what Mull called the “quick motor *volte-face*” that contributes to the overall humorous character of the work. The movement then veers into a different American setting: the gentle melodic airs that characterise, again, the prairie period

372

(senza vib.)

pp

pp senza rigore

mp cantabile e espress.

(senza vib.)

pp senza rigore

pp

pp

378

pp

pp

(senza vib.)

pp senza rigore

mp espress.

pp senza rigore

pp

ord.

allarg.

ord.

ord.

ord.

This restful mood does not linger, however, as a solo bassoon jerks the piece back into life with an extended, angular solo that fully exploits the bassoon's clowning possibilities. This is the second example of Mull's "*volte-face*", and it is a moment of considerable drama: in personal communication from the original bassoonist, Matthew Kneale, I have been informed that this sudden bassoon solo garners the liveliest response from school audiences, which I believe derives from its unexpected arrival. The movement is then steered firmly back into the 'hoedown' world, first via the flute and oboe together again, then with a more 'fiddle-like' tune

played on the clarinet. Over an uneven bass pulse in the bassoon and horn, implying more missed steps, the three upper winds each take the hoedown tune, moving through various polytonalities in rapid succession before the movement builds up to a series of grandiose chords. This is, however, a false coda as the five lines then collapse into a scurrying passage of triplet scales, suitably marked *furtivo*, before a dizzying run up to a final, blasted chord to end the work.

In an unexpected twist, the coda contains one final allusion, and one completely unrelated to Americana. The mechanical quality of the overlapping triplets, the darker tonality, and the general sense of scurrying are overwhelmingly suggestive of the closing moments of Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony, when the sextet of string soloists interrupt the triumphal closing passage with a disjointed, frantic, and polytonal hive of ironic activity.

One might wonder why include this faux-Prokofiev at the end of a movement that otherwise exploits the tropes and sounds of Americana? Partly, and honestly, it started as a happy accident deriving from the use of polytonal triplets. More importantly, however, I then chose not only to keep this happy accident but fully exploit the incongruity of the coda with what has come before. Perhaps, too, there was subconscious pleasure in alluding to the coda of a fifth symphony to close the fifth movement of my five scenes.

4.5.4 Theatricality: A Shared Joke

In writing *Five Scenes* I have deployed humour and quotation as tools; I regard both as important facets of theatricality in composition. In the closing section of the previous chapter, I referred to the shared experiences of virtuosity across the composer-performer-audience triad. As an audience is key for theatricality, I will return to that triad now.

Firstly, the explicit humour: in other words, what has been clearly sign-posted to the audience. The title clearly orientates an audience to a theatrical expectation. The deliberate use of foreign language in the movement sub-titles is another, as already discussed, but one that may not be recognised by *all* of the audience. However, this is addressed through the use of the

program note. Unlike some of my other work (the *Castafiore* work previously discussed, or *Postcards I-IV*), the program note for *Five Scenes* clearly articulates the work's influences and humour:

Five Scenes is a series of interconnected narrative vignettes. The odd numbered scenes play with musical tropes- the first scene takes on the character of a slightly wonky *moto perpetuo*; in the third, Classical evocations of hunting music have shifting alliances and allegiances between instruments as they form a murderous pack to eventually destroy the brassy interloper. Interspersed, the two even numbered scenes carry a more abstract narrative explored first in a duo, then in a trio. Finally, the fifth and final scene is musical tourism- my interpretation in Sydney of American prairie music in the style of 'Spanish' music written in Paris or, earlier, 'Turkish' music written in Vienna. (Whitney, 2018)

The implicit humour can be found in the quotation and allusion that has already been discussed in the third and fifth movements. However, it can also be found in the first movement, which fully exploits Mull's theory of musical humour. The first movement is a *moto perpetuo*, primarily driven by the clarinet, one that is regularly disrupted and interrupted: textbook examples of Mull's "quick motor *volte-face*". The first movement also deploys a number of Arias's techniques, for example an ungainly 'motor' passage for oboe and horn, with both instruments puttering along in a slightly unidiomatic manner, particularly for the oboe, which uses its least flattering low notes (see bars 34–43).

More broadly in the overall structure of *Five Scenes*, a brief observation in light of Mull's theory can be made about the second and fourth movements, which have not yet been discussed. Both of these austere movements provide a point of breath for an audience before the following movement springs to life: in both cases, the movement has a slow and soft coda which is jolted awake by a loud and fast opening to the following movement.

Whether implicit or explicit, what is demonstrated throughout *Five Scenes* is my relationship with an audience, via the performers. This has been done through both explicit and implicit signalling, via the tools of musical humour, and quotation and allusion. This is the composer-performer-audience triad that I consider one of my key identifiers of theatricality in my work.

5. David Davis@

This chapter examines my chamber opera David Davis@. I argue that in this work, 'theatrical' is not simply a metaphor for aspects of the work but is the defining attribute of the genre in which I am working. This attribute will be conducted by means of close analysis of both the context and compositional process for the opera.

5.1 Background

David Davis@ is a chamber opera adapted from the Western Australian author Meredi Ortega's 2012 short story *David Davis at Coldpigeon Dot Com*. It is scored for five singers and five instruments and is arranged in three brief Acts which flow without significant pause.

The work was given a piano workshop over a full day in January 2019, where all but the last three minutes (which were yet to be written) were sung through. Three of the five original singers then returned for the semi-staged workshop reading in February 2020. This presentation included an intensive week of rehearsal and then a performance in front of an invited audience. A full list of the people involved is found in the Appendix.

This chapter will examine this work, which differs in an important fashion from the other scores in this portfolio: here, theatricality is no longer a metaphor but, rather, the *raison d'être* of the composition. Before proceeding, I do need to make a brief note on terms: I will use 'Chorus' to refer to the three minor singing roles, and I will use 'ensemble' to refer to the accompanying instrumental quintet (piccolo/flute/alto flute, clarinet/bass clarinet, viola, cello, piano).

5.1.1 Plot Synopsis of the Source Material and Opera

David Davis is an early tech adopter with a common name. He joins a new email server called Dovemail soon after it launches, therefore managing to secure— as his address— the purest form of his name: david.davis@dovemail.com. It is implied, at least in the opera, that Dovemail overtakes Gmail in popularity, and that soon all the other David Davises of the world

sign up, using various variations of their name: daviddavis01, and so on. Consequently, our David starts to receive emails intended for other David Davises and, being bored and something of a misanthrope, he begins to reply. In doing so, he revels in the power to cause chaos and unhappiness among total strangers.

David receives an email from a poet, under the name of Erasmus. Erasmus met *their* David Davis at a poetry symposium and has sent *our* David their latest poem for feedback. David is brutal in his critique; after an email exchange between Erasmus (desperate, then despondent) and David (indulging in *Schadenfreude*), the poet fades away. David subsequently reads of a suicide which is assumed by him and the audience to be that of Erasmus. This forces David to reflect on his behaviour, a reflection that is left ambiguous and unresolved.

Meredi Ortega's *David Davis at Coldpigeon Dot Com* was not the first short story I had considered for adaptation. I had decided to limit my search for source material to short stories on entirely pragmatic grounds, given the 45-minute time frame I had set myself for my composition (the only significance to this time frame was that of practicality for the eventual workshop performance, which I knew would be essential from the start). After negotiations for the use of two other stories collapsed, it was a serendipitous find, the result of an incidental browsing of a second-hand bookstore while waiting for someone and seeing a copy of *The Best Australian Stories of 2012*.

Two aspects of the short story had an immediate impact on the composition. First, early in the process I decided that the eponymous server of the story— *Coldpigeon*— would not necessarily lend itself to singing. As the name would be sung repeatedly, I opted for the more mellifluous *Dovemail*. Indeed, while the story takes a certain literary freedom, *Coldpigeon* just sounded *too* unrealistic for a contemporary email server. I wanted to keep the bird imagery, as I had envisaged a fluttering birdsong-like figure for a 'new email' motif, and, happily, doves and pigeons belong to the same avian family. Second, the alliterative succession of hard 'd' sounds— **D**avid **D**avis at **D**ovemail **d**ot com—though not a deliberate part of my design, was also

musically pleasing, and became an integral part of the ‘dovemail.com’ tag that is repeatedly sung throughout the opera.

5.2 Theatricality in *David Davis@*

In previous chapters, I have taken what I have identified as the elements constituting the theatricality of my work—virtuosity, humour, quotation and allusion—and used these concepts as heuristics with which to analyse my concert works. In doing so, I treated these concepts first as metaphors with which to develop an understanding of how I write—and perceive—my music, and secondly, to create an account of how, in the writing and performing of my work, the anticipated audience functions as central consideration.

With regard to *David Davis@* there is a significant important shift: theatricality is no longer a metaphor, but rather an inherent attribute of the genre in which I am working. All of the elements considered in the previous two chapters are present in *David Davis@*, and I will selectively touch upon them in what follows. Setting this work apart from the others, however, is the fact that it was written for an explicitly theatrical performance context, with all the trappings this entails. Rather than exhaustively replicating the analytical process I used to produce my account on *A Painting by Magritte* and *Five Scenes*, the following chapter takes up this point of difference

To begin, I must address these contextual trappings. When a piece such as an opera is written *for* a theatrical stage, can I lay special claim to a particular sensibility of theatricality? In other words, is an analysis identifying the presence of an inherent theatricality made redundant by the conditions of the presentation?

It will be recalled that, in Chapter Two, I showed that Féral took up the role and significance of the physical stage and its trappings in her theorisation of theatricality. We are, she argued, conditioned to respond to a set of cues— the tiered seating, the dimming of house lights, a proscenium arch and so on— as an environment that creates a sense of theatricality, referring to this as a “semiotization of space” (2002, p. 96). An illustrative instance from the

staging of *David Davis@* highlights how such a transformation occurs. In the opera, the prosaic line “sent from my iPhone” is sung by one of the characters as a repeating motif. This line barely generated a response in the rehearsal room, but as soon as it was delivered in the full theatrical environment it generated one of the biggest laughs of the evening from the audience. This is a prime example of what Féral describes as the process of the heightening of the mundane and the everyday, through the conditions of presentation to the theatrical. If our analysis went no further, the implication is that as soon as this piece was put on stage, theatricality was present.

However, this is not where Féral’s thinking ends. She ultimately determines theatricality to be more of a *process* operating independently of any of what I have earlier called ‘contextual trappings’: those elements that indicate to a spectator that they are experiencing theatricality. I intend to discuss both of these approaches— that of context and that of process— from the perspective of a composer with a theatrical sensibility.

In considering this environmental aspect of the theatricality of *David Davis@*, I will address the conditions of the theatrical experience of the work. In doing this, I acknowledge that no opera in the world is produced in a completely unrestrained way, and that there are always limitations in any kind of resourcing. In preparing the semi-staged workshop for this work, a small group of singers worked intensively for a week with a conductor and director. The end result was, understandably, a product of these conditions. With this in mind, I decided that it would be unreasonable to expect singers to memorise a complex new work for a single workshop reading, and so the presence of scores on stage became an early limitation on the staging.

However, is this actually a limitation for a work such as *David Davis@*? The compositional implication was subtle but also important: as I was now freed from the expectation of memorisation, I could also write somewhat more adventurously than I would were I considering a tight rehearsal period with singers ‘off book’. In our performance, we used score reader iPads, which not only provided an eerie light source, but were also entirely within the dramatic landscape of the work. This is, after all, an opera in which every action and every

dialogue between two characters is mediated through screens and email. Consequently, it was entirely natural for tablets and screens to be present in the *mise en scène*.



Image 4- Chorus (Hamish James, Deepka Ratra, Bree Meara-Hendy) using iPads in the semi-staged reading

At first glance, the story does not suggest a straightforward theatrical adaptation: none of the characters ever inhabit the same space, and while epistolary stories have been adapted, they present a number of challenges that, in theory, should have militated against the theatrical sensibility I assigned myself in Chapter Two (for example, Conrad Susa abandoned the epistolary structure in his 1994 operatic adaptation of Laclos's novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*). Yet in my reading of the story, I could immediately both hear and *see* it as an opera. This *seeing* the story— and recall that the etymology of the word 'theatre' is a place to see— as an opera is a vivid demonstration of that theatrical sensibility.

In her original story, Meredi provided a framing device which I could immediately *hear* as staged music: the recurring textual use of an email format, including "To/From/Subject:" fields. From my first reading, I could hear how this mundane information could become a comical musical tag. This was the first, and strongest, magnetic 'pull' towards theatricalising the story in opera. The Chorus sings the headings at each occurrence, with David and his

correspondent each having a unique motif for their own names, which they sing in response. This frames much of the first Act, a framing I described in the workshop as being “vaudevillian”, with the attendant comedic implications, including quick transitions between different performers: in this case, the Chorus abruptly switches from their traditional role providing a kind of commentary on the action, to that of individual correspondents with David. This framing device propels the movement of the work, guiding the audience through these changes of characters between the three singers of the Chorus, while setting up the ‘rules’ for the rest of the piece—that every ‘dialogue’ is epistolary— without the literal, iconic reproduction of (textual) email headings.

I could also *see* that in an ideal production these email fields might be presented as projections across the stage. More interesting, however, is their use as an important structural device in the construction of the Act, and how this brings to the fore the theatricality I have written into the work.

I am not, of course, the first composer to have worked in this manner. While our sound worlds— and subject matter— are very different, this technique was used by George Benjamin in his opera *Written on Skin* (2012) where characters often refer to themselves in third person (“the boy said...”) or sing the stage directions in a quasi-recitative manner. Benjamin’s motivation for allowing the singers to be their own narrators— a technique he first used in 2006’s *Into the Little Hill*— was an attempt to address what he saw as a paradox: that opera needs story with emotion in order to be opera, but that at the same time, opera narratives had become bloated and, with the advent of film, attempts at narrative realism on the opera stage had become futile (Mead, 2018). This is a position in which I am in complete agreement: opera succeeds when it is fully embracing theatrical possibilities to heighten a narrative (consider that there is no operatic equivalent to a ‘kitchen sink drama’ that has had a significant impact on the repertoire).

The recurrence of the key motif that accompanies the words “Dovemail dot com” was an aspect of the work I could *hear* immediately in reading the original short story. It first appears at bars 74–75, in a clean triadic harmony of F major chords, but with a slightly unsettled resolution to a C minor chord in its first inversion:

Figure 14 is a musical score for three voices: Chorus S., Chorus M-S., and Chorus T. The score is in F major, indicated by two flats in the key signature. It begins at bar 71. The lyrics are as follows:

- Chorus S.:** C Da - vis eigh - ty two, Da - vid Tim Da - vis. @* Dove - mail dot com: a plum-ber,
- Chorus M-S.:** vis nine-teen se-ven - ty, Da-vis Da-vid for - ty three @* Dove - mail dot com: a doc-tor,
- Chorus T.:** Da - vis Da - vid nine-ty one, Da - vey - boy-six-ty-nine @* Dove - mail dot com: A

The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *p* (piano). There are also performance instructions like *p dolce* and *mf* in boxes. The score ends at bar 77.

Figure 14- David Davis @ (Whitney): bars 71–77

As the Act proceeds into the first email exchange between David and Carol (the first of David’s electronic interlocutors), the tag is elaborated. Carol’s tag is followed by a melodic melismatic passage that becomes more desperate, while David’s tag is more square and solid. While the melodic material remains calmly triadic, the accompanying harmony in the ensemble begins to ‘rot’. At each occurrence, the tag underlying “Dovemail dot com” becomes increasingly harmonically murky and rhythmically ambiguous, paralleling David’s transition from misanthropic prankster to something far more unsettling. In the below figures, **Figure 15** shows David’s first occurrence of this tag. This gradually evolves (or ‘rots’) over the course of the Act to his final occurrence of this tag, which is shown in **Figure 16**.

Figure 15- *David Davis @ (Whitney)*: bars 183–188

Figure 16- *David Davis @ (Whitney)*: bars 443–446

The evolution of this tag is not only important to the construction of the first Act but was one of the first things I could hear as I read the story and convinced me that the piece was open to theatricalisation for opera.

There are two further aspects of theatricalisation were considered in the composition process, one of which was abandoned in the draft stage. In the original story, Meredi provides an ironic three-word absolution to David—"All was forgiven"—which arrives simultaneously with a new email from an earlier antagonist ("Carol", who provides, in both the story and in the opera, the first extended comic exchange). Initially, I considered giving this absolution to all the

singers, presenting the audience with a final moral, reminiscent of the epilogue concluding Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*. However, I was not sure that wanted to embrace the morality play aspect, not least as in the short story the simplicity of 'All is forgiven' functions, in my reading at least, as a satirical sting in the tale. Consequently, I landed on a more provocative, but trickily ambiguous ending, whereby David starts to reflect upon the ethical questions arising from his conduct but is interrupted by the ping of a new email. How he responds is left unclear.

In leaving David's response unresolved, I was aware that I was playing something of a mean trick on an audience. As a genre, opera tends to offer dramatic resolution; audiences tend expect 'happily ever after' (or their clear opposite) endings supported by the musical resolution of perfect cadence, signifying that we have reached the conclusion. By withholding any kind of narrative resolution— there is neither come-uppance nor, indeed, any indication of continued malfeasance on David's part— and using a well-established musical motif from Act I to end the opera, a repetition suggesting a circular return to the beginning, I deprived the audience of resolution. This was demonstrated in performance when the audience were unsure on whether to applaud, and only realised the work was over when a purely theatrical element was introduced: an abrupt blackout.

While I abandoned the idea of something along the lines of Stravinsky's morality coda to *The Rake's Progress*, I do share with that opera the use of a ceremonial opening. This introduction, consisting of ponderous, portentous chords, firmly plants the story into the world of opera. That Stravinsky's opera provided two points of reference I find something of a curiosity, as it was not a conscious reference point in my writing.

I will now examine characters in the opera, and how their development in both writing and staging was informed by both seeing and hearing the work: this will begin with Erasmus, the poet, then the collective Chorus, and finally the titular role.

5.2.1 Erasmus

In reading the story, I could clearly hear and see the world of Erasmus. While David is the titular character and the opera's protagonist, there is no story without Erasmus. The character is a depersonalised cipher with an unlikely name (the original short story refers to them by the even more unlikely name of Erasmus Erasmus). I knew that they would come across as almost alien: through their interaction with David, the tone and overall ambience of the work shifts from vaudeville to something more disturbing.

I also knew that the role would be a mezzo-soprano (on grounds no more complex than considering how it would sit against David's baritone) and that our Erasmus would be as unidentifiable as we could make them, which included never specifying their gender. There were several reasons for this. The first, and most important, was the maintenance of the character as a cipher, with both the audience and David having as little information about this person as possible. The second reason was that although the treatment of women online is abhorrent and well-known, *this* story is not *that* story: unambiguously signposting Erasmus as a woman could bring an additional element to the story that I did not want. In our performance, the role was sung by a woman who was visually presented as a woman. The lack of information about this character was maintained— Erasmus, like many opera characters sung by women, exists to have a tragic death (Vincent, 2022)— and the audience undoubtedly brought their own knowledge (and perhaps experience) of women in online spaces. Although it was not exploited in this particular production, I also wrote the role as a mezzo-soprano in the knowledge that Erasmus could be presented as a (young) male, in a sly nod to the operatic tradition of 'pants roles', in which case the audience may instead bring their own knowledge (and, again, perhaps experience) of masculinity and adolescence.

Erasmus's importance is foreshadowed in fleeting glimpses during Act I. The first occurs at bar 261: this is the earliest instance where all five voices in the opera sing simultaneously, and also serves to introduce the only true aria in the entire opera (to be discussed further

below). Erasmus's next appearance is at bar 459, in the introductory material to the next key waypoint in the opera: the Act I *stretta* that draws Act I to its conclusion. Erasmus makes two further brief appearances in short phrases throughout this *stretta*, including at bar 480 as illustrated below in **Figure 17**. In these conscious choices of where to introduce Erasmus— they do not happen in the short story— I was clearly positioning the character as someone of importance. As I constructed these glimpses, I was very consciously *seeing* how they would appear on stage. As these phrases drift in and out of the texture— and the drift is strongly indicated through the use of ellipses in the text— I saw Erasmus as a wraith-like figure crossing upstage, a foreshadowing of the darker turn the work would take in Act II.

Figure 17 shows a musical score for bars 480-483. The score is for a scene involving Erasmus, David, and the Chorus. Erasmus enters at bar 480 with the lyrics "...dear Pro - fes - sor Da - vis...". The tempo changes from "poco allarg." to "Energico c. ♩ = 88" at bar 481. The Chorus enters at bar 482 with the lyrics "Hey Ti - ger... I've". The piano accompaniment includes a "poco allarg." section and an "Energico" section with a "Fl." (flute) entry at bar 483.

Figure 17- David Davis@ (Whitney): bars 480–483

Act II is an extended duet between Erasmus and David, with only the briefest interruption from the Chorus. Following the hurly-burly of the ending of Act I, a portentous chord introduces both Erasmus as their own significant character, as well as the two distinctive sound worlds Erasmus inhabits. The first involves sustained piano chords in registral extremes,

with hushed and slow-moving inner parts on the other instruments. The uneasy harmonic shifts and slower rhythmic movement immediately contrast Erasmus to David's jerkier accompaniment. Erasmus's other musical backdrop is that of agitation, with a fussy, busy counterpoint duet from the flute and viola. Across both accompaniments, Erasmus's vocal lines are more angular, more uncomfortable than any of the vocal music the audience has heard in the opera to this point.

In Act III, Erasmus joins the Chorus in indicting David among the incoming wave of emails, with snatches of their poetry (in rehearsal, we joked that this was a contemporary Shakespearean ghost in the form of metadata). In the final thunderous denunciations against David, the Chorus, for the first time, take Erasmus's words and, with them, issue a damnation of David. The impact of this moment is reinforced by the accompanying ensemble falling silent (bars 954–963), this shocking withdrawal drawing extra attention to the text. As David is left alone with his reckoning in the coda, both of Erasmus's Act II musical worlds, the sparse and slow chords, and the flute and viola counterpoint, intrude. Regardless of whether David reforms or not, Erasmus has left a permanent mark in his sound world.

5.2.2 Chorus

The Chorus, an archetypal theatrical construct, takes on several roles throughout the opera. They begin as historical scene-setters, perform the email headings (as already discussed), take on a range of individual characters, and provide important linking narrative throughout the work.

In addition to the email headings in Act I, the individual characters whom the Chorus represent throughout the opera propel much of the comedy. These are examples of the 'quick turns' identified by Mull, as discussed in the previous chapters. Some of these characters have more narrative baggage than others. Carol and Julie provide two different responses to David's electronic pranks: Carol is confused, whilst Julie responds with outright hostility. Once we've finished with Carol and Julie, each of the three singers take on fleeting snapshots of characters known only by a line or two of dialogue, which begin to overlap as Act I builds to its climax.

The composition of these snatches of characterisation offers example of both *seeing* and *hearing* being at the forefront of my practice. At this point in the opera, the pace of music is gradually building, and there is only so much I could do to differentiate each character in purely musical terms. A practical implication of this can be seen in the score, where individual names for the Chorus members for each character eventually disappear. The composition of the Chorus towards the end of Act I became primarily technical, responding to the importance of maintaining separation between the vocal lines, while at the same time building the layers towards what I had envisaged as an exciting musical climax. Subsequently, the visual assumed an increased significance for the differentiation of characters, and to emphasise the increasing flow of emails to which David is responding.

The Chorus is largely absent from Act II but begin Act III in a mode similar to that in which they operated in Act I, with the return of overlapping materials and textual jokes. As this style was interrupted at the end of Act I by the arrival of Erasmus, here, in Act III, it is interrupted by the Chorus switching themselves to narration of a death.

At rehearsal figure 844, there is the shock of the Chorus pivoting to spoken word. A Chorus that has been singing as a trio for the past half hour suddenly switches to a rhythmic, unison text, supported only by the lightest accompaniment in a completely unison ensemble. This change was made to indicate that the Chorus have switched to reportage: opinion and colour have been stripped out in favour of pure facts of the discovery of a suicide, ending with the prosaic information on when the bridge was re-opened to traffic (the bridge had initially been named in an earlier draft, but this name was deleted so as to remove any suggestion of a real place and/or time). In rehearsing this passage, the conductor asked the Chorus to perform the crescendo only with an increase in volume, rather than in intensity, as if it were a radio dial being turned up. This aligned exactly with how I saw this passage in potential staging: the delivery of information without emotion or colour, just fact. This spoken passage also proved to be one of the most successful moments of theatricality in the work, attracting a number of comments on its impact and power (perhaps it is owing to my theatrical sensibility, that I did

not take these compliments on the spoken word passages as a backhanded commentary on the more carefully crafted sung passages!).

As the piece approaches its climax in Act III, the Chorus returns to singing, and their relationship with their ‘emails’ undergoes an important shift: we have moved from specific correspondence to an increasingly fractured whirlwind. This is introduced with semi-aleatoric utterances of “To:” at bars 895 and 899, followed by jovial announcements of unread emails where the number becomes more and more unlikely. Where there is actual text content of emails, it is delivered in a deliberately ridiculous fashion by the tenor, cramming as many words as possible into a bar (starting at bar 930). At bar 945, the Chorus breaks down solely to constituent parts of an email, stripped of any content or context. The tenor aggressively yaps the ‘@’ symbol, the mezzo thunders subject headings, while the soprano militantly barks out email programming code.

Within all this development is one passage that clearly demonstrates the dual relationship of hearing and seeing the composition as a theatrical work. Between bars 910–922, the Chorus sing text that is not in Meredi’s original story, and the score includes seemingly random nouns: ‘eggplant’, ‘wineglass’, ‘peaches’. Some phrases are more explicit: ‘Winky face’, ‘face with dollar signs’. The emails are being reduced even further into a trend of modern communication (a phenomenon that only truly emerged after Meredi’s story was published): the emoji. This is an entirely visual reference that makes no sense without staging cues to an audience and is worked into the overall composition of this passage to indicate how the emails are increasingly less about the content and more about their role in David’s development as a character.

The character of Carol, sung by the soprano singer of the Chorus, has been mentioned several times in this chapter. Before studying the title role, it is worth mentioning that Carol is introduced by a twisted quotation of the Leroy Anderson classic *Sleigh Bells*, played jubilantly on the piano (and subsequently briefly referenced on the piccolo at the end of her exchange with David). The use of quotation as a device of theatricality in my composition has already

been discussed in Chapter Four; however, it is an entirely pleasing coincidence, pointed out to me by yet another David, that Carol is introduced by the quotation of a Christmas carol.

5.2.3 David

Having considered the construction of the previous characters, now it is time to examine more closely the titular role and how I consciously amplified the theatricality in writing the music of David Davis. David has the opera's only true aria, "My golden age was when I was seven..." (bars 268–380), the longest stretch of music sung by a single voice without interruption in the entire work. In this aria, snatches of David's character are glimpsed by the audience: his childhood and root of his misanthropy, that he is divorced (intriguingly, he appears to have spied on his former wife's mail), and how he justifies his belligerent responses to erroneous emails. In claiming that there is an ethical difference between what he is doing and "steaming open other people's mail" (bars 294–297) David also foreshadows his justifications in the coda of the opera: that emails are too inconsequential and too ephemeral for their being tampered with to have genuine consequences. This aria is tightly structured, and this was a conscious choice. In setting out the only aria in the entire opera, I wanted to create a capital-A Aria that clearly signposted to an audience the importance of both the character of David, but also that we were in the world of opera, with all of its tropes, cultural norms, and rules. One of those rules is, of course, that the principal character gets the most important solo. Even the positioning of this aria— after a worldbuilding chorus led opening— follows an operatic norm that traverses a repertoire as vast as Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Britten's *Peter Grimes*, and Glass's *Akhnaten*.

The structure unfolds in an A-B-C-B-A form that requires the singer to shift between multiple expressive moods. The A section, accompanied predominantly by a chilly unison of alto flute and bass clarinet, provides a glimpse of David at his most nostalgic and reflective, a characterisation of him we will not hear again until the coda of the opera. The B section presents David at his most typical, with bluster and a sort of mean *bonhomie*, often accompanied by a scurrying, agitated ensemble. The C section places both David and the ensemble in an

uneven, dream-like state as he interprets his behaviour as a (positive, creative) craft: he takes boring emails and makes them exciting. Here he is at his most pompous, full of self-justification. He then reverses back through the blustery characterisation of the B section before returning to the A section. This use of bookending, which does not occur anywhere else in the opera, is another signifier of the importance of this solo aria within the piece.

The final indictments of the Chorus and Erasmus in Act III have already been examined; however, the role of David here is also of note. David's text has also been fragmented, but each entry falls on an off-beat, representing how the earlier confidence of the character has become unmoored. This is followed by a brief coda for David alone, where each entry of the voice is hesitant, brief, as David tries to convince both himself and the audience of his lack of culpability.

Meredi's short story is written as a third person narrative, so the decision to have David directly face and address the audience was mine. David frequently speaks *to* the audience, trying to draw them into his world. One of the roles of the Chorus is to narrate without entering into a direct address to the audience, while Erasmus 'speaks' only with David. Meanwhile, David jokes with the audience, and seeks for them to indulge (or excuse) his behaviour. While the repertoire is populated with arias where the character sings their inner dialogue thoughtfully into middle distance, in this opera David has no fourth wall. The connection between David and spectators is made explicit several times in the text, such as below:



Figure 18- *David Davis @ (Whitney): bars 994-996*

The triadic relationship between composer, performer, and audience has been a recurrent theme in the previous chapters. Here, with the benefit of text, that theme is now made explicit *within* the composition of the work. This is carried through to the final utterances of the

work, made by David. Set to the most unsettling of intervals, the tritone, David's bluster and confidence evaporate in one, last, questioning plea to the audience: "they wrote to me?".

5.2.4 Theatricality: Context and Process

Throughout this analysis of *David Davis* there has been a key thread: that the theatricality which functioned as metaphor in previous chapters has now become the key defining attribute of the genre in which I'm writing. However, as I discussed earlier, this *in itself* is not enough to warrant the theatrical sensibility I have assigned myself. Instead, the sensibility in this work is reflected through the process of composing, and the visualisation of how the work would be not only heard but also seen. The triadic relationship of composer-performer-audience has been heightened by the inherent demands of the operatic form but the process and understanding theatricality shares common terrain with works examined earlier in this thesis, not written for the dramatic genre.

6. Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I discuss my final portfolio composition, Magnolias. While introducing an additional creative work at this late stage may be somewhat surprising, it provides an important framework for my closing analysis: how my artistic practice will move forward with a post-compositional and post-analytical viewpoint of my theatrical sensibility.

6.1 Theatricality in Transition: Magnolias

In Chapter One, as part of the discussion on methodology, I acknowledged that I had been concerned about how the reading and thinking I was undertaking in anticipation of this thesis could compromise my creative output. This, however, was set to one side with an acknowledgement that it was a pointless worry, and that it would be foolish (if not impossible) to somehow separate my creative process from the theoretical milieu I was currently exploring. I also wrote of the importance of post-compositional viewpoint in the analytical approach taken in this thesis.

In these concluding remarks, I intend to expand that post-*compositional* viewpoint even further, to a post-*research* viewpoint. I will do this by introducing the final work of my portfolio— *Magnolias*— even though to bring in another composition at this late stage may appear odd. However, *Magnolias* was written contemporaneously with this document, and therefore benefits from my evolving understanding of my theatrical sensibility, an understanding that developed concurrently with, and in a dynamic relation to, the reading, research, reflection and writing in which I was so deeply immersed.

I have articulated what I perceive as strengths of my theatrical sensibility in previous chapters. While ‘theatricality’ had always exerted something of a tacit influence on my compositional practice, between 2018 and 2020 I realised that my exploration of theatricality as a discourse was heavily influencing my creative work in a more conscious manner, and that this was manifesting through works that, to my mind, were straining under the weight of my (self-imposed) conceptual expectations. At the same time, I also knew that this theatrical sensibility

was an integral part of my compositional identity— indeed, this is what I had set out to explore— and it would be impossible to divorce myself from it. I had to find a creative path that allowed me to maintain this sensibility, but also to free myself from some of the conceptual trappings that were starting to intrude upon my work in an unwelcome way. In this respect, *Magnolias* is something of a turning point.

Magnolias was written for the Australia Ensemble as the major creative work of the Layton Fellowship, which I was awarded for 2020. It was written in the second half of 2020, for alto flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano and was workshopped with the ensemble, before being recorded in March 2021. Importantly, this was after the workshop production of *David Davis@*, and several works that have been previously mentioned in this thesis, but which are not part of the accompanying portfolio. These works include 2019's *Fantasy on Les Bijoux de Castafiore*, which took my fascination with allusion and humour to its extremes by comically alluding to an opera that doesn't exist (the actual source being Hergé's *Tintin* comic series); and the *Postcards I-IV* of 2020 which, through the provision of paramusical information, set out to gently mislead the audience about the true inspirational impetus for the work. While both works were favourably appreciated by the performers (the audience reception being unknown due to the COVID19 pandemic), upon further reflection I became aware of a gap between what I saw as concept and execution. To paraphrase the opening of this chapter, I was writing too much *in service* of the concept which, in turn, was heaving with influences from my contemporaneous reading on theatricality.

Magnolias, like *Postcards I-IV*, features an important program note. In *Postcards*, aside from the fairly prosaic title, the program note is the only information available to the audience. The note describes a completely imagined postcard that is, supposedly, the inspirational source for the piece. For *Magnolias*, I wanted to maintain some level of abstraction for the audience, and so chose a passage from Oscar Wilde's *The Birthday of the Infanta*:

The purple butterflies fluttered about with gold dust on their wings, visiting each flower in turn; the little lizards crept out of the crevices of the wall, and lay basking in the white glare; and the pomegranates split and cracked with the heat, and showed their bleeding

red hearts. Even the pale yellow lemons, that hung in such profusion from the mouldering trellis and along the dim arcades, seemed to have caught a richer colour from the wonderful sunlight, and the magnolia trees opened their great globe-like blossoms of folded ivory, and filled the air with a sweet heavy perfume. (Wilde, online)

In point of fact, I actually found this passage *after* completing the composition. The factual origins of the piece lay in a period when I had felt myself being haunted by magnolias: a local art gallery showcased a work in their window of a massive, hyper-realistic canvas in close-up of the flower; during the coverage of the United States Presidential election, I found myself often recalling my time in Washington DC and, in particular, the few weeks of Spring where the weather was pleasant and the magnolia trees in Lafayette Square were in bloom. (Amusingly—and completely by accident—I happened to wear a shirt with a floral design that featured a magnolia to the workshop of this piece: the composer in costume).

Why, then, retrofit a quote that separates the work and its title from the personal anecdotes in which the composition was grounded? The actual source of the title of the work is not very interesting: it is hard to imagine any performer finding interpretive guidance from such happenstance anecdotes as they look at the score, or an audience member skimming a concert program being engaged, let alone intrigued, by the composer happening to see a painting and having once lived overseas where there was a particular type of tree. Sourcing a highly picturesque quote, however, allowed me to reframe the work away from the quotidian and into a more high-brow, more imaginatively stimulating, and, perhaps, fundamentally more *dramatic* framing. Wilde's words are picturesque, painting an intense garden scene, and this aligned perfectly with how I *now* heard the piece I had already written.

Fascinatingly (and frankly, pleasingly), one audience member told me how much they heard the quote in the music. I did not correct them by explaining my mild deception. Indeed, it is perhaps unfair to refer to this as 'deception', as the audience member was responding to stimulus which I, in the role of the composer/authority, had provided as the result of a decision to heighten the theatricality of the notes on the page. In effect, I licensed the establishment of

connections between music and paratextual note, however irrelevant this connection was to my conception of the work during the compositional process.

Since *Magnolias*, I have only provided enigmatic program notes. A subsequent piece, also not in the accompanying portfolio, was the virtuosic flute solo *An Architecture of Butter and Sugar* (2021), commissioned for the ANAM Set Festival, which presented 67 new solo works by Australian composers. This provided a rare opportunity to compare the program notes of 67 different composers all working to the same brief. The entirety of my contribution was a quote from by legendary pâtissier Carême that inspired the work (in this instance, there was no deception: the work was, truly, inspired by the quote). This was in stark comparison to most of the 66 other program notes, which often drew attention to, and detailed, the harmonic or melodic structure of the work, or its unique construction. I see this as further demonstration of my theatrical sensibility: to write a program note outlining how the piece was written or structured feels like a magician explaining how they hid the rabbit as it comes out of the hat. To reiterate a caveat that I issued in Chapter One, this is not a value judgement on any of these composers or their work but is adduced as evidence of my theatrical sensibility. Rather, this piece of paramusical bric-a-brac provides a clear example of how I have been able to reconcile what I see as the strongest and weakest manifestations of theatricality within my composition process. For me, the strongest manifestations are those with the *élan* closely associated with virtuosity: my theatrical sensibility works best when the efforts are concealed.

Magnolias utilises several of the compositional devices that have already been examined in this thesis: there is virtuosity, and an unexpected coda that is a case in point of what Féral identifies as the quotidian cleft which creates theatricality, the cleft being created by the sudden change of mood, new material, and a surprisingly lush cello solo that is the longest solo passage in the entire work. However, it is also the piece where, as a theatrically minded composer, I found it necessary to reorganise my relationship with the audience of the work. I was becoming too obsessive in trying to steer the audience through misdirection and visibly planting flags, often humorous in tone, signalling my theatrical concepts. To paraphrase the discussions of

Chapter Three, the effort was becoming too visible for theatricality to truly thrive. Instead, to prime the audience and hide the inner compositional workings, I had to reconsider my usage of program notes and paramusical information as a pseudo stage curtain (yes, I'm at the risk of stretching the metaphor to breaking point). Importantly, however, I did not entirely retreat from providing framing for audiences: my titles are still overwhelmingly descriptive rather than technical.

It is through the operations of that triadic relationship of composer-performer-audience that paramusical information becomes critical in my identity as a composer with a theatrical sensibility. The performer, after all, has, at a minimum, the information in the score. In addition to hearing the work, the audience has only the title and any other paramusical information I provide. I cannot, with any certainty, control the audience's reception of the purely aural material in my music. What I can control is the paramusical information, and this is where, as I orientate myself towards the audience, my theatrical sensibility finds its sharpest outlet.

None of this is to say that my theatricality now resides 'outside' the notes on the page. *Magnolias* is imbued with subtle virtuosic flourishes in the form of unison passages that expose the ensemble's precision of intonation and rhythmic accuracy. It is built from an opening monodic passage that threads through the ensemble in perfect unison; subsequently, throughout the entire work, there are moments where two or more instruments will briefly touch together in unison before splitting apart (for example the shared C# in bars 23 and 24 between the winds; or the smudges which start from a shared F# in the upper three voices during the coda, commencing at bar 293, then later echoed in the clarinet, violin, and cello at bar 315).

The tools of quotation and allusion, as discussed in Chapter Four, are found in the interruption of the languid and sensual mood of the piece by an unexpectedly jolly *Brioso* at bar 153. With the walking bass line and open strings (see **Figure 19** below) convey an allusion to some kind of rustic, bluesy hoedown; the passage takes on a humorous character through the rhythmic skip in the walking bass that is introduced by the constant alternation between 2/2

and 7/8 metres (except for the right hand of the piano, which resists in steady crotchets). The whole rambunctious passage, from bars 153–192, could almost belong to a different piece entirely. It functions both as Mull’s “quick motor volte-face” (1949, p. 565), as also examined in Chapter Four, but also in its disruptive role it is also a demonstration of Féral’s process of theatricality: the quotidian cleft (discussed *passim* in this thesis).

The musical score for *Magnolias* (Whitney) bars 161–167 is presented for a chamber ensemble. The score includes staves for Alto Flute (A. Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vc.), and Piano (Pno.). The music is written in 2/2 time, with frequent changes to 7/8 and 8/8 time signatures. The dynamics are marked *mp* (mezzo-piano). Performance instructions include *pizz.* (pizzicato) and *arco* (arco). The piano part features a section marked *grb* (grace notes) in the left hand. The score is complex, with many beamed notes and rests, indicating a rambunctious and disruptive character.

Figure 19- *Magnolias* (Whitney): bars 161–167

I began this research with a sense that, somehow, I identified as a theatrical composer, that in Connesson’s hypothetical taxonomy theatrical and non-theatrical composers in Chapter One I was comfortably satisfied to place myself in one column over the other. Through adopting a highly conscious, self-analysing perspective, I started to overwork what I was learning about my own processes; however, as my understanding of theatricality within my own work matured, so did my confidence in being able to embrace this aspect of my artistic identity in a way that allows my music to develop without a cumbersome and overly-conceptual burden. *Magnolias*, therefore, is a pivotal point at which I fully, consciously, and emphatically embrace the theatrical sensibility I have assigned to myself, but with a lighter touch than in the works I was writing between 2018 and 2020. *A Painting by Magritte*, *Five Scenes*, *David Davis@*, and *Magnolias* each prominently demonstrate the development of a compositional practice of which

this theatrical sensibility is an inseparable part. The tools, and the nature of their deployment, may change between different compositions (or, as in the case of *David Davis*®, may take an essential prominence); however, the interrelationships in the composer-performer-audience triad that is critical to my understanding of my own practice does not, and indeed cannot, change.

Appendix: Recording and performance details for accompanying portfolio

Instrumental Works

A Painting by Magritte

Premiere recording, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra 31 August 2017

Performed by Alice Giles AM

<https://ianwhitney.com.au/a-painting-by-magritte/>

Five Scenes

Studio recording, ABC Classic FM, 2018

Engineer: Chris Lawson Producer: Jennifer Mills

Performed by Arcadia Winds (Kiran Phatak, David Reichelt, Lloyd Van't Hoff, Rachel Shaw, Matthew Kneale)

<https://ianwhitney.com.au/five-scenes/>

Magnolias

Workshop recording, 2021

Performed by members of the Australia Ensemble (Geoffrey Collins, David Griffiths, Ian Munro, Dene Olding, Paul Stender)

<https://vimeo.com/533745291/32fc6bc16c>

(Please note this is a private link and requires the exact URL to access)

David Davis@

Piano Workshop, 31 January 2019

David Davis	David Hidden
Erasmus	Carmel de Jager
Chorus	Bree Meara-Hendy, Deepka Ratra, Claudio Sgamarella
Conductor	Huw Belling
Piano	Ben Burton

Public Reading, 7 February 2020

Conductor	Huw Belling
Director	Andrew McInnes

Cast

David Davis	David Hidden
Erasmus	Rebecca Hart
Chorus	Hamish James, Bree Meara-Hendy, Deepka Ratra

Ensemble

Flute/Piccolo/Alto Flute	Michelle Yue Wang
Clarinet/Bass Clarinet	Clare Fox, Jarred Mattes*
Viola	May Bardsley
Cello	Freya Schack-Arnott
Piano	Philip Eames

Production

SCM Production Manager	Jarrad Salmon
Lighting/Surtitles Design	Morgan Moroney

Videography	David Kim-Boyle
Additional Dramaturgy	Clemence Williams
Répétiteur	Ben Burton, Philip Eames
Surtitles Operator	James Kong

<https://vimeo.com/416233306>

(Please note this is a private link and requires the exact URL to access)

*- Clare Fox experienced misadventure travelling to the venue on the night of the performance. She was replaced by Jarred Mattes, whose partner was in the ensemble, who sight-read the clarinet part for the accompanying live recording.

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