The Undervalued Art: A Defence of the Libretto

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Abstract

In an essay from *The Dyer's Hand*, W.H. Auden (1962) argued that a librettist should understand their role in the creation of an opera to be a supportive, if not submissive, one. They are to offer the composer a level of private inspiration that will set their own, larger work in progress. In later criticism, such as Patrick J. Smith's *The Tenth Muse* (1970), we have an expanded and more holistic envisioning of the duty of the librettist: to be the one taking the wider view, encompassing all aspects of the words, drama, staging and thematic of the piece. In such a scenario, the larger creative onus falls to the librettist. Frustratingly, there is a generality prevalent in both positions, where neither engage properly with the mechanics and techniques of successful libretti. And, aside from the posturing of each outlook, there is a lack of interaction (typical of the field) with the direct choices faced by the librettist as they go about the creation of their work. A criticism that can also be labelled at more recent academic criticism.

This thesis, blending a creative and theoretical approach, remedies this oversight by focusing its study on the direct choices faced by a librettist as they write for opera. As a means of fostering a better appreciation for the genre of libretti, there is an interaction with three main elements of the composition: 1) the first, and often overlooked, choice of the implications to a new libretto of the historical tradition it commits to; 2) a timely interrogation of how exactly the poetry of the libretto can be understood to stand as comparison to 'proper' poetry of the page; 3) by offering a case-study of my own creative project in relation to collaboration, to show how this relationship impacts the creative space of the librettist. As a means of bringing these ideas together, the last chapter of the thesis uses an autoethnographic methodology to represent how all such considerations played out in the composition of three individual libretti written over the course of this study. If libretti suffer from being misunderstood, then this thesis aims to lift the curtain and give a first-hand perspective on how the librettist might create in such a role.

The research methodology for this thesis seeks to capitalise on the uniqueness of this creative-critical project, it being a live collaboration with a composer, to harmonise close-reading and historical studies (of pieces including W.H. Auden's text for Igor Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* (1951) and the text for Alice Goodman's 1987 collaboration with John Adams, *Nixon in China*) with an autoethnographic element, as a means of establishing a concrete position on the worthiness of the art of libretti-writing that goes beyond this one project and therefore can go some ways to bettering the understanding of this neglected art form.

Foreword

Ask even an opera-goer who wrote *Peter Grimes* (1945) and they will likely tell you that it was Benjamin Britten. Just as likely it will be the same if someone were asked who wrote the opera for *Madame Butterfly* (1904) or *Don Giovanni* (1787). We would receive the names of Giacoma Puccini and Wolfgang Mozart but with little to no chance of hearing the names of Luigi Illica and Giueseppe Giacosa or Lorenzo Da Ponte, their respective librettists – or the name of Montagu Slater, the librettist for *Peter Grimes*. But such has often been the plight of both the libretto and the librettist. As noted by Sabine Lichtenstein, 'opera are increasingly received in the arts and in scholarship as a musical genre: *Anna Bolena*, *The Bartered Bride*, *Oedipus Rex* are regarded as works by Donizetti, Smetana and Stravinsky, rather than by Felice Romani, Karel Sabina, and Jean Cocteau.'[1]

While there is a frustration that the authorship of a collaborative project is often attributed to one individual in place of the full partnership involved in the creation, there is a wider difficulty that this tendency points towards: the general reluctance to ascribe much by way of creative worth to the content of a libretto or the practice of the librettist.

[1] Sabine Lichtenstein, '*Music's Obedient Daughter': The Opera Libretto from Source to Score* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), p. 2.

Mozart is recorded as having desired that the words of the libretto, in its dynamic inside the opera, should take the role of 'music's obedient daughter'.[2] The libretto should take the lesser (dictated-to) role in the complicated partnership with the musical component. Across the chapters of this thesis, we will see that Mozart was not alone in this preference for the libretto to be the lesser partner.

However, while the libretto might be preferred to be the quieter, supportive part – often undervalued, definitely under-researched[3] – the librettist's role is one that requires no small amount of talent. The poet Seamus Heaney, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, on creating a version of composer Leos Janacek's *Diary of One Who Vanishes* (2000), was particularly conscious of the skill necessary for the role:

> [Writing singable verse is] a very special art that a few poets have. I think Auden had it. Of course the Elizabethans had it. Shakespeare had it[…] to write verse that has a texture and lambency and staying power without the music, but at the same time will fly, will lift, will go.[4]

This statement by Heaney is useful at setting up the base-level difference between verse and singable-verse and this thesis will attempt to both challenge and bolster his position by endeavouring to give a greater study of the librettist's role in the creation of an opera.

At its conception, this doctoral study envisioned a new and dynamic structure for the doctoral project. Rather than being the isolated study of one individual, the aim of the creative element of the project was the collaboration between a librettist and composer towards the creation of a new opera to be performed by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. Meanwhile, the initial aim of this adjoining critical component, drawing on my own background as a published poet, was to look at what a poet specifically might bring to the act of writing libretti – what are the skills inherent to the poet? What can they do that others cannot? However, through

[2] Lichtenstein (2014)
[3] Ulrich Weisstein, *The Essence of Opera* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1969), p. 3.
[4] Michael Dervan, 'Poetic Licence', *Opera News,* 65 (2001), 38-38

the experiences of the creative component (the successes, challenges and tensions of writing a libretto for opera alongside a composer), the focus of this study has evolved and broadened.

There is an argument to make that, of all the written arts, the writing of libretti is the least critiqued, least analysed and one with the least surrounding guide literature. Books and workshops on how to write a poem, how the novel works, a guide to better letter writing, all these proliferate, especially in recent culture – but there is no practical guide on the inner mechanics of the libretto. Reasons for this limitation are likely to be manifold, but I believe can be situated in a number of factors including: the libretto being regarded as a musicological genre; the difficulty of separating the libretto from the musical accompaniment so as to outline what its accomplishments are; also, there would be the necessary divulging of sensitive details inherent in any collaboration which, as we will see, is often not one that divests the poet/librettist with the balance of equal power and creative input, which can be a complicated truth to acknowledge.

Remedying this, and as part of a critical engagement, alongside a reflection of my own creative writing, I will focus on building a critical conversation around the libretto genre that draws not only from surrounding literature and academic study but also harnesses the direct experiences of my own creative project. In place of solely looking at what a poet can bring to the act of writing a libretto, I want to write what I see as a unique and foundational treatise on a number of aspects of the libretto that I think will better ground any future discussion of the topic.

My assertion across this thesis is that the work of writing libretti has been side-lined and undervalued (and often misrepresented) but that by three particular actions we can remedy this:

1) by the creation of a genre-specific categorisation that reorientates conversation around libretti to their creative decision-making rather than to grouping them by their country-of-origin or historical time period;

2) a fundamental reappreciation of the challenges inherent in writing for opera, with a particular focus on the requirements of the verse that separates it from the verse of poetry;

3) a more concrete criteria for the specific nature of an operatic collaboration, one that better draws out exactly how a librettist might work inside this partnership.

Across these three main topics, it will be the work of this thesis to set a foundation for this correction and offer an improved reception of the libretto as a creative act and a topic worthy of academic study.

The first chapter begins by setting out a historical overview of the position of the art form of libretti. The intention is to show that there is a prevalence among both practitioners and those involved in the study of the art to minimise and undervalue the influence and expertise of the art. Hearing from composers and librettists, while incorporating the thoughts of mid-twentieth century critics such as Joseph Kerman alongside contemporary academics like Leonard Rosmarin, I will aim to show a discourse that veers between a reluctance to give prominence to libretti and a direct denigration of an art that is, as is argued by Leonard Rosmarin, 'foreign to the domain of literature'.[5]

Beginning a rebuttal of such a position with my dissatisfaction with one of the few serious studies of libretti, Patrick J Smith's *The Tenth Muse* (1970), I will argue that the only sure argument for allowing a meaningful basis for conversation on the creative worth of the libretti in the 21st-Century begins by relocating the conversation away from the libretti as a facet of its historical period and country-of-origin and towards it being an art form with multiple sub-genres each with a tradition that it might adhere to or rebel against.

[5] Leonard Rosmarin, *When Literature Becomes Opera* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 155.

As a poet, while there is often the resistance to applying labels to oneself and others, I think there is a benefit to having an optional stratification to more precisely describe both my art and the work of others. Therefore, there is a value in the qualifiers in 'Lyric Poetry', 'Conceptual Poetry', 'Concrete Poetry'. I argue that there is undoubtedly a benefit to such labels where they enable a more accurate conversation about where a work fits inside a tradition and set of values, despite how uncomfortable we as practitioners might feel about such descriptors when applied to our own work.

In the genre of libretti there seems an unwillingness to apply such modifiers even in a way that will benefit the appreciation of the art. The title of 'libretto' covers everything from the text for Martin Crimp's *Into The Little Hill* (2006) to Peter Maxwell Davies's *The Lighthouse* (1979), Hugo Von Hofmannsthal's *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911) to Bertolt Brecht's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930) to the libretto for *Wozzeck* (1922) crafted by Alban Berg from a play by Georg Büchner.

This first chapter begins, then, with the case being made for an implementation of two creative strands in the art form: Verse-Drama and Sung-Play.

The second chapter, focusing on the Verse-Drama tradition, constitutes an appreciation of the artistic practice inherent in the content of the successful libretto. A fundamental component of this appreciation lies in making use of the arguments of the Austrian Centre for Intermedial Studies in Graz (and their associated academics, Ulrich Weisstein, Walter Bernhart and Werner Wolf) and positioning the libretti not as a (suspicious) interloper into literature but as an intermedial art form. The reframing of the art form on musico-literary grounds will be key to this re-appraisal of the libretto.

Also, furthering the study of Weisstein, Bernhart and Wolf, this chapter will add to the discipline by making use of the uniqueness of this doctoral project – its imbedded creative element – by seeking to display that the musico-literary relationship does not only exist when the music meets the words of the libretto but that there is evidence that the successful libretto already incorporates the relationship into the manufacturing of its verse.

The exhibition of such a reorientated understanding is pivotal in the reappraisal of the libretto since it highlights that a number of the apparent flaws of the libretto-verse can be attributed to the success of the intermedial relationship rather than (as is usually the case) serving as evidence in the gap between it and 'pure poetry'.

Changing tack to investigate the interpersonal mechanics between composer and librettist, the third chapter will analyse how collaborative models impact on what we would understand as the usual dichotomy in the creation of an opera: librettist creates the words, the composer shapes the music. Such a clear delineation is rarely if ever the actual reality of any given project.

Making use of collaborative theory, including reference to the work of Vera John-Steiner, Chris Argyris and Donald A Schön, this chapter will position the W.H. Auden-Igor Stravinsky collaboration on *The Rake's Progress* (1951) as a case-study in operatic collaboration. With reference to their correspondence and the textual notes of the opera, rather than merely describing their project as collaborative, I aim to use the models taken from collaborative theory to define exactly what type of collaboration they could be categorised as partaking in, discussing how this would then impact on the creative freedom of the librettist.

Following this case-study, I will broaden the focus of the argument to define the changing dynamic of my own collaboration and frame, with reference to the Auden-Stravinsky case-study, the first-hand implications I experienced in the creation of my own libretto.

The final chapter of the thesis draws on all previous chapters in a practical comparison between the various libretti written over the course of the creative-critical doctoral project. The intention is to compare a new libretto written at the end of this period of study that implements and gives practical examples of the 'best-practice' libretto. This comparative study aims to draw on the practical evidence of all previous chapters to exhibit their functionality as a tool for creatively and academically bringing new light to the appreciation of a libretto.

Across all chapters, this thesis will engage with the surrounding literature on the genre of libretto and operatic writing. As explained earlier in the foreword, the topic is an under-researched one, and there is a particular dearth of analysis that focuses on the distinction that Heaney makes between 'poetry' as we would understand it, spoken or on the page, and that which is intended to be sung. Despite this, there are a few notable texts that have served as the bedrock for my own exploration. Patrick J Smith's *The Tenth Muse* is one of the only studies to focus predominantly on the libretto as a distinct and worthwhile area of writing, and as such was an invaluable first text to begin my understanding of the subject (despite my later criticisms). Likewise, especially coming to the area as a practising poet, the letters and essays of W.H. Auden (alongside the Textual Notes to his *Collected Libretti*) have been a steady force of inspiration, despite, as I will argue, that his most famous statements on the art are ones he later seemed to veer away from. Lastly, and of significant importance, is the work of those scholars associated with the Austrian School of Intermediality, whose work is pivotal in reorientating the conversation around libretti from being one mostly closely aligned with the realm of literature. Instead, the Austrian School acknowledges the libretto's complicated dual-nature, being itself created as a consequence of a text's union with music.

It is also important to note that this doctoral project was undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic. The ramifications of which are touched upon particularly in the chapter on collaboration. Lockdown had a significant impact on the ability of the composer and I to meet in person to discuss the initial creative ideas, which was perhaps the biggest loss to this project. There was the further repercussion of limiting the expected time to workshop ideas with the orchestra since such large gathering were prohibited until the end phase of the study. While acknowledging the impact of Covid-19 here in the introduction, I have tried to limit its reference inside this critical component to only the sections where its limitations were felt strongest, such as in the third chapter dealing the dynamics of collaboration and settling on the opera's storyline.

In summary, this thesis attempts to offer a synthesis between the challenges of the creative practice and seeks to find their remedy in academic study. Each chapter is a recognition of the various challenges of the creative collaboration, beginning with the initial lack of a concrete language to define the creative tradition into which we were to situate the libretto

of this opera. This project posed a number of difficulties, from the lack of vocabulary to describe the shape the project might take while it was in conception, the challenges of how to position my poetry as a poet coming new to the practice of writing for opera, and the further test of collaborating for the first time with a composer.

The attempt of this thesis, then, is to voice not only these predicaments – but to offer the solutions and conclusions to which I arrived as a means of setting a foundational discussion for the art of libretti in both the creative and academic realms.

Chapter One

The Libretto: Verse-Drama and the Sung-Play

The purpose across this thesis is to bring attention to the libretto, an overlooked art form, by highlighting the importance and literary value inherent to its creation, while seeking to foster further insights that are drawn from both academic attention and creative practice.

In this first chapter, I will begin by offering a historical overview of the genre's reputation. Building on this, and as an attempt to resist the general trend of neglect that has resulted in libretti most commonly being categorised by non-artistic factors (country of origin, date of creation), I will propose a case for delineating two particular genres of libretti. Detailing a framework for these two styles, the Sung-Play and the Verse-Drama, offers particular value for the critical commentary surrounding opera writing (especially post-20th Century) but, just as significantly for me, such a distinction between these two branches of libretti offers a surer lexicon for librettist and composers to talk about the shape, style and content of a potential creative project.

For me, the importance of arguing for these aesthetic strands as a basis by which we might talk about libretti is personal as well as linked to my academic study. The creative element of this project was to create a new libretto/opera that would be performed by the live orchestra.

And, in those early planning stages I found the greatest hurdle to envisioning the project was the lack of even a basic language that could be used to define the type of opera that we might hope to create. A more concrete language and set of terms can only remedy such an issue.

Historical Overview

It would be useful to begin with libretti's position in operatic conversations. As a new practitioner to the genre, I have been surprised to find a general side-lining of the libretto and librettist both in terms of lack of criticism and also when it comes to artistic accreditation.

It is a curious position considering that the words and story, in almost all cases written before the music, are (literally) foundational to the opera. The climbing of the narrative, intricacy of character relations, the push of the songs and interchanges between the singers, are surely the bedrock from which the composer builds the music. However, opera has not been viewed historically as a collaboration between equals, which is why *The Magic Flute* (1791) is by Mozart (1756-1791), *Carmen* (1875) is by Bizet (1838-1875), and often the librettist goes unmentioned.

From the outset of this collaborative opera project, reading around the critical and academic treatments of the subject, I was surprised to find that rather than merely side-lined, that in fact both libretto and librettist were often viewed by composers and critics with artistic suspicion. Such suspicion can be neatly witnessed in a book by one of the few academics who writes in depth on the subject of libretti.

In 1964, Ulrich Weisstein published *The Essence of Opera*, a compendium of essays and extracts on the subject of opera. The purpose of the book was to bring together multiple vantage-points on opera and libretti to better try to pin down the qualities of the art form.

Weisstein's book refers to opera's beginnings in the Greek classical tragedies and charts how it was in Renaissance Italy that opera settled onto its most identifiable hallmarks of recitative and aria. Included in the text are not only musicians. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, Kant and George Bernard Shaw, Voltaire and Diderot, all are in attendance to offer impressions on the mechanics and philosophical imperatives of the genre. However, as a librettist, what draws most attention is the last text of the collection, given prominence by its position at the close of such a book, a section titled 'Contemporary Opera'.

Here, Weisstein chooses an array of extracts taken from a conversation between Luigi Dallapiccola (1904-1975), Ildebrando Pizzetti (1880-1968), Gian Franscesco Malipiero (1882-1973), Werner Egk (1901-1983), Boris Blacher (1903-1975), Marcel Delannoy (1898-1962) and Sir Arthur Bliss (1891-1975). All are composers.

Questions are posed: Do you consider the libretto as a support for the music? Or the music as a complement of the poem? How, in your own work, do you envisage the relationship between words and music?

Among the listed names there is not one librettist to offer a counter-point to their summations:

> Egk is categorical: "The libretto is a support for the score." This is also the opinion of Dallapiccola, who adds: "My ideal is therefore a short libretto of not too literary a quality." Sir Arthur Bliss is not far from agreeing…
> … Bliss, who had expressed the opinion that "the words of a libretto are of secondary importance," maintains his position. "Even with good diction singers only succeed in making about seventy-five per cent of the text intelligible. In opera the music must take charge from the first bar to the last.[6]

The main thrust of contention across the conversation is the devaluing of the libretto's importance. Indeed, this position in not uncommon, and these arguments are prevalent even

[6] Ulrich Weisstein, *The Essence of Opera* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1969), p. 362-364.

in contemporary operatic practice and criticism, as I will show throughout this thesis. Composers, those who work most closely with the librettist and the text, are often the quickest to downplay the inherent artistry of the written piece; this is a position that gives greater significance to their own work since they are the ones to lift the opera towards art, unaided (or only slightly aided) by the librettist.

However, there is the added frustration in Weisstein's selection that the previous chapter, which might have served to balance this interpretation of both the libretto and the librettist, is given to a particular essay by W.H. Auden (1907-1973). Auden, a talented librettist and an interesting theorist on operatic practice, is on hand, too, to argue for this secondary position of the libretto. In his essay, Auden maintains that:

> The verses which the librettist writes are not addressed to the public but are really a private letter to the composer. They have their moment of glory, the moment in which they suggest to him a certain melody: once that is over, they are as expendable as infantry is to a Chinese general: they must efface themselves and cease to care what happens to them.[7]

Auden's position is similar to that of the composers above: music first, words and libretto as expendable. For Auden, and likely for a number of the prior commentators, the libretto's moment of triumph is not, as with the actual opera, in front of the crowd, but rather happens in the composer's study or at their piano. The libretto is 'pre-art', the forerunner rather than the act itself.[8]

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[7] Weisstein, p. 359

[8] It should be noted that despite this quote of Auden's being one of his best known and perhaps one of the best cited quotes on English-language libretti, there is evidence to suggest Auden's outlook became more complicated later in his writing life. The extent to which Auden was no longer willing to see his libretto as an expendable precursor to the composer's music can be seen in the tension between himself (and co-librettist Chester Kallman (1921-1975)) and their composer for the opera *The Bassarids* (1966), Hans Werner Henze (1926-2012). During the creation of *The Bassarids*, Auden resisted proposed cuts to the libretto and even desired to have the libretto printed intact, freed from all eventual changes, as part of the production, as a means of maintaining (and celebrating) its literary integrity. In a letter from 1964 included in the textual notes for the libretto, Auden writes to Henze: 'C [Chester Kallman] and I are vain enough to believe that our text is worth reading an-und-für-sich. That is to say, whatever cuts are made in the setting… we want our text to be *printed* as is.'

Coming to libretti from poetry, I felt ready to discover what particular quality the art form could offer – but was unprepared, surprised even, by how largely dismissive many were of the artistry inherent in the practice. Rather than providing firmer ground by which to undertake the project, such research uncovered a number of antagonistic viewpoints, revealing that the role and function of the libretto is still very much contested ground.

Patrick J. Smith, who I mentioned in the Foreword, has grand, all-encompassing views on the domain of the librettist. The responsibility of drama, plot, character and lines all falling under their remit.[9] For Smith's librettist, the libretto is the largest canvas. Coming with the most responsibility, his librettist is tasked with shaping the greater part of the creative undertaking. However, Smith's stance is more the outlier than the mainstream consensus. A more common viewpoint is represented by Joseph Kerman. In his *Opera as Drama*, Kerman argues instead, 'For the composer, I should like to believe that the essential problem is to clarify the central dramatic idea, to refine the vision. This cannot be left to the librettist; the dramatist is the composer…'[10]

Deriving from this contention, the librettist's parameters of influence being blurred and generally constrained, I was also to find that the finished libretto itself was viewed with a distrust as a genre in its own right. In a more recent study of operatic adaptation, *When Literature Becomes Opera*, Leonard Rosmarin describes the libretto as a 'paraliterary genre,'[11] 'foreign to the domain of literature,'[12] that potentially 'exists only as a subordinate to another art,' finishing off these slights by remarking, 'the libretto cannot, then, constitute an artistic expression in and of itself.'

What underscores the perception of libretti is evidenced particularly in these remarks of Rosmarin. The libretto is 'paraliterary', it is at a remove from prose and poetry and, of course,

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W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of Auden, Libretti 1939-1973*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 682.

[9] Patrick J Smith, *The Tenth Muse, A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1970), p. XIX.

[10] Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1956), p. 34.

[11] Leonard Rosmarin, *When Literature Becomes Opera* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 155.

[12] Rosmarin, p. 155

the musical element itself. Always, the libretto is understood in relation to another genre; the libretto is never an art in itself. Appreciation for the art was always through a secondary lens. So, to go against this, making room for the libretto as a distinct entity, with distinct needs and rules, is where it will be most useful and practical to begin.

A Case for Sub-Genres of Libretti

Despite being one of the few academic overviews of the history of libretti, the flaw for a practising librettist in Patrick J. Smith's *The Tenth Muse* is that while apt at giving a wide and inclusive span of libretti and opera, and while apt at offering basic critical evaluations of different pieces, there is little by the way of argumentation on what commonalities a group might share. Chapters on 'The Eighteenth-century Italian Comic Opera' and 'The Eighteenth-century French Comic Opera' stand separated but do not overlap; 'The Italian Melodrama' and 'The French Libretto of the Revolutionary Period' are side by side but remain distinct. The book charts trends rather than core principles of the art form.

To remedy this, and as the focus of this chapter, we must begin an appreciation of the libretto by outlining what I see are two contemporary strands of libretti, Verse -Drama and Sung-Play. The acknowledgment of such will help to codify the art in a more substantial way than mere time period and country of origin.

My reason for encouraging this is two-fold. Firstly, criticism benefits from a generally agreed language. That such disparate work as Bertolt Brecht's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930), Martin Crimp's *Into the Little Hill* (2006), and W.H. Auden's *The Rake's Progress* (1951), all fall under the blanket term of libretti is only so useful. In poetry we can talk about lyric poetry, concrete poetry, conceptual poetry; and, while categorising can cause its own issues, it gives the option of focusing in and being as specific as one might wish to be.

This leads to my second reason for encouraging the popularity of these two terms: the lack of a lexicon to engage with libretti also affects the ability to talk about it in a creative context.

Setting out to write a first libretto with a composer where there was no previous creative relationship was a challenge because we lacked a language to specifically outline our ideas and designs. Again, as with Patrick J Smith's focus on libretti grouped by historical period, we often fell back to describing our potential libretti in whether it was to be 'contemporary' in style or not, which replaced the ability to describe in terms of aesthetic with a need to describe by a vague historical proximity.

For the art form, in an academic and creative context, it is important that a gesture is made to offer even a small element of aesthetic categorising.

Verse-Drama and Sung-Play

What is frustrating, considering our struggle to find a concise language to describe our project, is that both categories of libretti, Verse-Drama and Sung-Play, are already present in Joseph Kerman's *Opera as Drama* but seem not to have garnered a foothold outside the text. In his book, Kerman positions Auden's libretto for *The Rake's Progress* against that of the Georg Buchner play that served as libretto for Alban Berg's (1885-1935) *Wozzeck* (1925), as a means of delineating what he understood to be the two aesthetic tendencies for the libretto.

Verse-Drama and Sung Play. Articulating such an aesthetic distinction is vital for any meaningful conversation about libretti since it is through delineating trends, requirements and traits in each that we can begin to better map out specific qualities or deficiencies in works that fall into such categories.

To begin with the Sung-Play, the qualities of this aesthetic style lie in two interconnected elements: a tendency to represent real-world predicaments, psychologically real characters, that are both couched in the language of the real world. Kerman, when discussing the opera *Wozzeck*, designates the qualities of this Sung-Play by paying particular attention to its naturalism, highlighting its 'short, lifelike, cinematographic scenes', noting how 'Berg scarcely changed the jabbing literary rhythm of the play. He no more attempted to fashion arias, duets,

or choruses for musical convenience that Debussy did'[13] – here referencing Debussy's own use of a stage script serving as libretto is *Pelleas et Melisande* (1902). Kerman is also keen to stress that 'the quite exceptional speed, vividness, terror, and naturalism of the opera are due first of all to the fact that it uses no tailor-made libretto…'

Such an aesthetic, I argue, compelling as its results can be, aligns least with the skillset of the poet; such a quest for naturalism necessitates a rejection of poetic phrase-making in favour of more natural speech.

To build on Kerman's thought, if seeking a more contemporary example of such a successful Sung-Play, it is worthwhile looking towards the libretto by Ian McEwan, most famous for his work as a novelist, for the opera *For You* (2008). Here is a section from *For You* followed by, for comparisons sake, a similar passage from Berg's *Wozzeck*:

Antonia: … But Simon, look at me. I'm so full of fears.
Another operation. I cannot bear it.
Must it be so soon?
I need to ask you – is there no other way?

Simon: A resection, and a biopsy to put our minds at rest.
A relatively simple procedure.
Trust me when I tell you, there is no other way,
And we must act now.

He pauses.

Is it your old fear that's haunting you?

Antonia: Yes. Ridiculous, I know.

[13] Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1956), p. 248.

My old fear,
The anaesthetic, the general anaesthetic.
The word 'general' sounds so sinister
To my ear.[14]

Naturalism seems an apt description of such dialogue. There is little by the way of phrase-making, little feeling that the language is under pressure to be concise or enigmatic, or to fizzle too much into open metaphor. Which is not to say that the scene lacks dramatic suspense. Reading the libretto, my own sensation was reading an English-language play the likes of which I have read a hundred times before: mannered, concise and artful – but, in its phrase and line, unelevated.

Here, for comparison's sake, is an extract from the libretto used in *Wozzeck* that served Kerman as his example of a Sung-Play:

Captain: I become quite worried about the world when I think of eternity. "Eternal," now that's forever! That's easy to see. Now again, however, it can't be eternal, but only for a moment, yes, a moment! Wozzeck, it horrifies me when I think that the earth goes around in one day: I can't stand even to see a millwheel turning without becoming melancholy.

Wozzeck: Quite so, Captain!

Captain: Wozzeck you always look so harried! A good man doesn't look that way. A good man, who has a clear conscience, does everything leisurely… Do say something, Wozzeck. What's the weather for today?

[14] Ian McEwan, *For You, The Libretto for Michael Berkeley's Opera* (London: Vintage Originals, 2008), Act 1. Scene 2.

Wozzeck: Very bad, Captain! Windy![15]

Wozzeck, Act 1 Scene 1

Reading both extracts, Kerman's description of a Sung-Play as staying close to naturalism in its speech seems accurate. This is particularly true of *For You* where 'biopsy', 'procedure' and 'anaesthetic' all stand out to my ear as difficult words to imagine chosen for the shape or sound of the language: cold, sterile and ungainly, these are words of reality, of a profession. Their inclusion makes the dialogue real by being so specifically wedded to a medical vocabulary.

In *For You* there is no frisson in the language – all tension is between the characters. Their desires. Their wants. This is not a criticism so much as an observation, and one that is important to our study.

Wozzeck is slightly different. The conversation is more obviously 'heightened', discussing eternity, morals, the role and purpose of an individual. However, the construction of these thoughts, like in *For You*, stays close to real-world rhythms and lexicon.

Although the content in both aspires towards philosophy, the articulation and writing of both pieces are very much grounded and steer clear of any more 'artificial' crafting.

An implication of such an aesthetic style in a Sung-Play libretti is that while the naturalism has the potential benefit of portraying a 'psychologically real' character in a setting and predicament that might be thought of as close to real situation, such a dynamic can limit other potential qualities: such as the potential for moments of melodic song. One can imagine Tom Rakewell bursting into aria for no other reason than he is on stage but not so any of the

[15] Alban Berg, *Wozzeck* (Rome: Opera d'Oro; First Edition, 2009), Act 1. Scene 1.

characters of *Wozzeck* or *For You*. Their grounding in reality inhibits their ability to even momentarily break free (into melodic aria) from such a constraint.

The remedy in operatic terms, perhaps used so often as to now seem itself unrealistic, is the recurring use of lullabies, children's mnemonic songs and nursery rhymes as a means of generating moments where real people might realistically find themselves singing melodically. Another example of strangely manufactured reasons for song in such realistic settings would be the lighthouse-keepers of Peter Maxwell Davies's *The Lighthouse* (1979) choosing to give off their bickering to stage their own miniature singing competition.

I will make one further observation on the Sung-Play libretto before moving on to libretto as Verse-Drama. In her essay 'Outstaring the Sun: Contemporary Opera and the Literary Librettist', Irene Morra takes particular umbrage with McEwan's libretto in *For You* as a representative of contemporary opera (and libretti) that centres the plot too significantly. Her reasoning is that such a prioritising in the opera of only a libretto's realistic portrayal of drama is a limiting of the art. Morra argues:

> This insecurity [in modernist operas] is defined primarily by the perceived difficulty of modern classical music. This difficulty is only enhanced by the increasing emphasis in modern opera on the importance of opera as drama, and on the engagement of that drama with a contemporary reality. For centuries, receptions have descried the ridiculousness of operatic plots, but exalted the sublime nature of an opera's music. In these valuations, any divide between music and plot can be overlooked either by celebrating an inherent drama within the music, or by recognizing the ability of that music to transcend its 'ludicrous' plot. In modern and contemporary opera, however, this implicit hierarchy has changed, with an increasing critical insistence upon the contemporary integrity of that opera's plot and libretto.[16]

[16] Irene Morra, 'Outstaring the Sun: Contemporary Opera and the Literary Librettist', *Contemporary Music Review,* 29 (2010), pp. 121–35 (p124).

For Morra, and it is an argument that I have a sympathy with, when the libretti's drama is centred too significantly (to the detriment and sidelining of other potential qualities and characteristics) then there is a misuse of the potential of opera. I am reminded of Ingmar Bergman's rules for creativity: 'I am not trying to make it real, I am trying to make it alive'.[17] And the question could be asked, does the contemporary reality depicted in such Sung-Plays (be it *For You*, *Wozzeck*, *Written on Skin*) result in characters with more flesh and blood to them than *Carmen* or *Madame Butterfly*?

Morra's argument echoes something of Auden in 'Some Reflections on Opera as a Medium' (1951). Auden opens his essay with a rule on creative undertakings: genres are different and, therefore, have different capabilities, uses, and strengths: 'Every artistic medium reflects some area of human experience. These areas often overlap but never coincide, for if two media could do the same thing equally well one would be unnecessary.'[18]

There is the question, then, of how does the Sung-Play benefit from being sung rather than being acted without the musical addition of the composer? And there is the second question: are such benefits enough to mitigate what is otherwise lost by its compulsion to be so wedded to the psychologically real depiction of 'the world as it is'?

What is important, regardless of the answers here, is to acknowledge the aesthetic strand itself. It is an aesthetic that by prioritising realism might be judged on its failure or success in providing such realism. It is about creating a libretto with less onus on the weave or intricacy of the line or the lift of the song, and more duty on the librettist's role as dramatist. This is not the libretto style that prioritises song. Indeed, it would perhaps be difficult to determine between the celebrated librettist and playwright Martin Crimp's writing for stage play and for opera. Extracts of both are included below:

> *A long table is spread with pages from the completed book. The BOY moves along the table explaining the pictures.*

[17] Ingmar Bergman, Ingmar Bergman Interview on The Seventh Seal, Wild Strawberries & more, *FilMagicians*, 17 April 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLVLKQ8Nh_A> [30 May 2022]
[18] W.H. Auden, *W.H. Auden, Prose Volume III: 1949-1955* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 250.

Boy: Here are your enemies
lined up on a gibbet

Protector: Hanging – excellent – like Judas

Boy: A vine-hook
Cutting a traitor's throat.

Protector: Yes yes – and who are these?

Boy: These naked boys have dug their own graves –
They're waiting in an orchard to be shot.

Protector: And what are these streaks of light?

Boy: A night bombardment:
Gomorrah – see it? – being turned to dust.[19]

And for comparison:

Vaclav: You agreed to talk to him. That's why we're here.

Amelia's attention wanders, then:

Amelia: What?

[19] Martin Crimp, *Written on Skin: Opera in Three Parts* (London: Faber Music, 2012), p. 33.

Vaclav: That's why we're here.

Amelia: I can see fields.

Vaclav: I'm sorry?

Amelia: When I shut my eyes.

Vaclav: That's because you've been travelling.

Amelia: What about you?

Vaclav: If I shut my eyes?

Amelia: Yes.

He shuts his eyes – concentrates.

Vaclav: I see your face[20].

Libretto as Verse-Drama

[20] Martin Crimp, *Writing for Nothing*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2019), p. 92.

David Harsent in an interview with Philip Lancaster[21] (hesitantly) points towards this second position that I feel must be given greater onus in the genre. Harsent, both a practising poet and scriptwriter, was librettist of *The Minotaur* (2008), a piece given prominent position by *The Guardian* newspaper as one of the great works of classical music in the 20th century.[22] In the interview with Lancaster, Harsent gives a short answer that has two key points for our study.

Asked about the process of hearing his words set to music, a question referencing Harsent's work with composer Harrison Birtwistle, Harsent talks of the process of trust between librettist and composer and how the libretto changes through the process of this collaboration. However, interestingly for us, Harsent also adds that 'the libretto can be had separately – as a pamphlet or pages in the programme; there, it is (let's say) a verse drama.'[23]

Two factors are proposed: the validity of the libretto as a stand-alone artefact, a valuable defence given earlier accusations of the inability to discuss a libretto freed from its musical component. Furthermore, and importantly for ideas on potential foundational concepts in libretti, is this (hesitant) designation of the libretto as a Verse-Drama.

Verse-Drama. Such was Harsent's description of it, such, too, was Kerman's definition. From the outset, however, there is care needed in how precisely this definition is applied, with caution being taken to differentiate the standard staged verse-drama of its high-period in the un-sung Renaissance and Restoration plays from the libretto-verse-drama (or Verse-Drama awaiting music) that will be the focus of this study, and which served as the principle of my own completed libretto.

[21] Guillemot Press, 2020, *Salt Moon: Philip Lancaster Interview David Harsent.* [Online] [Date accessed: August 2022] https://www.guillemotpress.co.uk/news/2020/10/3/salt-moon-philip-lancaster-interviews-david-harsent-67dee

[22] Andrew Clements, Fiona Maddock, John Lewis, Kate Molleson, Tom Service, Erica Jeal, and Tim Ashley, 'The Best Classical Music Works of the 21st Century', The Guardian, 12 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/sep/12/best-classical-music-works-of-the-21st-century> [Accessed on 6th June 2022] (para. 23 of 28)

[23] Guillemot Press, 2020, *Salt Moon.*

The previous extracts of *Wozzeck* and *For You* display, in form and in theoretical grounding, the thought behind their composition as: real words for real characters in a scenario closely paralleled to the actual world. As texts they represent a world separated from ours only by a thin veil: the veil of music that heightens and gives greater significance to their actions. Importantly, as argued by Kerman with the Sung-Play, the theory is present directly in the libretto text, by dint of its word-choice and relationship (or rather, its lack of a relationship) to patterned rhythmic structure.

If such is the case in libretto as Sung-Play, then what are we to infer from the libretti of its contrasting model, such as Auden's own *The Rake's Progress* or Alice Goodman's *Nixon in China* (1987)? Serving as counterpoint, I include passages from both, below. Here, first, are the opening lines of *The Rake's Progress*:

Anne: The woods are green and bird and beast at play
For all things keep this festival of May;
With fragrant odours and with notes of cheer
The pious earth observes the solemn year.

Rakewell: Now is the season when the Cyprian Queen
With genial charm translates our mortal scene
When swains their nymphs in fervent arms enfold
And with a kiss restore the Age of Gold.[24]

Believable, realistic language this is not. Rakewell and Anne are not psychologically-accurate, their lexicon is not in line with regular usage: There are 'swains', 'nymphs', 'Ages of Gold'. The lines are quite rigid in their formal structure, especially the opening line itself, ten single-

[24] Igor Stravinsky, W.H. Auden, Chester Kallman, and William Hogarth, *Oedipus Rex/The Rake's Progress*, *Opera Guide* (London: One World Classics, 1991), p. 77.

syllable words arranged in a thudding iambic pentameter line, a rhythm that the proceeding lines retain.

Already, the *verse* of the Verse-Drama becomes apparent. Where there was only a thin veil between the libretto of the Sung-Play and our own world there is now a gulf – a distance between our language and theirs, our predicament and their own: two characters are openly singing that they are in love. A space for the composer's music to bridge or fill, as Irene Morra's previous critique would have it.

The second chapter of this thesis will tackle the technical qualities of the verse in a Verse-Drama libretto. Here, though, I would like to share a further example of a libretto whose composition might bring it into the terrain of the Verse-Drama.

Alice Goodman's *Nixon in China* is a particularly valuable case since it is located in 'reality', the opera fictionalizes a real-world political event, but by virtue of its handling and its libretto's stylistic turn, it manages to estrange this event. Here, in this first act of the libretto, Richard Nixon has landed on Chinese soil in a historical moment for US-China diplomacy:

Nixon: News has a kind of mystery:
When I shook hands with Chou En-Lai
On this bare field outside Peking,
Just now, the world was listening.

Chou: May I…

Nixon: though we spoke quietly
The eyes and ears of history
Caught every gesture –

Chou: – introduce –

Nixon: And every word, transforming us
As we, transfixed –

Chou: - the Deputy
Minister of Security…

Nixon: Made history. Our shaking hands
Were shaping time. Each moment stands
Out sharp and clear.[25]

This scene, exemplary in my view, is well crafted. Like with Auden, there is a uniformity to the line structure, this time an iambic tetrameter (four stress with the stress falling on alternating syllables) and, similarly to the opening of *The Rake's Progress*, with the added technique of the lines being composed in rhyming couplets.

As an aside, there is a question sometimes asked in opera about who exactly the singers might be singing to – is it to the audience? The orchestra? To one another? To themselves? In *The Rake's Progress*, the duet seems to point towards the latter two answers. Each singer is singing to their companion – but also to themselves. They are telling each other of their feelings, but also, I feel, they are informing themselves of their own feelings. What is delicious about *Nixon in China* is that his singing can be understood to be aimed at no-one other than

[25] Alice Goodman and John Adams, *History is Our Mother, Three Libretti: Alice Goodman* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2017), pp. 7-8.

himself. Nixon, ignoring the interruptions, is lost in his own myth-making even in the moment that the events are unfolding.

Less ornate in its word-choice than *The Rake's Progress*, *Nixon in China* has a subtler take on literary construction than Auden's work. Lexicon and speech patterning are closer to traditional models. Reality, such as in the official interruptions, surrounds the action – but, partly through the concise rhythmic overlay, the drama continuously lifts away from this basis in reality.

This interplay between the fantastical as it pushes against the boundaries of the real is one of the keystones of the Verse-Drama libretto. Confident that the music will, as Morra desired, make any incongruities palatable, neither the words nor the action is unduly anchored by the believable.

In a similar manner, Auden's libretti also push the concept of grounded dramatic action to its more extreme limits. *The Rake's Progress* involves a machine that can turn stones into bread, it has the romance with Baba the Turk, which is to say nothing of the contract with the devil and the ultimate game-of-cards by which the hero's fate is decided.

One of the special elements of this conception of the Verse-Drama libretto is that in libretti like Auden's (and co-librettist Kallman) the Verse-Drama libretto was a place of pure creative freedom. In the libretto of *Delia*, the proposed follow-up to *The Rake's Progress* that they (unsuccessfully) pitched to Stravinsky, we can see both the possibilities and the pitfalls of such a belief in the wild freedom inherent in this conception of opera.

Unwisely seeming to take *The Magic Flute* as a template for the libretto, the work is filled with both moral and philosophical posturing – but combines such an aspiration towards existential significance with elements of farce. Here, in the extract that follows, amateur sorcerer Bungay and his wife Xantippe are practising spells:

> Bungay [*finding the spell in his book*]: Eureka! This opens the rock.
> Now. A little peace, a little reverence,

Woman, and you shall see I stray not. I commence.

[Draws a diagram on the ground with a stick and intones.]

Hic. Haec. Hoc.

The fiddle and…

[*A man-sized OWL walks on the stage*.]

Xantippe: By all the saints!

Bungay: Well, if it a bird be, let us be bold

And quickly strike that it for us may lay an egg of gold.

[*Intoning*] Eata, theata

Lo and behold,

Pie-upsey, pie-upsey,

An egg of pure gold.

[*He Pauses*]

Well, bird, the egg!

Owl: Tu-whit.

Bungay: The egg, I say.

Owl: Tu-whoo.

Bungay: What shall I do?

[*Consulting his book*.] Ah, now I see, that spell is but for geese!

Owl: Tu-whit. Tu-whoo.

[*Exit Owl*][26]

[26] W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of Auden, Libretti 1939-1973*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 101.

Bizarre and confusing – still, in the Verse-Drama libretto such things (magic, summoning, the uncanny) are conceivable. Practicable, even. That I feel the scene is a failure – and that Stravinsky turned down the opportunity to continue working with Auden and Kallman – is to be disregarded for the purposes of our point. What is to be emphasised is that both librettists felt *able* to envision and write such a scene. The Verse-Drama libretto is free to lift away almost entirely from the rules and customs of the temporal world.

For a more successful example of how a Verse-Drama libretto can unmoor from the confines and strictures of reality again we shall look again to Goodman's *Nixon in China*. The opera, being a curious myth-making transformation of historical fact, is content to steer close-by the usual rules for representing such matters: Nixon meets the state dignitaries on the airport tarmac; Nixon and Pat reminisce in their private quarters about their earlier life together; Henry Kissinger is allowed in the dialogue of the libretto to ask such mundanities as:

> Kissinger: Premier,
> Please, where's the toilet?
>
> Chou: Through that door.
>
> Kissinger: Excuse me for a moment, please.
>
> [*Kissinger exits on the double*…][27]

While such an exchange seems more suitable for the *Wozzeck* or *For You* Sung-Plays described earlier in this chapter, Goodman's use of the Verse-Drama model constantly has the libretto creating just such a friction between itself as a depiction of reality and itself as a constructed artifice. In the opening act we have already seen Nixon's manic self-commentary of his own

[27] Alice Goodman and John Adams, *History is Our Mother, Three Libretti: Alice Goodman* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2017), p. 57.

actions translating the scene from reality to myth – but there is further evidence of the allowance that the Verse-Drama gives for a libretto to play with its relationship with unreality in the second act. Here, pivotally, Nixon and Pat sit down to watch the ballet for *The Red Detachment of Women,* the real-life ballet that was performed for Nixon's actual visit to China in 1972.

In the libretto, as though the text were suddenly made aware of its own artifice by the incorporation of the artifice of the ballet, the libretto shifts into a new unreality of its own: the singer who performs Kissinger finds himself inside the ballet as the character of Lao Szu, while both Pat and Nixon seem unable to decide exactly on the realness or otherwise of the ballet they are watching.

Kissinger (as Lao Szu):
Whip her to death!

Pat: They can't do that!

Nixon: It's just a play.
She'll get up afterwards, you'll see.
Easy there, hon.

Kissinger (as Lao Szu):
Whip her to death!

Pat: It's terrible! I hate you both!
Make them stop! Make them stop!

Nixon: Sweetheart.
Leave them alone You might get hurt.

The First Lady rushes onstage.[28]

This above extract begins in a liminal zone where Nixon is first sure of the unreality of the ballet only to then caution that, despite this, Pat might get hurt (undermining the first assertion). Following this, both Nixon and Pat then find themselves onstage where rather than the play stopping, a stagehand coming on to interrupt, or the characters turning back to actors, no stoppage in fact occurs. The ballet, this artifice, continues but now subsumes both Nixon and Pat into its twined unreal-reality.

Here we have what I take to be one of the signature qualities of Verse-Drama libretti: their unreality, being acknowledged, becoming a strength as it allows for the estranging of the human experience, which gives the possibility of opening up new and undiscovered creative and emotional possibilities. We acknowledge that it is un-real, that it is un-true – Carmen dies singing, we hear the minotaur singing in cogent language in its dream – but still, like Pat shouting from her position in the audience we become so invested that it becomes real. And, as with Pat and Nixon entering the ballet, it becomes more real than the real. Real in a way that the regular world cannot compete.

Verse-drama libretti, standing as contrast to the naturalism of the Sung-Play, creates distance by its commitment to a literary, formal composition and lexicon and also by its willingness to go beyond the natural and temporal.

What can be seen in *Nixon in China* is that even in dealing with the apparently factually real, the Verse-Drama libretto has an ability to give any subject matter it frames the quality and scale (the metaphorical resonance) of myth. Earlier we asked the question of *Wozzeck* and *For You* of whether their commitment to naturalism, and the sacrifices this entailed, brought an overall net positive for the opera. For the libretto as Verse-Drama, the question is different. In such cases we must ask: does it matter that there is an estrangement from real and

[28] Alice Goodman and John Adams, *History is Our Mother, Three Libretti: Alice Goodman* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2017), pp. 45-46.

psychologically-accurate, believable characters and their situations? What avenues are opened if we are not limited in such a manner? What transcendence is now within reach if characters are not bound by real world conventions of action or speech, if they can fall in love in the space of a song or articulate the moment of their death even as their dying breath is apparently being wrung from their body?

These conceptual questions are likely to have only subjective answers. The importance in this first step is merely to acknowledge the stance, and, for the value of this commentary, to begin to outline exactly where we can discern rules and choices that the potential librettist might follow.

In poetry, my main artistic field, there is the all-encompassing term 'poetry' into which a host of poets write. However, despite the dangers of such signposting, it is also broadly true to acknowledge that a first descriptor of my own work would be: lyric poetry. The connotation being that it is a poetry that favours musicality and rhythmic thought – that it is a poetry that acknowledges its tradition and sees itself as an extension (and evolution) of such tradition. It is a description that helps narrow the field – it helps both the reader and the writer articulate more exactly its domain and the domain into which the poems will likely be written (likelihood rather than surety).

The language of libretti, having read across a variety of critical sources, has little such ability to make more exact distinctions. Looking at Patrick J Smith's analytic work, libretti are often characterized by era or broadly whether they fall into comic or tragic traditions.

Here, the libretto as a written and understandable art suffers from being categorised primarily by era, country and broad tone. Therefore, and as remedy to this, I argue that it is important to begin by setting out this essential means of categorisation that will better delineate the art as an art within a tradition. Libretto as Sung-Play and libretto as Verse-Drama – such descriptors already help bring acknowledgement to the genre by placing the art form into a position where its very writing (the choices of how it is written) is at its foundation rather than describing it in by its non-creative signifiers (era and country).

If, as is the intention of this opening chapter, we are to begin by giving due acknowledgement to an under-represented genre then it is best achieved by nuancing the genre.

Beginning by asserting a 'creative' system for libretti, we already introduce an integral element when looking at apportioning skill and promise: choice. The librettist, if they are to achieve any level of admiration or praise, must be understood to be an artist faced with choices and their consequence – and this choice, Verse-Drama tradition or Sung-Play tradition, is the *first* and, perhaps, most fundamental choice since it impacts the libretto's likely lexicon and rhythmic structure of the line, and, – as shown – it is likely to have influence over the interplay and mechanics of its world, its believability and strictness of its rules.

On a personal level, one of the most difficult elements of beginning my own libretto revolved around the inability to have such a template for discussion when outlining with the composer what I would write. In these initial discussions, we talked about the *opera* but lacked any concrete language by which to approach the libretto itself. Encouraged to write something 'modern' and 'contemporary', I wrote in the vein of what I saw as the most critically celebrated contemporary piece, Martin Crimp's *Written on Skin*, it seeming to fit the request for something modern and contemporary.

However, this first version of the libretto, written over the span of eight months, unrhymed and without anything resembling song, was completely discarded at a late point because the composer felt it did not align with her desired artistic outcome. It was only by seeing the finished libretto (that she did not want to write music for) that she felt better able to point out the sections that did more closely align with her own vision.

Partly I understand this as a failure of the collaborative element – and will discuss this in third chapter – but more significantly, I see these struggles as stemming from the lack of a clear vocabulary for the work of the librettist. And, from this lack of clear vocabulary ripples out the lack of appreciation of the art.

Chapter Two

Poet and Poetry: The Challenges and Choices in Writing for the Verse-Drama Libretto

The first chapter of this thesis asserted that the first choice a 21st Century librettist could be understood to make was between writing in the vein of the Verse-Drama or Sung-Play traditions. The aim was to make a case for such traditions and, by doing so, to begin an appreciation of the librettist's task since it is only through better delineating the choices a librettist makes that we can more accurately outline the skill of its implementation. Such a conversation necessarily dealt with the libretto as a whole – its overall trend towards one of these two conventions, and the implications for tone and realism that such a choice might elicit.

Now focusing on the particular branch of Verse-Drama libretto, I want to analyse more closely the actual mechanics of such a libretto, and to further broaden the scope of appreciation by better detailing the challenges manifest in the writing of a libretto predicated on Verse-

Drama. Since the Verse-Drama libretto has long been associated with poets and poetry, this chapter interrogates what is it that a poet can bring to the art form, and what are the particular challenges the poet experiences when moving between the realms of 'pure' poetry (the poetry of the page) and the writing of a libretto?

It is useful at this junction to return to the quote by Rosmarin in the first chapter, where he describes the libretto as a 'paraliterary genre' and 'foreign to the domain of literature'.[29] Rosmarin's belittling of the libretto is predicated on what we might describe as a heliocentric understanding of the written arts, with literature as the central body that one is included inside, with all else relegated to a satellite of this more important genre. A counter to this view, and one that gives a potential firmer foundation to libretti, is found in the works of those associated with The Austrian Centre for Intermedial Studies in Graz and their argumentation for intermediality. This concept of intermediality allows for a more dynamic and valued understanding of the connection points between the arts and has special implications for the study of libretti.

Represented by the work of Walter Bernhart, Ulrich Weisstein and Werner Wolf, among others, the value of intermediality lies in its particular focus on tackling musico-literary frameworks, and how the written text (especially the libretto) is changed and augmented by its contact with music. This framework elevates a more nuanced view than the ring-fenced, hierarchical viewpoint often prevalent in literary studies. In his 2007 essay, 'Words and Music as Partners in Song: 'Perfect Marriage' – 'Uneasy Flirtation' – 'Coercive Tension' – 'Shared Indifference' – 'Total Destruction', Bernhart offers an initial description of such a musico-literary relationship that might be found in opera and song:

> There is a wide range of diverse relationships which words and music can establish in songs, and have established in the course of European cultural history. They are basically of two types: either they are primarily concerned with meaning, and therefore take their start from a verbal text; in such 'interpretive songs' the music is expected to relate itself to

[29] Leonard Rosmarin, *When Literature Becomes Opera* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 155.

> the text and contribute to the generation of meaning by the joint two forces of the song. In the other type, meaning is of lesser concern and the function of the song is in the wider sense social, with the music usually being the driving factor[30]

In an essay from the following year, 'What Can Music Do to a Poem? New Intermedial Perspectives of Literary Studies',[31] he reasserts the primary relationship as either falling into a relationship where the composer 'redoubles' the meaning/emotion of the text, these being 'interpretive songs', a mode that centres the text; the second type is more generally understood to be 'reflective' – where the composer reflects on their emotional/intellectual understanding of the text and channels this dislocated motive. Here, the writer/librettist's text is of less importance to the song than the composer's own reaction. Incorporated into each view is a ladder of differing modes of such interpretation or reflection.

Despite the value of such readings, especially with their consequences for libretti, the revelations showcased are centred around understanding the musico-literary relationship of a *completed* text. Bernhart and Weisstein, in particular, have opened up avenues for beginning to articulate the relationship between music and words that pleasingly complicates our understanding of a song or opera. Of special interest is the idea of the distinction between 'pathogeneous' and 'logogeneous' texts, the music/text relationship being founded in an emotional or intellectual basis. Historically, opera has revolved around this pathogeneous relationship – the singing taking place in a heightened emotional state. Something we shall unpack later in this chapter. However, as suggested above, thus far the work of intermedial studies has looked at librettists such as Auden and Britten, with notice paid to contemporary productions of such adaptations as *Jane Eyre* (2000).

Practically, studies looking at intermedial relationships between words and music have been focused on the moment the music and the words meet – what I aim to do in this chapter is to build a further layer to their perspective by concentrating on the text's relationship to the

[30] Walter Bernhart, *Essays on Literature and Music (1985 - 2013) by Walter Bernhart*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 377.
[31] Bernhart, 2015

music PRIOR to their meeting: how is it that the librettist forms their text with the knowledge that it will become music, that it will be an intermedial art and not a genre related to literature isolated from any other art form?

My assertion, that I will argue for across this chapter, is that the librettist does write with this intermedial component in mind when creating their libretto. This particularly has important implications for the poet-librettist because it posits the question of what changes can we see in the written text that show conscious realignment of ideals when comparing the poem (as isolated art) to the libretto (verse that will later be set and sung).

Drawing on the thought of Auden's criticism, and making reference to my own experiences, I will aim to show that such changes in writing are centred around two specific qualities in the libretto text. The first of these is the *immediacy* of the text, with this linking back to Bernhart's idea of music preference for pathogeneous texts, where the emotional content is prioritized. The second quality I argue, is that there is also a discernible alteration in the desired 'content density' of the verse line. By signposting both these specific dimensions, I hope to show that the libretto should not be understood to be a facet of 'pure literature' – satellite or not – but should be understood to be an intermedial art form, intermedial even before the music connects with the text.

The Argument for Immediacy

As a practising poet, when surveying the written lines of a Verse-Drama libretto, there is something in the composition that is both familiar and strange. If we were to pay attention to those extracts from Auden and Goodman in the first chapter, it would be straightforward to point to formal technique: line length, cadence, perhaps rhyme or other obvious writing practices, such as alliteration – all such things point towards poetic composition. However, despite this, it would be difficult to argue that either extract is composed of 'poetry'. Between the verse of the libretto and the verse of the poem – and even between the verse of a

standard verse-drama, such as Shakespeare's *Othello* or *King Lear* – there is a gap that goes beyond the particular capabilities for verse-making of the individual writer.

In fact, I would go as far as to say that the lack of nuance or intricacy of the verse (some might wrongly assume these are the limitations of the verse!) stems directly from the needs of the libretto itself and therefore might be argued to be representative of the qualities that underpin the libretto's compositional requirements.

Part of this sameness/difference, I argue, lies in the relative immediacy of the text, a quality that we can find articulated in Auden's own theoretical writings from around the period he was undertaking his opera, *The Rake's Progress*, with Igor Stravinsky. In 'Notes on Opera and Music', Auden argues:

> If the librettist is a practicing poet, the most difficult problem, the place where he is most likely to go astray, is the composition of the verse. Poetry is in its essence an act of reflection, of refusing to be content with the interjections of the immediate. Since music is in essence immediate, it follows the words of a song cannot be poetry…[32]

There are two significant strands in this quote: the nature of poetry and the nature of music. Both have consequences for our argument.

To begin with the poetry: 'Poetry is in its essence an act of reflection, of refusing to be content with the interjections of the immediate'. Auden, in many ways, is echoing his own previous thought ('poetry is reflective: it stops to think. Music is immediate, it goes on to become')[33] which aimed to situate poetry inside the realm of thought; with music being, perhaps, more closely situated with the emotions, echoing too the idea of Bernhart's questioning of music's pathogeneous quality. A poem, for Auden, is something *considered*. It is mulled over – and –

[32] W.H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 472.
[33] W.H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 466.

by being mulled over, it is changed. The poem is not immediate. As Auden writes, it *refuses* to be content with such interjections of the immediate.

This itself is not a new position, and chimes particularly with Wordsworth's account of poetry from *Lyrical Ballads* (1800 – the revised second version of these collected poems): '[Poetry is] the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.'[34]

For both statements, poetry is not responding directly, in the moment, to the event – it is disconnected, at a remove from the specific event. 'Poetry stops to think' and poetry is 'emotion recollected in tranquillity;' both Auden and Wordsworth have poetry as a thing happening *after the fact*, post-event. The removal is important as this 'stopping to think' is both the metaphysical component of the poem (philosophically interrogating it, the experience becoming thought) but also allows for the creative construction too: not needing to react *in the moment*, limited by time and spontaneity, the poem can be more self-consciously crafted, honed, made into art, since there is no pretension of its being impulsively in the moment.

As insinuated by the second section of Auden's remark, this is not the case with music ('music is in essence immediate') and not the case, consequently, for opera. For opera libretti, this is the underlying tension and the particular difficulty for the poet new to the genre: the poet's art relies on stopping but the musical component will not allow this.

Here is a great part of the librettist's task, especially if the librettist is a poet: they must go against the standard imperative of the poem-writing act – it *must* react to (and in) the moment.

In terms of what shape this quest for immediacy takes: it is a commitment to the present tense over the past-tense and, further, asks that the emotional (often unconsidered) reaction

[34] William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 307.

is prioritised over the contemplative, considered response. Again, to return to Auden, in an essay for *Tempo* magazine in 1951, he writes about what the good libretto must entail:

> …the librettist need never bother his head, as the dramatist must, about probability. A credible situation in opera means a situation in which it is credible that someone should sing. A good libretto plot is a melodrama in both the strict and the conventional sense of the word: it offers as many opportunities as possible for the characters to be swept off their feet by placing them in situations which are too tragic or fantastic for 'words'. No good opera plot can be sensible for people do not sing when they are feeling sensible.[35]

Immediacy, then, can be considered as a drive towards emotional intensity, an intensity (unrelenting) that will elicit a transcendence towards song in the singer (and before this, the composer).

Melodrama, Auden's model for the good libretto, is a drama that appeals primarily to the emotions. A libretto is not the thought of someone in isolation from the event, rather, it is the living, breathing response of a character in the midst of their life happening around them. There is no withdrawal, no opportunity to step back and contemplate. The librettist's task is to give power to this character's mind, helping them articulate their response, there immediately, **and**, all the while, to make it song.

The challenge, then, for the poet-librettist is to find the middle ground – not stopping to think but also not accepting 'to be content with the interjections of the immediate'. The poet-librettist must write inside the moment in a way that responds directly to the event – and in a way that can still lean towards the technical bravado and considerations of poetry.

[35] W.H. Auden, *W.H. Auden, Prose Volume III: 1949-1955* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 253.

Verse-making is still needed, and so the genre is something that the poet can excel at, but it is verse-making at a slant, augmented by the considerations of the fact that it will soon touch music.

Here is the first challenge for the poet-librettist – and it was one that, to talk of my own libretto project, I found initially quite difficult to implement.

Below, are two attempts at song – the first composed at the outset of the project, the second song written much later in the schedule.

First Song (Written in first month of PhD as prototype)

I know this road, the path where our field grew,
our second home – my father humming tunes,
singing *cut* and *sow*, the barely grew like gold
[whistles as a signal] – where is my friend - am I here alone?

It grew like gold – and then the world moved
and we small people had to struggle through,
anger on anger, when they took the land;
oh father, you died, we laid you out like barley,

and they planted red grapes to make a red, red wine
[whistles again] where is my friend – I've come with fire,
let me grow sadness, – let me use my hands
oh father, let me reap a flame's bright harvest –

[whistles again] nothing, no-one, I go alone.
Let me be winemaker - let vines of smoke grow.

Last Song in finished opera

(Coll runs out the door to escape – it closes behind him)

Oh lord, oh throat, oh thirst,
What is this darkness behind the door?
Why is the void here?
Mother – please open up again.

A storm is coming – I can hear it,
I don't want to be alone out here
I just wanted to bite the apple once…
then once, again. Then once and once

then all of it.
I thirsted more than others
I don't know why. Rain quenched nothing –
And now it's raining dust and dirt – not rain
And now it's raining dust. Did I waste everything?

Oh god, am I being pulled back – to do it all again.
No, give me rain. Please no, give me rain.

Extract from *Drought* (2022) (Libretto by Niall Campbell, Composition by Anna Appleby)

It is insightful to pair this project's initial attempt at song-writing alongside this opera project's final song as I feel it can function as a case-study of sorts in the smaller, subtle nuances that denotate the literary decision-making that underpins the libretto. In a thesis about the gap, the disconnect, for a poet between their lyrics that are not meant to be sung and those that are shaped for singing, it is useful to weigh what knowledge has been gained between the two versions: the two moments are separated by both significant experience and critical engagement with the field of writing for libretti.

For me, considering all the while the argument on immediacy, the first 'song' functions more as a poem than as a song fit for opera. In contrast with Auden's mantra, it is literally a character stopping to think. Its terrain is thought; the speaker of the piece is notable for their poise. They talk of deaths and burning fields, but are stoic about such deeds. Revenge is administrative. Their violence is the violence of images, not the violence of impulse or action. He (the male narrator) speaks to the audience of himself, but curiously is intent on reminding himself of what he is doing and why he is doing it. In many regards the speaker does not exist at all; what is being articulated is a moment in thought, a vignette with a blank mystery before it and a further blank mystery ahead.

In the second song, written much later in the project's schedule, the character of a young man, harassed by the drought that has enveloped the land, having spent the opera on the cusp of departing the farm and his home, has finally made the gesture of opening the door to leave.

Opera (especially of the Verse-Drama model), being open to preternatural knowledge, allows that, in this moment, the young man is able to see how badly that decision plays out, and, as a dust storm surrounds him, is able to mourn his own life, and since knowledge was gained too late, the likelihood of repeating those mistakes into infinity.

This song is less thought and more emotion, a direct response to what is happening and continuing to happen around the singer of the song. There is, in the jumping panic imbued by the rhythm of the language, the chaotic desperation, a sense of someone at their emotional

end. They are a wick burnt down to the last strands, and by pushing the character and the language into this position, it is a benefit to the potential for operatic singing.

Technique aside, and there is a formal difference, what separates the two texts for me is this sense of emotional immediacy.

In the first song both the singer and the song are dislocated from any emotional significant event. The singer is not noticeably troubled by the act he is about to commit; also, the act is not being committed, it is up the road, distant from both singer and audience. In the second song, the character is overwhelmed and the action is occurring. Literally, he is being surrounded by it, in the body of the surrounding storm.

These things being noted, this is where I think there is underappreciation for the librettist's task: writing the present moment is difficult. Especially with a desire to frame a character in the midst of being consumed by their present moment. It is more heat and less light, less ostentatious – less overtly literary, since the characters by virtue of being swept by their emotions are less rational, less able to see or articulate the long view. It would be ridiculous if the character being consumed by the dust storm, overcome by their own panic and loss, were to begin making subtler philosophical points on their loss or referencing other falls in any but the most surface of comparisons. An ability to forge such connections would undercut the sense that the character was lost and on the verge of death. In opera, emotion and thought are in competition, and it is in the interest of the librettist and composer that the emotion always wins.

If such is the theoretical imperatives when embarking on writing a scene for a libretto, then it would be useful next to look how such a theory is implemented in the composition of the lines, as a means of giving tangible examples of the decisions that are made and lead to the finished article.

When writing this later song, I was especially conscious of two creative priorities when trying to give a sense of the panic of the character facing their end. Firstly, it was that the character would be lost in this present moment. Present tense is a challenge to a poem – and

consequently the change is not as minor as might be imagined. There is a challenge to writing inside the moment of experience and utterance since, as noted, the potential for allusion and reference is stifled.

Secondly, there was the further question of how to give the character's speech a shape and lyricism in a way that added to the audience's experience of the event rather than slowing or undermining it through prioritising thought over the emotional dominance of loss.

The solution, showcasing some of the overlap between poetry and libretti, was in the rhythm of the piece. Panic speaks in short bursts. 'Oh lord, oh throat, oh thirst…' uttered at the outset of the song was a means of expressing a scattered sense of self. Overawed, the mind is moving between concerns: 'Oh lord, oh throat, of thirst' is, in poetic terms, an iambic trimeter: a line of three stresses where the stress falls on every second syllable. But considering the movement of the character's thought reflected in this line, it is possible to read the line as both musically unified and yet representing a personal fragmentation: 'Oh Lord', the character briefly understands himself as a being perhaps in the hold of a larger, spiritual situation – with this quickly overthrown by the 'Oh throat', immediately erasing this thought and bringing the character back to his 'feeling' body. 'Oh thirst', this character is a body that is suffering.

The iambic stress in this section of the song (du-DUH, du-DUH, du-DUH) functions as the shadowy undercurrent of a heart-beating, thudding its rhythm in the panicking chest.

Developing the sense of rhythm, there is also the sonic pattering of the vowel in 'lord' being close (but not exactly similar) to the 'o' in 'throat', while the 'th' of 'throat' has a smoother continuation into 'thirst'.

The second line breaks the pattern of stuttering thought to allow a whole question to be uttered: 'What is this darkness behind the door?' This, again, subtle as it is, is another technique of poetry: following a series of short thoughts with a brief period of flow. Too much brevity of statement, I think, can lead to a staccato effect. Considering this piece is to be sung

there is a need for a balance between the need to portray short-breathed terror and longer flow of words that might lift the piece into song.

If I might offer one further critique of this second song, it lies in the section:

> I just wanted to bite the apple once…
> then once, again. Then once and once
>
> then all of it.

The repetition of a word in a poem is not an uncommon technique. But in terms of how this repetition is enacted I think it would be useful to compare this extract from the libretto with an 'actual poem', Seamus Heaney's 'The Wishing Tree' (1987). This poem, for me, is the perfect example of a lyric poem.

> The Wishing Tree
>
> I thought of her as the wishing tree that died
> and saw it lifted, root and branch, to heaven,
> trailing a shower of all that had been driven
>
> need by need by need into its hale
> sap-wood and bark: coin and pin and nail
> came streaming from it like a comet-tail
>
> new-minted and dissolved. I had a vision
> of an airy branch-head rising through damp cloud,

of turned-up faces where the tree had stood.[36]

The phrase that is of importance to our argument is 'need by need by need' on the fourth line. Echoed later in the 'coin and pin and nail', the music of the line is in accord with the description. There is an elegance to Heaney's writing. It is a considered description that flows as it unfolds its 'this and this and this' as though he were softly remembering the placement of each item in the bark of the tree. There is a quiet oratory nature to the line; a calmness that borders on stoicism envelops it, especially when considering this is a poem about death and absence.

When composing my own moment of repetition, I tried to go against nearly every part of Heaney's style. The desire in the particular section of my own song was to keep the rhythmic quality, heightened by the repetition, but substitute the elegance and serenity of Heaney for a sense of a character grasping for a foothold, his thoughts scattered and impulsive. 'I just wanted to bite the apple once' is voiced but since the character has not had the chance to consider his thoughts they quickly re-consider and correct the sentiment in the next line, 'then once, again', and from here the character's thoughts seem uncontrollably led on by the emotion of loss surrounding him: 'then once and once/ then all of it'.

Comparing these two extracts, I think it is fair to sum up the similarities as based on technique – there is the patterned use of repetition – but there is also the metrical line that appears in both sections:

need by **need** by **need** in**to** its **hale**
sap-**wood** and **bark**: **coin** and **pin** and **nail**
came **stream**ing **from** it **like** a **com**et-**tail**

[36] Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987)

In bold we have the iambic rhythm in Heaney's verse – and there is a similar metrical pattern that asserts itself in my own piece:

to **bite** the **ap**ple **once**…
then **once**, a**gain**. Then **once** and **once**

then **all** of **it**.

However, seeking to balance the usefulness of a steady rhythmic underpinning against the desire to reflect a chaotic element, I sought also to disrupt the uniformity of the standard iambic line and so in parts throughout the song the strong rhythm falls away.

The poetic unity between the true lyric poem and the libretto finds a basis in formal structures. However, their divergence is centred in both the placement of the narrator/speaker and also, we can see, in their split allegiances to the emotional/intellectual realms.

Heaney's mourning is a mourning of the mind, the libretto's mourning is one of the body and its emotions – which again links to the ideas of pathogeneous and logogeneous qualities, and how music-orientated arts are more suited to the emotion-centric model.

Immediacy, then, for the librettist-poet is this challenge of singing the moment as it happens. It is the challenge of making the piece as intricate and adorned as possible while also being cautious of overbearing the line in a way that encumbers the emotional content, allowing it to remain vibrant and dynamic. Immediacy is an acknowledgement that what is lost in scope and long-view (qualities of the poem) can be compensated by what the musical component will be able to embody. In intermedial terms, the immediacy of the libretto text (its closeness to the action and feelings of its characters) is an acknowledgement that the music will be added to the text and these musical qualities will be best served by such a treatment.

In terms of the poet-librettist and what specific skills they might possess and how these might be represented in a verse-drama libretto, it is evident that while there is a need to alter the usual 'positioning' of the voice, and an altering of the thought-emotion basis of the poem, the technical skills inherent in the accomplished poet are still of paramount value: what has changed is the 'artistic ideal' of the verse, but what remains is the basis that poetic techniques can allow for the representation for such an ideal.

To move this conversation forward, I want to also tackle a second quality that makes the libretto distinct and that, again, might be misrepresented as a flaw in the 'artistic merit' of the genre. This is the concept of 'content density' and how this relates to the verse line.

Verse Line and 'Content Density'

This chapter has sought to build on intermedial thought to show how a librettist might set out to write while remaining conscious that the written word on the page is not the end of the life of this word. That it will be transformed by contact with music.

So far, this conversation has tried to show that there are noticeable concessions-to/diversions-from the usual positioning of the poet's writing when they write for opera that displays that they are conscious of such an understanding. To push this argument further, I also aim to show that it is not only in the positioning of the verse (its immediacy and onus on emotional heft) that a change is discernible. I also want to highlight that a second strand of (necessary) divergence from standard verse can be seen in the relative 'content density' of the verse.

What do I mean by this? To begin with, it would be useful to return to W. H. Auden and his thoughts on Strauss and Hofmannsthal's *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911):

> Much as I admire Hofmannsthal's libretto for Rosenkavalier, it is, I think, too near real poetry. The Marschallin's monologue in Act I, for instance, is

so full of interesting detail that the voice line is hampered in trying to follow everything.[37]

We can note immediately the implied demarcation: libretto and 'real poetry'. For Auden, and it is a point I agree on, there is 'real poetry', poetry of the page with a grounding in traditional lyric values – beside this, overlapping but not wholly so, there is the poetry of a libretto.

Auden's basis of distinction is what we shall be concentrating on in this section so requires unpacking: for Auden, the 'interesting detail' that made up Hofmannsthal's verse was one of the main points that brought it away from libretti and closer to 'real poetry' – and this property of 'real poetry' was a quality that caused friction with the voice line (one of the points of intermedial contact as the words of the libretto becomes the vocal score).

For the purposes of context, I include here the monologue (in translation) from Act I of *Der Rosenkavalier*, so that we can get a sense of Auden's criticism and begin to formulate the outline of how such 'interesting detail' might be an antagonistic quality rather than a benefit to the libretto.

(*alone*)
Ah there he goes, a vain pretentious
pompous fellow,
and takes a young and lovely bride and
ample dowry as reward.

(sighing)
He takes it all,
and then he pleased to think that he's the
one who is honouring her!
But why trouble myself? The world will

[37] W.H. Auden, *W.H. Auden, Prose Volume III: 1949-1955* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 254.

have it so.
I remember a girl, just like this one
who fresh from the convent was marched
off straight to the holy estate of wedlock.

(*She takes a hand mirror*)

Where is she now? Ah,
(*Sighing*)
go, seek the sorrows of yesteryear!
But can it be,
(*quietly*)
(ah yes, can it really be so)
that I was that young girl long ago
and that I shall one day become the old
Princess…
The old Princess, the Marshall's old
Princess!
'Look now, there goes the Old Princess
Theresa!'
How can this come to pass?
Is this indeed the will of God?
For I am still I, the very same.
But if indeed it must be so,
why then do I sit here looking on,
and see it all, so clear? Why are these
things not kept from me?
This is mystery, all mystery,
and we are here on earth
(*sighing*)
to bear it all.
But to know 'how?' –

(*very quietly*)
In that lies all the difference.

Since the only thing Auden seemed to enjoy more than making a large sweeping statement on literature and art was to leave without unpacking his statement, it is left to us to offer an interpretation of Auden's accusation that the above piece's movement into opera was stymied by the 'detail' of the verse that brought it too close to true poetry. What can we understand this criticism to mean? And what form does it take?

Asked to name the potential problem, I would argue that the problem commences in the lines that follow from the raising of the hand mirror. Before this, the song progresses in what seems a natural way: the male character is insulted and his designs are shown to be viewed with disfavour. Marschallin is melancholy and feels defeated – 'the world will have it so' – but rather that lingering here and drawing out the emotional element, the libretto (much in the way a poem might) shifts the perspective, complicating the image – but also the language and phrase-length.

I shall one day become the old
Princess…
The old Princess, the Marshall's old
Princess!
'Look now, there goes the Old Princess
Theresa!'

Even in this short extract we have the initial thought, its partial repetition, its complication (not just old, now the princess is old and belonging to the Marshall, too) and then the detachment and exterior view on the situation (another person viewing the princess from the outside). My belief is that Auden would say the 'real poem' complicates, the libretto does not need to, since this will be the role of the music.

I wish to back up such a statement with an example in Auden's own opera writing that I feel encapsulates this desire for an ordered and unconstrained line (one that is ready for the music – but defies any need to clutter or complicate). Taken from the textual notes of his libretti, here, working on *The Rake's Progress*, Auden offers these various models to Stravinsky for the final chorus of the opera:

Act III, Scene 3

Fugal chorus

[4 syllables. Mourn Adonis.
Weep for Venus.

5 syllables. Mourn for Adonis
The dear of Venus
Mourn (him) ever young
Weep (beside) his bier.

6 syllables. Mourn for Adonis, Mourn
Mourn the dear of Venus
Weep for him, ever young,
Tread softly round his bier

7 syllables. Mourn Adonis ever young
Weep for the dear of Venus
Weep, tread softly round his bier

8 syllables. Mourn for Adonis ever young.
Mourn for Adonis, Venus's dear
Weep, weep, tread softly round his bier
Weep for the dear of Venus, weep.

Between the five-syllables version and the eight-syllables version there is a difference of a whole twelve syllables (three on each of the four lines). For a poet this is a huge amount. This could be a difference of twelve individual, single-syllable words strung out into an expository sentence or two – it could be six two-syllable words to add texture or movement to the piece. Between the two versions there is both space and potential. However, Auden refuses this potential and between the two different versions there is a difference of only four (additional) words: 'tread', 'softly', 'round' and 'the'.

In Auden's piece there is a will to purposefully NOT add detail. With opportunity and space to complicate, he does not. Given the opportunity and space, Auden goes out of his way to add as little difference as possible between the versions: the mood is provided, the outline of the emotional position of the character: weep. This is a song of sadness and tenderness. A song of loss. Any additional detail, such as with Marschallin's song, would not add to the song so much as muddy it.

Here, I think lies one of the great misunderstandings of the libretto text: that its disparity (in terms of metaphor/simile, imaginative leap and excess) when compared to 'real poetry' is a deficiency of the text and not a manifestation of the NEEDS of the genre. A large part of this mistake again has been a result of the habit of mis-aligning the libretto text always in relation to literature, whereas it should be understood as a musico-literary art, an intermedial art form.

As a musico-literary genre, the libretto text by necessity needs to be conscious of its ability not only to create itself – but that inside this act of creation it also must leave space for the musical component that will follow.

Two references to the work of librettist/poet John Malouf will be useful to further ground such an assertion.

In the 2007 essay 'Myth-making Opera: David Malouf's and Michael Berkeley's *Jane Eyre*', Walter Bernhart investigates the complications arising from adapting a novel into a functioning libretto, and how the opera can make the most of the novel's operatic elements. What is significant for our argument is the section where Bernhart also makes reference (through the work of Stephen Benson) to Malouf's understanding on the priority of the libretto, a view that compliments my own thoughts:

> Malouf knows very well the requirements for writing a successful opera, and Stephen Benson has drawn attention to Malouf's conviction that in an opera the libretto must leave ample room for the music to evoke the transcendent, "Edenic space".[38]

My interpretation of such 'leaving room' is not just in the length or shortness of an actual libretto text – but is a tacit nature of the writing itself. It is an echo of Auden's wariness of too much 'interesting detail'.

In poetry, an individual poem's relationship with 'space' is commonly thought to be based around its relationship with the white space that surrounds the poem: the margin, the gaps between the stanzas, the length of the poem itself. This is understood to be a conversation with the silence that surrounds the utterance of the poem.

For the libretto, there has long been a consciousness of this same relationship between the text length and the usually much greater length of the performed piece.[39] However, this should not be the only way we understand 'space' when it comes to the libretto. Space, for Malouf and Auden, and for myself, is also a concept that should be understood in terms of the relative density or otherwise of the actual text that is written.

Auden, in the section above, with his versions of the same song shows how even when he is given more 'space', more syllabic room, he is unwilling to pack the song anymore in a way

[38] Walter Bernhart, *Essays on Literature and Music (1985 - 2013) by Walter Bernhart*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 357.
[39] Ulrich Weisstein, *The Essence of Opera* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1969), p. 9.

that might step over into the space allocated for the composer. Further evidence of a prolonged belief in such a principle can be read in a letter written to A.E. Dodds about his later libretto for *The Bassarids*: 'Am so delighted that you like *The Bassarids*[…] As you can see, the "poetry" has to be pretty bare in order to be set to music.[40]'

Two things stand out in this brief note. One, that Auden puts inverted commas around the word poetry. I think this small gesture cuts to a great deal of the tension that surrounds the writing of libretti: it is both poetry and not. Poetry is the closest description to what is libretti-writing, and, as has been shown, the two acts share a number of established techniques. However, the second point of note is Auden's assertion, much in line with my own, that there is a need for bareness, as Auden would call it, (lack of line density, as I would term it).

To return to David Malouf, there is an excellent exchange between himself and composer Michael Berkeley in *The Financial Times* (June 2000). Having worked together on the adaptation of *Jane Eyre* from novel into an opera, both make claims on the basis of what we might understand to be the musico-literary relationship:

> [Malouf:] "If the libretto were to fulfil the dramatic qualities of the piece or already to present fully what is there, there would be nothing for the music to do. It should be the bones, leaving something unstated. It's a little piece of moral discipline," he concludes with an air of self-effacing virtue. "David's very good at being spare," his collaborator acknowledges. "I throw myself at things so it's good to have to work to a skeleton. No fat on it. It leaves you wanting more."[41]

There is an elegant suggestion here by Malouf, that the libretto functions as the bones of the piece. And functions this way as a necessity, since otherwise 'there would be nothing for the

[40] W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of Auden, Libretti 1939-1973*, edited by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 681.
[41] Martin Hoyle, 'Jane Eyre's Bare Bones Made Flesh: Charlotte Bronte's Novel Has Been Turned into an Opera, Financial Times, June 2000, (para. 20–20)

music to do'. The libretto text must, in their words, be a skeleton, with no fat, no excess, no totality.

"Real poetry", to return to Auden's description, is about richness and detail. It is about creating a self-contained structure. The word 'stanza', the unit of the poem, literally translates as 'a room'. The libretto, by its nature, goes against this. It is, as Malouf jokes, 'a little piece of moral discipline' where the poet withholds their full scope for the benefit of the completed work.

Returning to my own libretto, a recurring theme throughout the project was interrogating the question of what a poet specifically can bring to the act of writing libretti. While there is a history of poets working well in the opera genre, there is also a history of playwrights writing successful libretti and also of composers writing the texts for the own work. The relationship of the writer of the text to the text itself, and more generally of the text to the music, has elicited a number of almost polemic statements. Famously, we have Mozart's summation of the text's relationship to the music, when he called the libretto 'the music's obedient daughter'.[42] Less famously, but important to our study since it is from one of the first books to tackle the subject of the libretto as separate from the music, Patrick J Smith's *The Tenth Muse, A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* makes a wildly oppositional claim for the importance of the libretto:

> The librettist therefore cannot be considered merely a word-smith stringing out lines of mellifluous verse; he is at once a dramatist, a creator of word, verse, situation, scene, and character, and – this is of vital importance – an artist who, by dint of his professional training as a poet and/or dramatist, can often visualize the work *as a totality* more accurately than the composer.[43]

[42] Sabine Lichtenstein, *'Music's Obedient Daughter': The Opera Libretto from Source to Score* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), p. 2.
[43] Patrick J Smith, *The Tenth Muse, A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1970), p. XIX.

Smith, trying to define why a poet might be especially successful in the field of libretti, strives to place the primary skill in an ability to see 'a totality', the whole movement of the whole piece and how it connects. This, I do not believe is a sufficient explanation of the situation.

Across this chapter, I have sought to show that the poet can (and must) make use of their craft when writing for a Verse-Drama libretto. There is a need for emotion-imbued writing condensed into small forms and phrases. There is a need for memorable turns of phrase that go beyond their limited word-span. There is a need for flow and rhythm. But there is also a need to tailor these skills. And, there must be an acknowledgement that this is a different type of poetry. One that is not wholly resident in the domain of literature – but one that must be aware of its impending transformation. As librettist David Harsent argues: 'My view is that the libretto, before it's set, is waiting on the music. Once set, it's transformed – part of the piece – opera, oratorio, song cycle – which is a different thing to be differently judged.'[44]

The poet-librettist must understand this component of the work: the waiting for the music. The intermedial approach offered by the Austrian Centre for Intermedial Studies in Graz is one that highlights and gives onus to this very fact. One that rescues the libretto from the previous accusation of being the poorer cousin of literature. The libretto, instead, is an art when in text-form that understands itself on the cusp of transformation, a transformation that must be considered in its own creation. In terms of how this manifests in my own writing, it is worth giving one example from this recent collaborative project.

Midway through my own libretto, after discussion with the composer, we felt that there was an opportunity for an interesting tonal and stylistic shift. In a story about a young man's desire to be elsewhere, we had the idea of him listening to a radio and that this radio's song might reflect something of the scattered, fragmentary nature of the character's desires. That, in a sense, its dipping in-and-out of reception and clarity might reveal the character as someone who is himself torn and unrooted.

[44] Guillemot Press, 2020, *Salt Moon: Philip Lancaster Interview David Harsent.* <https://www.guillemotpress.co.uk/news/2020/10/3/salt-moon-philip-lancaster-interviews-david-harsent-67dee> [Date accessed: August 2022]

This was the dramatic sense of the piece. However, this specific song also displays a number of examples of the creative decision-making we have analysed above. The song in its presence and in its construction, perhaps more than any other song in the libretto, is very much about 'leaving space' for the musical component, it is about leaving aside the detail so that there is just the bone framework for the music to 'flesh out'.

Here is the section from the libretto:

> *Coll ignores her – and the radio plays louder*
>
> **Radio Song** – *I imagine it as a strange almost disconcerted, distorted song. A sort of shifting mirror into which a main character sees the image that they want to see. While to everyone else it appears unclear or alternative. It is shifting and liquid with perhaps the lyrics overlapping each other.*
>
> Need. Brightness. Taste the…
> Overflowing… And silver…
>
> Grapes and… We made figurines
> from the wheat. Lips kiss and… Endless.
>
> Silk and pearl and… insurance is more
> important now than ever…. wild fire. Osiris welcomes…
>
> Thorn. Pure roses and… luck…
> order now to receive your... Ice flow and dance…
>
> and – *This is the first night of the rest of your*…
> This is it... Skin and breath and…

In the mention of Osiris and also the mention of making 'figurines from the wheat', I am self-consciously trying to echo T. S. Eliot's reference to the rites mentioned in Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), nodding too to *The Waste Land*'s own dislocated, shifting text. With additional sections mentioning more mundane matters such as insurance and prosaic pop song mantras ("This is the first night of the rest of your…") I wanted to jumble the religious with the secular and the secular with the more mundanely capitalist. Woven through it all was a texturing sensualism: "silk", "pearl", "pure roses", "ice flow and dance".

If such were the ideals of the song then I should also note that I was aware that it might only 'function' successfully by its transformation into song. The words alone are a jumble (by design); they pull in competing directions and struggle to cohere. Space, though, is left for the composer and their music to bring unity (and transcendence) to the song.

Writing this specific piece, like Harsent, I felt conscious (freed, even) by the knowledge that the text was 'awaiting music'. Such writing, however, does require a fundamental trust from the librettist: that the composer will make good on the space provided, that they will achieve a coherence, add the layers of flesh, that the librettist consciously withholds.

In Irene Morra's essay 'Outstaring the Sun', mentioned in chapter one, she falls into the position of viewing the librettist and composer as forming fundamentally an antagonistic relationship, with each one reduced to their portion (words or music) and vying for the importance of their contribution. J.P.E. Harper Scott makes a similar claim about Morra's study, *Twentieth-Century British Authors and the Rise of Opera in Britain*: 'So [Morra's theory is]: composers and librettists have their own personal, irreconcilable views on the literary source of a given opera, and these are presented antagonistically in a work that cannot satisfactorily be appreciated as a whole. Twentieth-century British opera therefore exhibits classic signs of a modernist fragmentation at the level of the genre itself. It is a striking theory,

though not one I find uniformly persuasive'.[45] In many ways, on a practical level, this project has been about understanding the symbiotic relationship that the words-music functions through.

The librettist makes room. The libretto's verse awaits the music. The poet-librettist, especially, needs to be conscious of shifting the mode of their writing. It cannot be 'pure poetry' or 'real poetry' – it must make room and trust the music to fulfil its portion.

However, while this dynamic is a valuable ideal to hold, I believe that it will also be useful to our study to probe further into the general power-dynamics that are often at play in the librettist-composer relationship.

If this chapter has been about signposting an underdeveloped nuance between the shift a poet-librettist must make in their writing to accommodate the 'oncoming' arrival/connection with music, then it should also be useful to look away from the power-dynamics on the page and interrogate the wider dynamics of the collaboration (historical and in my own project) that accompanies the creation of an opera such as our own.

[45] J. P. E. Harper Scott, 'Twentieth-Century British Authors and the Rise of Opera in Britain. By Irene Morra'. *Music and Letters*, Volume 90, 3 (2009), pp. 495–498 (p496).

Chapter Three

The Librettist in the Collaboration

> We found Forster huddled in his overcoat over a dying fire, glacial, disgusted, enraged, and inconsolable. To me, as his college guest, he was chilly but polite. To Britten, he was outrageous: he spoke to him like some low-class servant who deserved to be whipped. Then he stalked off into the night to his lodgings, a King Lear facing the oncoming storm with no Fool to keep him company.[46]

Eric Crozier, co-librettist along with E. M. Forster, gives a colourful portrait of the working relationship between Forster and composer Benjamin Britten as they collaborated on the opera *Billy Budd* (1951). Alongside this vignette, Minou Arjomand, in his essay 'E. M. Forster's *Billy Budd* and the Collaborative Work of Opera', interrogates something of the likely tension in the collaborative process when it comes to writing opera; a process given all the more friction since, for the broader public and musical community, the collaborative piece tends to only have one acknowledged creator: the composer.

[46] Minou Arjomand, 'E. M. Forster's Billy Budd and the Collaborative Work of Opera', *Theatre Survey*, 51 (2010), p225–45 (p.225).

Even Arjomand's essay title is a slight poke at this convention, reframing the piece as belonging to Forster while describing throughout the essay examples of Forster's continued frustration that all publicity for the opera only ever ascribes its creation to Britten.

It will be the former element, the practicalities of operatic collaboration, rather than the latter facet of public perception, which will be the focus of this chapter. Leaving aside how the public often fails to properly acknowledge collaboration, I will look at the actual collaborative experience of a librettist working with a composer, furthering the study of the librettist's role and function by analysing how such a collaborative spirit manifested itself in my own project.

The dynamic of the collaborative relationship between librettist and composer in many ways is an extension of the general 'conversation' surrounding the creation of an opera: how much is this a collaboration between equal parties, and how acceptable is it that the seemingly dominant component (the music) can and should hold the greater sway? When Mozart writes that the libretto should be 'the obedient daughter of the music',[47] what implications does this have for the role of the librettist?

This chapter will not aim from the outset to give a definite answer to such subjective propositions but will aim to add to the conversation by two means: firstly, outlining and analysing a historical precedent of a librettist-composer collaboration in a way that could give further scope to our understanding of such a working relationship. For this, Auden and Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* serves as a useful template for a number of reasons: the success of the final project, its relative wealth of surrounding criticism and, as importantly, the available letters and correspondence exchanged between the parties that offer an unparalleled insight into its creation and how the collaboration functioned.

With the focus on Auden, and reference to an overarching collaborative framework, I want to go beyond the mere fact that these two artists (along with Chester Kallman) created a piece

[47] Sabine Lichtenstein, *'Music's Obedient Daughter': The Opera Libretto from Source to Score* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), p. 2.

of art. I want to outline a model for *how* they worked and what the implications of this model were for Auden's creativity inside the project.

The second aim of this chapter, turning to my own practice, is to analyse the complications inherent in my own opera project. Utilising the case-study of Auden's work with Stravinsky, I will look at points of similarity and divergence, how my creative work was fostered or inhibited, while also aiming to offer a 'best practice' of how I would aim to aim to structure any future collaborative project.

This second point, across its different elements, is of importance because, in part, its answer has implications not only for the librettist-composer relationship but also has ramifications for this template of a 'joint-collaborative-PhD' – since this additional dynamic did, I will argue, cause additional complications that could be said to have altered the standard power-dynamics of the relationship.

Collaboration and Historical Precedent

Before turning to Auden's famous collaboration with Stravinsky, it would be valuable to outline something of the frameworks that I have found useful in understanding the mechanics and the power-dynamics that come to underscore any collaborative project, but especially those in the artistic/creative sphere.

A useful model for thinking about the practicalities of collaboration is presented in the work of Sam Hayden and Luke Windsor and their essay 'Collaboration and the Composer: Case Studies from the End of the 20th Century'.[48] While their study has a focus on the relationship between composers and musicians, in many ways a simpler model since it revolves around the single medium of music, I see two particular insights into the collaborative process marked

[48] Sam Hayden and Luke Windsor, 'Collaboration and the Composer: Case Studies from the End of the 20th Century', *Tempo*, 61 (2007), pp. 28-39 (p. 6).

out in the essay that can be transferable to our study of the librettist-composer relationship in the making on an opera.

The first element that we will look to draw on is in more effectively codifying the different varieties of 'working together'. Here, Hayden and Windsor propose three varying degrees of synchronicity between the working artists: **directive**, **interactive**, **collaborative (proper)**. I add the additional description of '**(proper)**' as a means of highlighting its different meaning compared to the more generally used term 'collaborative' which the essay will show comes in different models.

Directive, in Hayden-Windsor's case, is a model where the composer assumes a hierarchical position and, in their case-studies, gives demands to the musicians. Here, they withdraw from a collaborative ideal towards one where the composer is solely in control and all other parties are subject to this composer's vision. Such a creative-dynamic is, of course, the most uneven in power terms but not to say the least valuable. This approach has the benefit of a single, unified vision that the project can work towards – and this directive relationship does not necessitate friction, as one might assume, if all parties are aware beforehand that such will be the structural basis of the project. However, of all the varieties, it makes least use of the available knowledge and expertise of all parties involved.

Interactive and **Collaborative (proper)** models stand in varying degrees of opposition to the directive position, each offering their own set of possibilities. The **Interactive** mode of working, as Hayden and Windsor summarise, is "discursive and reflective, with more input from collaborators than in the directive category, but ultimately, the composer is still the author".[49] Such a model benefits from drawing knowledge and experience from outside the natural limit of the sole perspective of the composer. However, there is the potential for tension if the 'included view-points' do not feel sufficiently listened to – since the ultimate judgment of worth still resides solely in the hands of the composer.

[49] Sam Hayden and Luke Windsor, 'Collaboration and the Composer: Case Studies from the End of the 20th Century', *Tempo*, 61 (2007), pp.28-39 (p. 6).

Finally, the **Collaborative (proper)** method. This model differs in that it is understood to not be the main authorship of any one individual person but rather it belongs to the efforts of the group, with creative control and decision-making shared between the parties. To return to opera, the benefits of such a dynamic could be summed up by E. M. Forster's reflection to Benjamin Britten on the completion of *Billy Budd*. Despite their related tension during the creation of the opera, Forster feels such a dynamic has inherent benefits, since: 'You and I have both put into it something which lies deeper than artistic creation, and which we both understand. I could never have got there but for both of us.'[50]

Collaboration, in such a scenario, offers the theoretical transcendence of the individual talent. The completed project becomes more than either one of its authors, though it is clear that the process comes with the potential for conflict if one author does not feel that the other is giving their ideas/input the importance it deserves. Without the hierarchy of the interactive model, where one party does have control, there is also the potential for prolonged stalemate or grievance.

It is so important to outline these three main models of collaboration because, despite the creativity of an individual project, so much of collaboration comes down to just such interplay between positions of power in creative decision-making. Finally, now that these modes have been outlined, there is still one further paradigm that should be taken into account, neatly summed up in the work of Chris Argyris and Donald A Schön.

In their book, *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*, Argyris and Schön, when looking at collaborative models, make a distinction between Espoused Theories, the ideal or imagined course that the process or project will follow, and the Theory in Practice, the actual course that the project follows and the real basis by which the partnership functions. Hayden and Windsor also pay attention to the implications of their arguments:

> [Argyris and Schön] suggest that poor collaboration often arises where the two [Espoused Theory and Theory in Practice] are significantly different. If one

[50] E. M. Forster*, Selected Letters of E. M. Forster. Ed by Mary Lago and P.N. Furbank* (Glasgow: Collins, 1985), p. 246.

> claims, for example, that one wishes to take on board aesthetic ideas from a performer, in addition to technical feedback, and yet acts in a way that is resistant to such a widening of scope, then collaboration is unlikely to be easy, since the performer will be frustrated by what he or she perceives to be a contradictory working context. Similarly, the performer may say that he or she is happy with having only technical input, but may act in a way that reflects a dissatisfaction with such a limited technical role.[51]

To summarise, not only is the collaborative model important (**directive**, **interpretive**, **collaborative (proper)**) but what is also vital for the smooth-running of any endeavour is that the model is decided on towards the outset of the project – and – applied in practice. Tension is likely to be manifoldly greater if, for example, a **collaborative (proper)** model is suggested as the framework of a project but in practice a **directive** hierarchical model takes shape.

For opera, already fraught with centuries of tension between the words/music and the intrinsic value of each author (librettist and composer), there is a heightened potential for further antagonism if, mid-project, the dynamic is altered from the prescribed course.

Now, having given space to outlining the methods and degrees of collaborating, it would be valuable to show a practical example of such methods in practice. By this means, I can better frame my own experiences by offering points of similarity and divergence.

Espoused-Theory and Theory-in-Practice – in Practice

W.H. Auden, by dint of writing not only the creative content of his libretti but also theoretical essays showcasing the reasoning behind many of decisions, offers an invaluable and insightful viewpoint when analysing a collaborative process between librettist and composer.

[51] Sam Hayden and Luke Windsor, 'Collaboration and the Composer: Case Studies from the End of the 20th Century', *Tempo*, 61 (2007), pp.28-39 (pp. 2-3).

In 1947, Igor Stravinsky was looking for a librettist to work on a project he had envisioned concerning William Hogarth's engravings *The Rake's Progress* (1735). Encouraged by Aldous Huxley, the librettist that Stravinsky turned to was W. H. Auden, and by that autumn they were meeting to map out the dramatic shape the opera might take.

While operatic history has *The Rake's Progress* as a collaboration between Auden and Stravinsky (with Auden's then lover Chester Kallman completing the trio), my interest is in demarcating exactly what *type* of collaboration underpinned this project. My assertion, returning to the potential protypes offered by Hayden and Windsor, would be that, rather than a fully collaborative (proper) project, the Auden-Stravinsky model took more of an interactive model (favouring the power position of the composer, Stravinsky).

As well as displaying why I understand it to be the case that Stravinsky's vision took precedence, I will also show how Auden was to find room for his own creativity, questioning the certain confines that this creativity functioned inside. Furthermore, in line with the ideas of Espoused Theory and Theory in Practice, we will see that Auden not only accepted this interactive model from the outset but that he would also argue for the value of just such a framework being the ideal when it came to the writing for opera.

*

Looking over even the early correspondence between the two artists, it is clear that Auden was inclined to give Stravinsky the more prominent position when it came to organising and designing the opera. Roger Savage in 'Making a Libretto: Three Collaborations over *The Rake's Progress*,[52] is eager to note Auden's willingness to cast himself in a supportive rather than an equal partner in the conception of the libretto. For Savage, and it is an argument that I agree with, 'Auden in a serviceable and deferential mood… seems, at first anyway, to have adopted

[52] Savage, Robert, *Opera Guide 43* (London: Overture Publishing, 1991), p. 49.

the attitude of a skilled and solicitous midwife, tactfully and cannily drawing out and moulding the composer's own long-standing theatrical obsessions…'[53]

Thinking of the directive and interactive models for collaboration, where the 'main author' of an art assumes a hierarchical position of authority over the participants, it is interesting to read the first exchange of letters between Stravinsky and Auden in the early autumn of 1947, just before their first in-person meeting which would take place November of that same year. In his opening letter, Stravinsky immediately takes initiative by setting out in a number of ways the initial loose dramatic structure. In this letter he asks (orders?) Auden to:

> Prepare a general outline of The Rake's Progress. I think at the moment of two acts, maybe five scenes (five [i.e., three] for the first act and two for the second act)… After the outlines is completed, I suggest you prepare a free verse preliminary for the characters (arias, duets, trios, etc), also for small chorus… make it as contemporary as I treated Pergolesi in my Pulcinella. As the end of any work is of importance, I think that the hero's end in an asylum scratching a fiddle would make a meritorious conclusion to his stormy life. Don't you think so?[54]

There is something of the do-to list evident in this letter. Auden must prepare a general outline, to Stravinsky's specifications; Auden must also prepare the characters, but while this might insinuate a modicum of autonomy, Auden must make reference to Stravinsky's own earlier work. Stravinsky has also already outlined what he sees as the end-point for the drama and the characters: the asylum (this ending is retained in the final opera). It is to this position that both structure and character must move towards, a point I will make reference to later in this section under the light of Auden's own creative autonomy.

As mentioned in the opening to this chapter, I do not want to make a value nor a moral judgment on what model of collaboration that any project commits to. There are benefits and drawbacks to all varieties, and tensions (following the Argyris and Schön argument) most

[53] Savage (1991), p. 49.
[54] Stravinsky to Auden, October 6th 1947, in *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence Edited and with Commentary Robert Craft, Vol 1*, ed Robert Craft, (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 299.

commonly arise when there is a disparity between the espoused collaborative model and the one that is manifest in practice. Auden, we can see in his reply to Stravinsky, has few qualms about the position he is being asked to adopt. Again, since it is better to get the sense across, I quote from the letter at length:

> [As] it is the librettist's job to satisfy the composer not the other way round, I should be most grateful if you could let me have any ideas you may have formed about characters, plot, etc'
> You speak of a "free verse preliminary". Do you want arias and ensembles to be fully written in free verse or only as a basis for discussing the actual form they should take?
> I have an idea, which may be ridiculous, that between the two acts, there should be a choric parabasis as in Aristophanes.
> I need hardly say that the chance of working with you is the greatest honour of my life…[55]

Throughout his reply, Auden cedes almost all creative control to Stravinsky: ideas on characters, plot, the formal considerations of the libretto's own poetry (free verse or actual form), all are pushed back onto Stravinsky. Indeed, twice in the short letter, Auden, as Roger Savage describes, positions himself as the 'admiring junior partner'.[56] The collaborative dynamic even borders on the directive since Auden positions himself wholly as the compliant subject: 'it is the librettist's job to satisfy the composer not the other way round…'[57]

Auden's one suggestion, the choric parabasis in the manner of Aristophanes, is not followed up on. In fact, this idea would only be realised in one of Auden's later projects, this time with Hans Werner Henze, a project where Auden (finally) took the greater creative ownership: see

[55] Auden to Stravinsky, October 12th 1947, in *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence Edited and with Commentary Robert Craft, Vol 1*, ed Robert Craft, (London: Faber and Faber, 1982) p. 299.
[56] Savage, Robert, *Opera Guide 43* (London: Overture Publishing, 1991), p. 47.
[57] Auden to Stravinsky, October 12th 1947, in *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence Edited and with Commentary Robert Craft, Vol 1*, ed Robert Craft, (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 299.

his insistence that Henze (against his will) sit through a Wagner opera to get the sense of the musical outcome that Auden desired for their opera *The Bassarids*.[58]

As mentioned, there should be no creative or moral judgments on Auden's willingness while working with Stravinsky to defer to such a model that relegated his decision-making capacity. Though it is only an opinion, I would go so far as to understand Auden's preference for this dynamic in context of the relative failure with his first attempt at opera, the collaboration with Benjamin Britten on *Paul Bunyan* (1941). Perhaps we can understand that Auden, beginning this project with Stravinsky, is relieved to cede such a large amount of the responsibility that comes with control. Though this, again, is only conjecture.

Whatever his reasoning, Auden's willingness to understand himself as having embarked on a project where he is the compliant party is evidenced not only in the work and correspondence, it is also in his theoretical writing. Indeed, in these works we do not get a defence of such a position so much as a championing of it as a model of best practice in operatic collaboration:

> The verses which the librettist writes are not addressed to the public but are really a private letter to the composer. They have their moment of glory, the moment in which they suggest to him a certain melody; once that is over, they are as expendable as infantry to a Chinese general; they must efface themselves and cease to care what happens to them.[59]

True or not, practical or not, this is *not* the language of full, joint-ownership and joint-worth collaboration. Auden's is a theory that, rightly or wrongly, prescribes a collaborative model that is lopsidedly in favour of the composer. They, the composer, become sole arbiter of what is kept and what is discarded; the librettist must 'cease to care', must accept such decisions. For Auden and Stravinsky, there was no danger on this project of the Espoused Theory

[58] W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of Auden, Libretti 1939-1973*, edited by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 679.
[59] W.H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 473.

diverging from the 'theory in practice', to return to the language of Chris Argyris and Donald A Schön.

From first letters to later drafting (see chapter two for Auden providing Stravinsky with the option of five different versions of the same song, each with differing syllable counts, for Stravinsky to choose which best suited his vision for the scene) there is an understanding that the greater creative control must always rest with Stravinsky, and that Auden's writing is in his service.

As part of expanding this study, I want to delve a little into the implications that arise from such a model. Firstly, and to rescue the project from the accusation that it might better fit a directive model since so much of the earlier evidence has shown Stravinsky dictating his desires, it is clear that Auden (and Kallman) did have elements of creative control in the writing of the project. Indeed, for Auden and Kallman, themselves an interesting collaboration inside the collaboration, there is plenty of evidence in the story and character-songs themselves to show how much room for creative licence there might be.

One example is the creation of Baba the Turk, a bearded lady who Rakewell marries in defiance of the world, which can definitely be traced back to their initiative, rather than Stravinsky's: 'the day that Baba the Turk was born and named, we [Auden and Kallman] both laughed until we could no longer stand up straight'.[60] Auden also mentions his freedom in certain passage to be more unrestrictedly creative: 'In the choruses, where the words aren't so important, I can fool around with fancier meters…'[61]

Such snippets highlight how the creation of the opera was not purely directive, with Stravinsky controlling all parts, the librettists working fully under his orders. There is a clear interactive element, where ideas are exchanged, decisions are made by the librettists, even if these decisions are under the overall control of Stravinsky.

[60] W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of Auden, Libretti 1939-1973*, edited by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 626.
[61] W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of Auden, Libretti 1939-1973*, edited by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 580.

A further letter written by Auden to Stravinsky towards the beginning of the project gives ample example of Auden's willingness to proffer ideas of his own. Written in French (I include my translation below), the letter shows both the readiness of Auden to offer ideas – and also, his willingness to offer such ideas predicated on the understanding that it was down to Stravinsky to accept or decline such creative suggestions:

> Cher Igor Stravinsky,
>
> Memo. Act I, Sc. I, Je crois que ca sera mieux si c'est un oncle inconnu de l'hero [sic] au lieu de son pere qui meurt, parce que comme ca la richesse est tout a fait imprevue, et la note pastorale n'est pas interrompue par le [sic] douleur, seulement par la presence sinister du villain. Enc e cas, la girl possedera un pere, pas un oncle.
>
> Etes-vous en accord? Je tiendrai silence pour Oui,
>
> Wystan[62]
>
> [Memo. Act I, Sc. I, I think it will be better if it is an unknown uncle of the hero [sic] instead of his father who dies, because that way the wealth is quite unexpected, and the pastorale note is not interrupted by the [sic] pain, only by the sinister presence of the villain. In this case, the girl will have a father, not an uncle.
>
> Do you agree? I will be silent for Yes [I will wait for your yes].
>
> Wystan]

In his reply, Stravinsky, maintaining his position of authority, accepts Auden's reasoned improvements: 'OK for the uncle of the girl now becoming instead her father and OK for the father's death of our hero to be replaced by his uncle's death…'[63]

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[62] Auden to Stravinsky, undated letter [early November 1947], in *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence Edited and with Commentary Robert Craft, Vol 1*, ed Robert Craft, (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 303.

[63] Stravinsky to Auden, 25th November 1947, in *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence Edited and with Commentary Robert Craft, Vol 1*, ed Robert Craft, (London: Faber and Faber, 1982) p. 303.

While it is important to be able to more accurately frame Auden and Stravinsky's collaborative relationship, and here we have shown that Auden was willing to accept Stravinsky having a more authoritative role in their project, I also want to assess the implications that such a dynamic has for the librettist.

In this study, that aims to offer further insights into the challenges of the role, it is not enough to say that such an interactive collaboration, readily agreed upon and worked through, was how they worked. It is also important to probe into the ramifications of such an interactive model where overall structural decision-making is overseen by the composer. This complication can be summed up as the tension between the points at which the 'creative actions' of the librettist are asked to fit inside the prescribed overarching outlines of the main party's vision. An example will make this clearer: following the initial correspondence with Stravinsky at the outset of the project, Auden is said by Alan Ansen to have summarised the initial outline of *The Rake's Progress* as thus:

> There are to be seven characters – three men and three women, in addition to the hero. I think I'd like to connect it with the Seven Deadly Sins. The hero, of course, will represent Pride, the young girl Lust, I think… The final scene in the madhouse… I'd like to treat as a coronation service… The girl turns up in the final scenes. I don't know what I'm going to do with her. In the last scene I want the hero to stand alone. But what am I going to do with the plot?[64]

That Auden understands his collaborative method with Stravinsky as interactive can be seen in the number of his own ideas even in this short section: the characters and the seven deadly sins, the coronation, the hero standing alone. We really get the sense of Auden's mind in these moments as bubbling with potential avenues for metaphor and layering. However, my main interest lies in three of the last four sentences: 'The girl turns up in the final scenes. I

[64] W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of Auden, Libretti 1939-1973*, edited by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), pp. 579-580.

don't know what I'm going to do with her,' and perhaps more significantly: 'But what am I going to do with the plot?'

Initially, at the outset of my own project, reading this extract I misinterpreted the sentiment of Auden's 'But what am I going to do with the plot?' as an extension of Auden's misadventures in *Paul Bunyan*. In Auden's first libretto there is little dramatic structure and almost no sense of thematic coherence. *Paul Bunyan's* libretto is flighty, various, disordered, sometimes excellent but mostly muddled. And, I read Auden's uncertainty with the plot as representing something of the same flaw: a focus on the individual actions of a libretto (verse, line or song) and a lack of care and attention with the overarching structures that do not come so naturally to a poet (plot, character, narrative arc). However, having gained further experience in collaboration, I believe my instinctive reaction is a misunderstanding of Auden's situation. Rather than it being a disregard for centring the plot, I think we can understand in Auden's remark something of the inherent tension when the interactive model is used in opera/libretto and the composer has (too?) strong ideas on the structural form the opera's narrative should take. Earlier in this chapter, we have Stravinsky writing to Auden in their first correspondence: *'As the end of any work is of importance, I think that the hero's end in an asylum'*. In this same letter, Auden is also told that the story should be structured around five scenes (three in first act, two in the second). Here is the difficulty. Auden is, of course, given an element of creative licence but the larger framework is already set.

'Write a plot for an opera, with free reign' is a very different prospect to 'Write a plot for an opera where the main character, a man, ends up in an asylum; it should be done in three acts'.

This second scenario is the predicament that Auden is constrained by. The librettist in such a situation has a certain licence, a certain freedom, but with the collaboration being weighted towards the side of the composer there are also set limits and challenges produced by the order. Stravinsky set that the character must end in the madhouse; now Auden must work that imperative as an anchor onto his freedom. And this is to say nothing of the need to adapt Hogarth's original works into a coherent narrative.

Auden's cry of 'But what am I going to do with the plot?' makes sense given such a dynamic. In poetry there is a certain truism that when writing the poem, the poem must guide itself. If the poet is too self-conscious of their own designs it will stifle the creative result, inhibiting the unusual turns that a free poem might take. For the libretto, especially in such a partnership as Auden and Stravinsky, there is little allowance for this. For Auden, he was aware from the first exchange of letters where the endpoint of the drama would take place.

Collaboration, as seen in Auden and Stravinsky, is a much more complicated interplay than might generally be assumed. The challenge this poses to the librettist is too often underappreciated.

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Expanding from this analysis of a historical example of operatic collaboration, I will move to analysing the collaborative principles of my own project, examining how these changed throughout the project. Beginning such a study is daunting since it is concerned with offering a single subjective perspective on a multi-person collaborative endeavour. There is a risk, too, to being open about what I understood to be my predicament. However, two factors encourage me that it is right to progress in such a manner: firstly, this thesis has been about bringing attention to the role that the libretto holds inside the opera and also seeks to better represent how the librettist functions, with the aim of casting light on an underappreciated role. An honest perspective of such challenges, that expand past the page to the actual mechanism of how the work is produced in the collaboration, adds to this ideal of building knowledge.

Secondly, and following from the insights of the essay 'The Scattering Light: Shared Insights into the Collaborative and Cooperative Processes that Underpin the Development and Performance of a Commissioned Word', I find common ground in their assertion that this reflective re-living of the project is a complicated but legitimate way of broadening the scope of the conversation around artistic collaboration:

> Josselson (1995) reminds us that 'we live life forwards but we understand it backwards' (p35). This chapter presents the findings of a retrospective participatory investigation of the development of a work for piano quartet from commission to premiere performance. As such, it constitutes a retrospective participatory case study that aims to 'understand backwards' the processes of creative collaboration and collaborative creativity in this setting. Retrospective studies have the advantage of providing a complete view of a phenomenon from conception to conclusion.[65]

My own attempt to 'understand backwards' will also entail an element of 'understanding historically', as I will aim to compare my own position as librettist to equivalent historical examples, since I argue that many of the predicaments of this project are not entirely a result of this particular project but can be understood to represent something of a standard, (natural), dynamic inside a librettist-composer relationship.

To begin, it will be important to give a summary of how the collaboration was initially conceived.

This collaborative project was envisioned as trialling a new type of doctoral research, one that replaced the format of an individual person's private research with an interdisciplinary, collaborative structure. There was to be a joint creative-project with each party augmenting this with a study of their own that would stem from the shared, collaborative work. Added to this composer-librettist collaboration was the further element of the completed opera being performed by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra.

That the final project was to be performed by the orchestra was a huge benefit to the prestige of the opera but did come with complications in terms of the orchestra size and potential length of the piece: it would not be feasible to ask for a full orchestra to perform a two- or three-hour opera, for example. Because of this, the original parameters of my libretto were

[65] Margaret S. Barrett, *Collaborative Creative Thought and Practice in Music* (Farnham: Routledge, 2014), p. 21.

to allow for a potential 90-minute opera with up to four main characters and a further four side-characters. Here, it is important to also mention a further impact on such a multi-faceted, collaborative project: the Covid-19 pandemic. As well as having implications for how we worked together, the pandemic (its rules on gathering and group numbers) also necessitated a scaling back of the initial imagined scale of the opera. We were encouraged by our supervisory team to re-frame the opera as a 45-minute opera with ideally two main characters, only. Since this is a chapter focusing on collaborative process, I will leave commentary on how these alterations were challenges to plotting and drama until the next chapter where I have a direct commentary on the creative work. For now, I want to focus solely, reduced scale or not, on how we set out to create the finished opera.

The first decision to be made was what/whose story we wanted to tell.

To return to the useful terminology of Chris Argyris and Donald A Schön, our 'Espoused Theory' was to commit to a fully collaborative project, collaborative (proper). There was to be no hierarchy in the manner of Auden and Stravinsky. As a means of implementing this, when it came to choosing the story that we might write we agreed that each of us could suggest ideas of their own and from these we could decide together on one that we would pursue towards completion. However, it was during these idea-forming months that the first complication arose in our model.

After each submitting a number of potential outlines, my collaborator outlined that she wanted a story that rejected conceived societal structures and made it clear that she would prefer not to set certain character-types and situations for political reasons. This was a particularly difficult concept for me since I would argue that the lyric poem, as I understand it, is weighed down by no such considerations.

Much in the same way that I argue that Auden was asked to be creative within the confines of what was allowed to him, I already felt that the collaborative theory espoused at the outset was altering and felt that my own creative freedom was being stymied. But where Auden, as shown, had accepted Stravinsky's authorship from the beginning, I feel that this change was a fundamental alteration of our collaborative model.

Here is a good place, I think, to outline what I see is a danger to any collective endeavour as it is imagined inside a collaborative project linked to obtaining an advanced qualification: in a usual creative relationship there is the allowance that the project will fail. In such instances, both parties, understanding that there are differences, might go seek other parties to work along with. However, because this creative project was intertwined within a doctoral project and all its associated funding and prestige, it becomes a less straight-forward proposition to split.

Now partly removed from it, and understanding more about the dynamics inevitably involved in a collaboration, and conceding that the composer will have their own points of stress, I put my frustration with the project at that moment down to discovering that the pre-agreed lack of a hierarchical positioning between myself and the composer had been altered. As much as I empathised with my collaborator's political standpoint, I felt that our differing positions complicated our project on two fronts: their insistence on setting limitations (as I saw it) on the narrative and characters went against the collaborative principle that began our project, where no one opinion was greater than another. Further to this, the determination on foregrounding considerations that were not related to art, narrative or character, went against what I see is a fundamental of art: that it should be as free as possible to offer an un-impelled exploration of the human life. In those moments I saw our divergence as a misalignment of the primary concern. Whereas my composer seemed to focus on the 'construct' of the project, how its structure reflected or agreed with their principles, my concern was more with the content, and in creating/finding a coherent, engaging story.

Ultimately, were this a project not tied up with both livelihood (funding) and education attainment (the doctorate), this is where ordinarily I would have ended the partnership.

At this point in the project, feeling stymied in my quest for creative expression, I now see the collaborative (proper) ideal being replaced with an interactive model. In such a scenario, I was free to proffer ideas but more and more I felt that authorial control now resided with the composer.

In her study *Creative Collaboration*, Vera John-Steiner adds a further complication to our previously described models of collaboration with the introduction of the term: cooperation.

Cooperation is itself a positive term, and John-Steiner draws it from the discourse of William Damon and Erin Phelps around the differences between collaboration and cooperation in peer education.[66] 'Cooperation' can be understood as where multiple parties work together but, within this overall project, each party commits to the completion of separate tasks, while 'collaboration' is the completion of tasks that 'neither could do on their own prior to the collaborative engagement'. Put succinctly: cooperation, then, is working together with the ability to separate the tasks inherent in this 'working together', while full-collaboration is the working together in a manner that cannot be divisible into aggregated tasks.

John-Steiner particularly in the essay 'Joined Lives and Shared Work', contained within *Creative Collaboration*, used such definitions when analysing the work of historians Ariel and Will Durant. I found this section on the two individuals working together on a single project (the completion of the series of books looking at the history of civilization) of particular relevance to the evolution of our own project:

> At this stage, the pattern of their interactions can be thought of as cooperative. The participants in cooperative endeavours each make specific contributions to a shared task. However, their level of involvement may differ, as well as their sense of intellectual ownership of the resulting product.[67]

I feel that, despite the initial ideal being to work within a collaborative framework, that at the moment these creative strictures were imposed on the storyline that our project moved to becoming interactive (the composer assuming an overall decision-making role). Augmenting this, in many ways, the project also began to resemble a cooperative rather than collaborative relationship, with the understanding that with the storyline chosen (by the Spring of 2020), I

[66] William Damon and Erin Phelps, 'Critical Distinctions among Three Approaches to Peer Education', *International Journal of Educational Research*, 13, 1 (1989), pp. 9–19
[67] Vera John-Steiner, *Creative Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 13.

would temporarily withdraw to write a first version of the libretto that we could then work at redrafting together.

This withdrawal to the basis of 'specific contributions to a shared task' mentioned by John-Steiner particularly resonates. As does the diminished sense of intellectual ownership. In many ways I put my own willingness to withdraw to writing the libretto in seclusion to a desire to reinstate a modicum of creative control with the aim of renewing this sense of having intellectual ownership inside the project.

It should also be noted that this story draft was in no way to be seen as a 'final text' but rather it was to be considered a 'starter text' from which we could better orientate the libretto our project needed. In the preceding months we had made little to no progress on settling on an idea. Setting a 'starter text' was then to be a method of having something concrete around which to base our conversations: what in the libretto we did or did not like, what we accepted or rejected.

First Draft of Rainmaker Libretto and Further Evolution of the Project

Even now, I can sympathise with my own desire at that moment to mentally reorientate the project on cooperative grounds: where, with the story decided on, I would withdraw to write a version of the libretto and, after a joint redrafting process, to assess, redraft, and, once finalised, then pass this off to the composer to perform their own allocated task. The pandemic protocols around meeting made such a structure seem even more natural since, with all group gathering prohibited, any meeting to more actively collaborate on the content of the libretto would have needed to have taken place over phone or Zoom. However, such a collaboration at a distance was not ideal for this project, and Zoom had not yet become a 'naturalised' mode of everyday working.

This decision, however, I now understand to be a mistake for two particular reasons. Firstly, the idea that by writing this libretto I was fulfilling an individual, isolated task was fundamentally misguided. Such an envisioning of the structure sees the movement of the finished libretto into a vocal and orchestra score to resemble a baton-pass: the librettist begins and completes the text and then passes the finished libretto on to the composer who begins their work, moving the project towards completion. Such an imagining sees the project as divisible into two linked but isolated actions. But they are not separate tasks but rather a single unified task with a through-running thread. The ability to be cooperative rather than collaborative (in any version) was a mirage.

The second issue, complicating the fact that any withdrawal from the collaboration could only be illusionary and temporary, was that (as outlined in the first chapter concerning Verse-Drama and Sung-Play) due to the lack of a means of describing the potential shape and style of the libretto, I wrote the libretto without the knowledge if its inherent form fitted in any way with my composer's own vision. We might have agreed on a story – and agreed a scene-by-scene movement of the characters – but we had not been able articulate the tone, style or tradition that the libretto might commit to. The result: having taken three months to write the libretto, and given a further two months to attempting to redraft it to better fit the composer's vision, the libretto was discarded and we set out on writing a second version. The reason given for needing a full re-write, a complete start-over, is particularly relevant for the interrogation of power-dynamics in the making of an opera. The composer argued that *they could not hear the music in the piece*. I found such a framing of the problem interesting as it struck me as a critique that again placed the authorial position in the composer's domain. They were to be the arbiter of a text's musical worth and without their approval, their subjective 'hearing of the music', then there was an impasse from which the only option for the librettist was to facilitate the hearing of the music by making changes along the lines of the composer's suggestion. There is never the potential for a librettist to argue: Well, I *can* hear the music in it.

This formation of the second version of the libretto saw an entrenched realignment of the collaborative principle of the project based around two specific moments that I think are worthwhile relating.

From the outset of this second version, I was given a much stricter structural brief to follow. The first version of the libretto, as related, having been subject to narrative strictures, this second version was to follow this specific format as a means of the composer more fully controlling the pacing, structure and location of songs:

- One page dialogue
- One song (solo) – no more than 12 lines
- One pages dialogue
- One song (of a different tone/nature) – no more than 12 lines
- Two pages dialogue
- One song (duet) – no more than 18-20 lines
- Two pages dialogue
- Final song (solo) – ending the libretto – no more than 12-16 lines

I was to be asked to re-frame our previously agreed storyline within this structure but also to be willing to provide page-by-page submissions for approval. Within this section-by-section writing, there was one further point of conflict that reflects on the collaborative principle's deterioration.

For the third song, the duet, now to be imagined as the mother and son characters singing different interpretations of the previous 'radio song', I had aimed to display the character of the son as being a reckless (but relatable) character. Coll's character was to be defined by his current *lack*. He was living on a farm in the middle of a drought – he was also living alone with his mother – when imagining the dreams that haunt him, I saw him as someone desperate for excess, as if to make up for his life of seclusion. He would not want merely to eat – he would want to order a feast. He would not want to live a regular life – but rather one of excess

conflict, love, sensations. He was someone, as he saw it, with nothing but who wanted more than might sate himself.

I wrote this following song for him:

Coll:

I hear the sound of wine poured out
Of plates being smashed and night-time shouts
I hear the sound of speeding cars
And blood like thunder inside my ears

I hear the sound of hard desire,
Wildness spreading like a new struck fire
And me walking down the dim lit street
Star and moon and completely free

To the girls I'll sing 'Hey there, love'
To the men I'll swing and punch in the mouth –
I'll drink and eat in sweet excess –
Not starve here lost in this hard desert…

As outlined, the aim was to allow Coll to voice his desires in a way that he seemed true to his character. I wanted these desires to be physically located inside his new promised world. He was to be allowed to sing of a world of 'speeding cars', 'wine poured out', the 'dim lit street', far away from the realm of the desert farm. Crucially, I wanted to have him sing himself engaging with it in a way that would ground his character and make him seem alive in his settings: 'To the girls I'll sing 'Hey there, love'/ To the men I'll swing and punch in the mouth…' A farmworker, I tried to give him the voice and desires of a farmworker.

However, the composer had an issue with these two specific lines quoted above. The composer felt that such sentiments brought him into line with the mindset of a sexual predator – and such being the case, a position that they could not envisage being able to set the music for.

Similar to the issues surrounding the discarding of the initial version of the libretto, what I find worthy of note here is the imbedded power of the composer to be final arbitrator since, the music following the text, they can withhold the musical component – refusing continuation until their preferred changes are made. The musical scores, by being the culmination of the project rather than the first action, gives the opportunity to the composer to say this 'I cannot'.

In the end, despite having argued for the character reasons for such lines – that they added a specificity of desire rather than falling back on generalities or vagueness – we again reached an impasse that required that I rewrite the given section. In place of the original lines, it was asked that Coll should instead sing these replacement lines:

Coll: I'll eat the forests and drink the moon…

I'll swill the oceans around my mouth.

Summary

Despite the complications involved in the creation of the libretto and its consequent opera, I also feel it is important to acknowledge the quality of the final opera that we produced, the success of which saw it performed to an audience of over one hundred people at the BBC Philharmonic studios in Manchester. I am also aware that in any creative project there is likely to be frustrations on both sides, and that this is both inevitable and natural.

Summarising my experiences of this project's collaboration is a challenge. And partly this is because, acknowledging its academic setting, I want to as much as possible leave out the emotional/inter-personal element and give onus to the larger shifting framework that underpinned the project.

My fundamental argument drawn from my experience, is not a dissatisfaction with the collaborative model that we ended up falling into. This model, that I would argue to be Interactive with the composer taking on the role of final arbitrator, has been shown to be very successful in Auden's collaboration with Stravinsky.

By aligning my own collaboration with Auden-Stravinsky, I sought to highlight that if there was a difference between the projects it was only in the shift (and its consequences) between our Espoused Theory at the beginning of the project and the Theory in Practice as the project evolved. What I think is fundamental for the understanding of why such a change can cause antagonism is that not only is there a forced realignment of the power-hierarchy but, more importantly, that this change can bring to light aesthetic differences and divergences in the artistic aims of the initially envisaged collaborative project.

Personally, I would place my grievances within the project as not being related to the relation of power that ended up being manifest in the creation of the libretto, so much as that the altered power dynamic revealed a divergence of artistic intent. Not only was I not able to shape the project I wanted to create – I also saw that the project I was being asked to create was not one that I felt connected to, nor being aesthetically representative of my artistic practice nor its principles.

For all future projects, the single important point, and the means by which I will choose to collaborate or not, will not rest on the type of collaboration. My understanding of such models remains as stated at the outset, that there are qualities and pitfalls to any of the models. I would, of course, encourage the model to remain consistent and not to alter to what has been agreed. However, the pivotal matter will be the sense of shared artistic vision. This aesthetic-alignment in the collaboration (be it in a model that is interactive, directive or collaborative (proper)), will take precedence because over and above a feeling of leading or playing the

significant role, what I have found during this project to be foundational is that I need to feel a sense that the work that is being created is something that I believe in, and something that shares not just my writing style but my own artistic values.

Chapter Four

An Autoethnographic Analysis of How the Thesis's Theoretical Groundwork had Practical Lessons for the Creative Practice

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, the initial intentions of this doctoral study changed and broadened from how they were envisioned at the outset. This is evident in the shift in focus of this critical component – its movement away from the specific attention on the role of the poet coming to write libretti (what a poet, adept in lyricism and form, might specifically bring to the art form that other practitioners could not) and towards a more encompassing overview of the challenges and misinterpretations that the libretto genre has posed not only for practitioners but also for its critical commentators.

Additionally, as well as this specific change of attention in the critical study, there was also an enlarging of the creative aspect of the project. The original remit was to write one libretto, and for this piece to culminate in a live orchestra performance – but, due to the challenges of the creative process and my own wish to endeavour to make greater improvements in the new genre (better expressing what I see as my own development and growing sense of achievement), three libretti have been written across the period of study: *The Rainmaker* (written at the outset of the project, and eventually discarded), *Drought* (written with my composer and constituting the main published component of our collaboration), and *The Praise Songs* (written as a solo undertaking towards the end of the doctoral project). I argue

that the importance of these three libretti are that they constitute three clearly definable embodiments of increasing control and technical understanding when it comes to my own progress in the libretto-form: *The Rainmaker*: an initial sketch, replete with muddled influence and application; *Drought*: growing technical proficiency but with the identifiable struggle of cohesion in the dramatic stakes' connection with the musical component; *The Praise Songs*: heightened technical control added to a clearer holistic approach to unity between its place inside tradition and its musico-dramatic and structural needs.

That same concluding paragraph of this thesis's introduction posited that this doctoral study intended not only to voice and define the difficulties for those being initiated into the libretto-form but that it would also offer both solutions and conclusions as a means of setting a foundational discussion around the art form. The progress and evolving control of the form exhibited between these three iterations of libretti allow a unique opportunity to chart just this movement from struggle and difficulty to practically-applied solution, and with a further progression towards, as I would argue, discernible realisation of the genre.

This chapter, indebted to the earlier theoretical groundwork, then, will concern studying and giving examples of this evolution, from misconception to solution to clearer sense of accomplishment, by identifying three key areas where there is most pronounced growth across the three libretti. Comparing the libretti, I wish to focus on what I see as tenets around which to base future practice in the genre:

1) the sense of cohesion allowed by a better understanding of the tradition that I was writing inside;

2) the clearer conception of song content and placement;

3) the intermedial elements, even going beyond music to ideas of staging, and a heightened sense of these implications and opportunities.

Taking such areas into account, the aim of this chapter then will be to highlight a best practice, as I would argue for it. This thesis is concerned with building a better appreciation of the librettist's work, so it is important to focus not only on the implementation of certain principles but also look at establishing a conversation around their practical application. Furthermore, considering the critique in the foreword of this thesis, that there are handbooks and guides to nearly every other writerly medium (from poetry, to novels, to plays and letter-writing), I will aim to offer a commentary on the reasoning behind my creative decision-making (especially when it comes to what each last libretto has learned from previous versions) since it is important to not just focus on the libretto as a product of technique and craft – but acknowledge that it is an art form that should also house a creative vision. Consequently, as a means to better describe and relate the experiences of both the process and the creative decision-making embodied across the three libretti, this chapter will more fully adopt an autoethnographic methodology, describing more exactly the personal conflicts and desires that went into the writing of the different pieces of operatic writing. This use of autoethnography finds its basis in the work of Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis, when they describe it as a methodology that centres around 'demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience'.[68] Like them, I see the value, especially in the arts, of such a method that enables 'deep and careful self-reflection' which will aid the exhibition of first-hand knowledge gained from creative practice.

Growing Fluency in the Verse-Drama Tradition

The first chapter of this thesis explained how a great deal of my uncertainty when attempting to write the first libretto involved my own complicated understanding of the vein into which my writing would fall. Prior to the outset of this project, I was conscious of opera historically being a balance of recitative and aria – where the recitative (less ornate, more grounded, more similar to prose) would generally progress the plot while the aria (lifted, lyrical, an

[68] Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 2.

opportunity to let a character's unsaid drives take hold) would allow characters the opportunity to stop and give voice to their emotional predicament – and that it was these 'numbers' (songs) that would serve as set-pieces for the opera. It was reading these different historical libretti and watching the respective operas that initially gave me confidence that there would be a compatibility between my own ability to write shaped, emotive poetry and the ability to transfer this to a libretto. A problem, of which I only later understood the ramifications of, was that the greatest proportion of available libretti are from much older pieces, with very little contemporary libretti being published or easily available.

Complications arose when I became better acquainted with contemporary opera, particularly the work of Martin Crimp. Investigating celebrated 21st century opera, it was hard to overlook the impact of his many collaborations with composer George Benjamin. Their *Written on Skin* (2012) was named in 2019 as *The Guardian's* second greatest piece of classical music of this century.[69] I found Crimp's libretti for *Written on Skin* and also for his other projects such as *Into the Little Hill* (2006) both fascinating: they possessed interesting dramatic arcs, unusual narrative devices – however – they showcased none of the usual hallmarks of what I had understood opera to be composed of: songs, verse, the balance of drama with melodic potential.

George Benjamin, Crimp's composer for both *Into The Little Hill* and *Written on Skin*, in a panel discussion for King's College London concerning the second of these operas, talked about some of this realignment in contemporary opera practice:

> Writing opera today is not like it was in the nineteenth century or writing in Puccini or Janacek or Wagner's time. The movies have come along, the 'speak-ies', and things have changed I think a lot. And I think most composers acknowledge this and some of the ways composers

[69] Andrew Clements, Fiona Maddock, John Lewis, Kate Molleson, Tom Service, Erica Jeal, and Tim Ashley, 'The Best Classical Music Works of the 21st Century', The Guardian, 12 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/sep/12/best-classical-music-works-of-the-21st-century> [Accessed on 6th June 2022] (para. 24 of 28)

> solve this problem is by not telling stories or even by having people not sing at all during operas.[70]

This break from the historical caused a number of problems with my conception of how I would write – none more so than the complicated position of feeling an aesthetic connection for my own writing with one element of historic or traditional opera (mainly situated in the past, and this compatibility with song) that was dislocated from the celebrated work of contemporary practitioners, further muddied by my own admiration for these practitioners.[71] A further example, beyond Crimp, of such opera would be *The Exterminating Angel* (2016) by librettist Tom Cairns and composer Thomas Ades[72]. Based on the Surrealist movie of the same name, this opera very much fitted with what I saw as the boldness of the Sung-Play's amalgamation of human drama and forceful music, where the forcefulness might give a further sense of importance and urgency to the action.

A consequence of this conflict is that both the discarded libretto, *The Rainmaker*, and the completed libretto for *Drought* display in their writing a similar sort of halfway house between the commitment to the Sung-Play's rejection of song, along with its desired representation of the psychologically real characters, and my own (perhaps poetically driven) desire for the slanted story-telling veering more towards fairy-tale with shaped, crafted moments of (musical) transcendence that might be better represented by a Verse-Drama style. This is an issue I will continue to explore here.

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[70] King's College London, *King's College London: Written on Skin*, online video recording, Youtube, 11 October 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r23J_23xxEs> [accessed 19 June 2022]

[71] It is also important to note what is one of the inherent complications of studying opera: the availability of historical pieces, the canon, which is almost wholly aria-recitative and the difficulty (and cost) of either attending or resourcing any more contemporary varieties that break from this tradition. Opera performances on DVD or through online streaming services such as Medici.tv cater almost solely for the former and include only the latter if already having achieved popular success.

[72] Tom Cairns and Thomas Ades, *The Exterminating Angel*, online video recording Met Opera Online 2016 < https://www.metopera.org/season/on-demand/> [accessed 2 June 2023]

To begin bringing in creative examples drawn from my own libretti, I want to show how this muddled influence displayed itself in practical terms. Complementing this study, I will also show how a movement towards my more harmonious commitment to the Verse-Drama style of libretti, and a movement away from the confusion, can most clearly be seen in a comparison of the three opening passages of my three libretti and how they tackle the central lack of realism in the main arc of the story, since as has been argued in Chapter One, realness (be it in character or setting) and how it is handled, is one of the central tensions between the Sung-Play and the Verse-Drama.

To look first at the opening to *The Rainmaker*, I will give some context for my decisions. This story I envisioned as a version (perhaps even a sequel to) 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin', and that famous poem by Robert Browning.[73] In this poem, a town has the problem with rats and a stranger (the piper) arrives promising that they can rid the town of its problem for a certain cost. Echoing this, the setting of my own first libretto was to be an Australian outback farm in the middle of a drought. The stranger, the aforementioned Rainmaker, was to arrive and promise that they, in a similar vein, could break the drought and make it rain if members of the community paid her. The libretto ended with an echo of the original poem, where the piper steals away the town's children, with the Rainmaker character encouraging the main character's son to run off in love with her.

I argue that especially in our turbulent political times there was interesting metaphorical potential in a such character who promises the impossible and asks you to believe in what you must know to be false. The piece was conceived and written during a period when internationally there were a growing number of populist figures: Bolsonaro in Brazil, Trump in the U.S. and Le Pen's close-run election against Macron in France. The Rainmaker as a character who promises a return to better days, days of less strife and more comfort, seemed one that would especially resonate with our moment. Such was the creative impetus behind the project.

[73] Robert Browning, 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin', in *Poetry Foundation Online* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45818/the-pied-piper-of-hamelin> [accessed 2 May 2023]

While I believe there was merit to the premise of the libretto, my own difficulties with implementing this idea are evident from the outset. This piece was written very early in the doctoral project schedule. There was a priority to quickly get the libretto to a fixed state since it was necessary for the libretto to be all but finalised before the composer could begin working on the musical component. As such I had not yet begun to think concisely of the different strands of operatic styles and what they might mean to the writing of a libretto. In such a critical vacuum, there is an evident mishandling of the genre, seen most clearly in the excessive word-count.

Wanting the piece to be both strange (a person believes themselves as someone who can control the weather, and might potentially be believed in turn by others) but yet also to situate the action in a version of a recognisable and believable world (to better help serve as a realistic political allegory), I ended struggling to unify these factors inside the requisite time constraints that the opera was to be performed.

Here, in the extract below, twenty-three lines alone are used at the outset in an attempt to accurately relate to the audience a situation where farm-workers might be desperate enough to trust a stranger who was promising that they could end the drought with nothing more than their own will:

> *Outside Australian Farm – the scene evokes a dryness – it is early but already it is getting hot. Dust lifts from each footstep. Their way of life, like an old empire, is failing, only the momentum and habit keep things moving. Charlie, a sheep farmer, showing all signs of weariness, is mid-conversation with a stranger who has arrived at her farm.*
>
> **Charlie**: You've seen the farm – our animals,
> stick thin, licking the sand;
> they see water where there's none,
> the dead one's stomachs are filled with stones.

Rainmaker: And isn't this why I've come;

I have an offer for you –

too long

this drought has scorched the land, too long

has burned down everything

– you've worked to the bone,

and no-one cares you are alone –

but, imagine, the grass long

again, the rivers flowing from

a hundred sources to a hundred mouths –

and nothing less than you deserve

just things your parents had – full troughs,

bright grain.

Charlie: And what it this to do with you?

Rainmaker: I'm here to make it real –

you work hard – but you need rain;

and this is what I'm offering:

wet ground – the troughs all filled –

a wet shirt heavy as an iron bell,

on necks and porches, on the hooks of barb-wiring…

This **first scene** of *The Rainmaker*, which involved just the Rainmaker offering their services and being refused, would go on to be around 430 words, around **a third of the entire final libretto** for *Drought*.

The excessive word count I see as stemming partly from failing to be aware of the duality of traditions that the libretto must at its heart choose between. My libretto for *The Rainmaker* did not want to commit to the 'unreality' of a situation – it wanted **the unreal made real**. In this first attempt at operatic writing, I was trying to portray a realistic back-and-forth of a conversation where one person is trying to convince another person of something, with different hooks and incentives being offered and rebutted. Faced with the uncomfortable unreality of the situation I had decided to make as my main plot, my own insecurity led me to attempt to write the story **into** believability, adding as much reality in terms of conversational pace and tone. The consequence was that the libretto ended up being twenty-five pages long and totally only slightly off 3500 words. A completely un-settable amount for a forty-five-minute opera. Even discarding all stage directions, the libretto demanded that, without pause or repetition or sections of unaccompanied music, one word would be sung every second for the entire forty-five minutes.

The main error of the libretto for *The Rainmaker*, then, is the belief that in opera there is the necessity (along with both the space and time) to write the concept of the libretto **into believability**. The mistake of *The Rainmaker* was to see the strangeness of the plot as an obstacle that needed to be overcome rather than a facet of opera that can easily be harnessed by the musical component.

The second libretto, *Drought*, by dint of its strict structure demanded by the composer, forced me into a situation where over-writing was impossible since each section was to be so strictly controlled. Here, for comparison, is the opening section of the second libretto, that includes the first section of dialogue up to and including the first song of the opera:

A large room divided into two sections. A kitchen with sink and long table. Over to the right side is a recreational (of sorts) area: a small cabinet with radio and an armchair.
Charlie is sat at the far end of the table – close to her on the far wall is the door to the outside.

Coll enters from his bedroom, through a door to the left handside. He is irritable since he cannot sleep. It is still dark – lamps are lit in the room.

Charlie is a greying farmer – but she sits resolutely, calm as a statue. Tiredness has not broken her.
Coll wears his age worse. He looks middle-age and beaten by it.

Coll: My mouth is full of dust –
I close my eyes and I can feel it –
Dust. Grit. Sand. Falling on me.
Damn the drought.
I need to leave.

Charlie: We want rain, first – remember that.

Coll: *(dismissive)* Yes, Yes…

Charlie: That first – nothing else.

Morning's not far off.

Coll: (taking a seat at the table)
Then it is breakfast time –

(Turns over his plate and picks up the cutlery)

Shall I close my eyes? Will that help?
Or what about this:

Begins rhythmically beating his hands on the table and hitting his cutlery together

Mother bring the wine; Waiter bring the feast;
Don't spare the cost – bring all of it.

(Opens his eyes)

Mother, you haven't moved. (looking down at his plate)
Nothing – nothing again. Nothing always.

Charlie: Nothing's what we've got. Eat it. Drink it.
Do what you want – it's all we got.

Coll: Ah, this old chestnut. (Kicks back from the table)
Make do, eh? Make and mend, eh?

Mum, that's not for me – thank you for the meal;
You stay – I'm gone.
I'll tell you what – you can have my future share of meals –
Make a feast – nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. *(Pointing at the empty plates on the table).*

Charlie: You are not going – you know it

and I know it.

And more than that – you know I need you here.
This is not a one-person life out here.
It would fall apart.

Just shut up…

(gesturing to sit back down at the table)

Come here – just try to close your eyes,
remember, remembering, the drumming sound
of downpours in the daylight.
No thirst – or want – just the thrilling soak –

drip, drip – it filled the feeding troughs
and filled the wells.
Drip, drip – you worked in it,
shirt as heavy as an iron bell.

Drip, drip – drip, drip – you were so happy then,
cassia and wildberry at our ankles,
light on your back – and the rain will come again.
Be patient – want less – give it time

Coll: Drip drip – Is this water torture?
Drip drip. (mocking) It wasn't anything like this.

On the face of it this second libretto has an improved directness, launching into the story and situation of its world in a much quicker manner: Coll and Charlie are struggling to make a living from the drought; Coll is already growing resentful and Charlie attempts to calm his desire for change by looking back to an ideal to which things might return, a recollection that Coll rejects, pushing him further to a point that he might actually make a change and leave the farm.

I will write in the next section about the missed opportunity of Charlie's song in relation to musico-dramatic tensions, but purely in terms of concision and impetus, I feel this passage displays growth in my own level of proficiency. It is less insecure and has made a number of strides towards competency. This opening is not as static as the opening of *The Rainmaker* – in that libretto, the rainmaker character despite all the allocated time had only made an offer that was rejected, leaving the situation almost completely unchanged and the stakes and central plot still mostly unclear. In *Drought*, however, there is the proficiency to more succinctly outline the world and its logic, to clearly signpost the main narrative drive of the main character and how this is in tension with the second character: Coll has come to the realisation that he wants to leave, Charlie argues that if he does then the farm will fail: 'This is not a one-person life out here/It would fall apart.'

I would argue that from the outset of the libretto there is more drive and less of the stasis of the scene-building in *The Rainmaker*. Coll clearly articulates his desire to leave, and we can see that the libretto will likely move toward the denouement of him accepting or going back on this resolution.

However, while there are improvements, there remains some lingering distrust of the Verse-Drama capacity to carry the unreal and uncanny. On the face of it, the libretto – included in full in the Appendix – is a libretto of a young person's choice to leave his home – it is about struggle and unfulfilled desire which harnesses a clearer sense of the Verse-Drama's use of recitative and aria to blend movement with moments of pause. However, returning to our argument about Verse-Drama and unreality – where *The Rainmaker* aimed to solve the unreality by overly grounding the situation in psychologically real character actions

(hesitancy, doubt, back-and-forth argumentation), the flaw of *Drought* is that, despite more fully committing to the recitative-aria/dialogue-song structure of the Verse-Drama, it solves the problem between the unreality of Verse-Drama versus the real-world of the Sung-Play by avoiding the unreality rather than by directly facing it.

In the (rushed) planning stage of the libretto, the outback farm was to be a more complicated setting than it arguably appears in the finished libretto. Coll's stakes of 'leave the farm or stay' are small and low-key for opera – and the idea came that the farmhouse was also to be a kind of purgatory where he would be re-living a defining part of his life – the moment when he made the significant choice that led to his life's downfall – and that each time he opened the door and re-made the decision to leave he would be forced to re-live this choice again and again until he made a different decision.

There is still evidence of this concept in the last lines of the final aria:

Coll: …Oh god, am I being pulled back – to do it all again.
No, give me rain. Please no, give me rain.

Rain, his desire for it, was to symbolise his own inner drought as well as the one consuming his farm. I can sympathise with those who read the libretto or listen to the opera and are surprised that this supernatural element is a facet of story since there is so little work done to centre this as an overt premise of what is unfolding. I put a large proportion of this down to the fact that while I had grown more comfortable with the commitment to the Verse-Drama's use of song as a central tenet of its composition, I also felt a continued discomfort with anything that veered too far from regular depictions of life – see, for example, Coll's first instinct in *Drought's* libretto is to look towards breakfast, a strange focus on his body and the needs of his physical self in a libretto intended to be about the afterlife of a soul trapped inside a repeating void.

If the first libretto for *The Rainmaker* tried to solve the problem of unreality by over-explanation, then the second libretto, this time in *Drought*, aimed to solve the problem by avoidance, leaving the unnatural elements so unvoiced that they are barely discernible.

There is a concrete change in the construction of the project's last libretto, *The Praise Songs*, and how it tackles inhabiting a manifestly unrealistic world. However, before quoting directly from the libretto, I would like to reference two quotes from Seamus Heaney from his time as Oxford Professor of Poetry that I found especially useful when beginning to write the third libretto. The first of these quotes is Heaney channelling W. B. Yeats: 'the will must not usurp the work of the imagination'.[74] This felt a particularly important commitment to make when considering the earlier libretto's struggles between wilful imposition of ideas versus organically manifesting creativity. In Chapter Three of this thesis, I made reference to an overarching feeling of imaginative constraint caused by my collaborator's insistence on certain extra-artistic wishes (avoidance of character types and relationships) and have stated how this inhibited my own freedom when tasked to then create the libretto. 'The will must not usurp the work of the imagination' became a mantra of having all decisions made inside the libretto (character, plot, song) having their primary concern to be committing only to the internal logic of its people and setting. My own will, my own politics or desires for characters to do commit certain actions, was to pull back as much as is ever artistically possible.

The second quote by Seamus Heaney that helped to recommit to how I intended to write libretti going-forward stemmed from Heaney's own mantra for writing his poetry: 'the poem exists to be itself'.[75] What does this mean? For one, there is the echo of the earlier quote and the self-creating nature of the poem; the poem must only be concerned with itself and not any outside influences of the writer's or some shadowy sense of the public when it is being composed. The poem must have the strength to be autonomous. Furthermore, I read the line and felt something else about the differences between the arts: the poem must not exist to be an essay or a play – it must exist to live by its own foundational rules, however we

[74] Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 4.
[75] Seamus Heaney, 'An Afternoon with Seamus Heaney', *HoCoPoLitSo*, 20 Janaury 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpdzarVGOfs&list=RDLVe87nqv9PiLA&index=5 [10 April 2023]

understand them. As can be seen in the extracts from the previous libretti above, not all blame for their failure to fully achieve what they might can be said to be the consequence of the uneven balance in decision-making between myself and the composer: there was also my own hesitancy and lack of confidence when trusting the libretto to carry anything beyond real depictions of life was almost certainly also a factor in my struggles. These quotes of Heaney, then, were to serve as an affirmation that my intention was to commit fully to the conception of Verse-Drama as a place of unbridled creativity, as a place where the world was able to be depicted unbound to historical or temporal rules.

Again, it is in the opening of the libretto that we can understand how the piece tackles the world in which it situates itself. Here is the opening section of *The Praise Songs*, a piece inspired by Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*:

Scene 1

The stage is demarcated into two sections. On the right is a king sitting on his high chair. All day, as has been ordered, each citizen has come to sing the praises of his rule. As his accolades are sung, he nods his head – in the silences as the citizens come and go, his body slumps again into boredom.

The day is wearing on. From the left-side of the stage, a new citizen, a small brown-haired man, has entered and begins to sing his master's praises.

Citizen: High king – the setter of our feast;
gold coin in an age of brass,
he brought the trains to the underpass,
first iron, closed mouth, man of grace.

(King Offa lulled by the singing – looks up, surprised, when it stops.)

King Offa: I like it well enough. But it
is short – was there nothing else?

(*The citizen is panicked by the rebuke.)*

Citizen: There was! Please, please, forgive.
I didn't want to waste your time –
there were a million things to say,
but I…

King Offa: Shhhh, I forgive – but next time you are called
Do not be so meagre. Sing me better.

Did I not build the shopping mall?
Am I not a hawk, wide wings, bright talons?
Am I not a moon, that holds your darkness?
Next time, remember, mention these…
It would be wise. Now go.

(Citizen leaves – Hill, a further citizen, arrives. He is middle-aged, unremarkable. Evidently nervous and unsure of how the position he has found himself in.)

King Offa: Even listening to my praise
is tiring – you are last today –

be worthy of such position.

Hill: Sire, could I…

King Offa: Sing! This is not a conversation.

Hill: Small mouse, I know his shadow's length; (*All sung awkwardly*)
we, servants, hold our breath until he's past
he built the skyscraper out of glass,
and gave his name to this countr…

King Offa: Stop!
What is this? Is this a joke
to lay such small coins at my feet?
And if I bite them are they copper
or brass or coins of dirt. You insult your king.

These are the very first lines. Before them there is no build up. No moment before the first song where the character, about to sing, comments on how strange the situation is in a way that might give both character and situation a sheen of realism, or even acknowledge the strangeness of the king's desire. No character complains of hunger or a poor night's sleep.

Instead, it trusts, as Irene Morra argued, that the music will bridge any such gaps in the logic.[76] A king is asking people to sing, such is how it is. Notice also that the comfort in the unnatural

[76] Irene Morra, 'Outstaring the Sun: Contemporary Opera and the Literary Librettist', *Contemporary Music Review,* 29 (2010), pp. 121–35 (p124).

scenario extends, too, to the realm of wider world itself: 'Did I not build the shopping mall?/ Am I not a hawk, wide wing, bright talons?' The king, along with his kingdom, exists in an unreal world that seems to blend the feudal imagery and convention (the praise songs themselves blend the imagery of hawks, recalling such medieval hunting parties with other images of completely contemporary design, such as in the reference to the shopping mall).

I would like to make one further point regards committing to the ideal of Verse-Drama and the consequence I felt on using it as a basis for the libretto. The idea requires the sharing of one further section from the last libretto. Here, in the passage below, is the last main action of the last libretto. The main character, having previously decided that they were to rebel by singing the truth about the king's cruelty, arrives in court to see his family stationed beside the ruler. Rather than rebelling, fearing for his family's safety, he becomes obedient and chooses to debase himself by singing in praise of the king:

Hill: Family. Do not think less of me.
Even though I will be less.

(*Begins his song)*

Overlord and architect.
Guardian of the true stone bridge
And all that follows under it.
You do no wrong – our one, true king.

Saltmaster, guider, friend to us.
Father, here in your stone house.
You break us for our betterment.
You do no wrong – our one, true king.

(*Breaks down and weeps)*

King Offa: I liked that. Such depth. If it
was a bow it would have touched the earth.

Hill: Please. King, sirs. With all respect.
I want to leave. I want to go
where there are no songs. Let me hold
my wife and son. His skin is white
and she is shivering – I'm done,
I have finished. Let us head home.

King Offa: Citizen. You have a voice!
And do you know that I was right:
this stone's blood has the sweetest taste.
Your song, such sweetness, such freshness.
And you thought you couldn't sing
your own king's praises!

Hill: I sang your praises.

King Offa: And I liked it. Now, sing it again.

[Ends]

When composing the ending to the libretto, I felt that here too the implications of the choice of Verse-Drama tradition had creative consequences that went to the heart of the arguments of real characters or committing to their unreality. In initially envisioning the libretto, I had a vague idea that, this being a tragedy, the main character would die at the end. Opera tending to focus on points of high emotional impact, usually love or death, I saw this having the consequence that this opera would pull towards the side of the spectrum marked *death*.

Nonetheless, here particularly I felt the impetus of both Seamus Heaney quotes that I referenced earlier in this chapter: that the libretto would create itself – that the ideal is always in the will taking a lesser role so that your function as creator becomes to feel for the pull of where the piece instinctively wants itself to go. Here, despite my initial suspicion that the libretto would end with the main character's physical death, it did not feel a suitable fit for the close of the libretto. Indeed, the libretto's Verse-Drama nature, this unreality and songishness, seemed to discount the possibility of the 'real-world' likelihood that the main character would be physically killed at the end of the piece. It felt too simple. In many ways, **too likely** to occur, if this were a representation of the real world.

The conclusion that I came to was that since the Verse-Drama rejects the real world, it should also reject the conventional threats and punishments of this world. The real living body should not be the thing most guarded and most at stake – instead it should be some less definable part of the self; perhaps, as incongruous to the real world as anything might be, what might be at stake might even be the person's soul itself.

I would also argue that the final ending, so much more in line with the Verse-Drama, is a crueller, more visceral ending that one that might involve bodily death. If one were to imagine a second alternate ending that changed King Offa's lines to:

And I liked it. But now you will die.

Or:

And I liked it. But not enough to save your head.

In both cases there is a bluntness that is at odds with the libretto itself. It also robs the characters of agency since, sing or not, he is to die; this being the case, there is no sacrifice to make.

However, for the king to free the protagonist, to free the character of Hill, would also be anticlimactic – he shames himself and then he goes home? There was not enough *resonance* to such an ending. What I liked about the idea of forcing Hill to 'sing again' was two-fold. Firstly, it was a gesture that brought the libretto into a greater synchronicity with the poem that was its inspiration; 'sing it again' is also the closing lines of the Geoffrey Hill's poem.[77] Secondly, this way of drawing down the curtain on the libretto provides an ending without an ending. The opera was stopping but this scene was continuing to playout whether we witnessed it or not. How many times might the king repeat the line: 'Now, sing it again.' The main character shames himself once but the horror is that he must continue to do so but now with no further option to 'save' himself by refusing. I also think it better captures what brutality can be: the ability to imbue small almost insignificant actions with dread – and such an action brought to mind the testimonies of the Stalin-era Soviet Union where, after Joseph Stalin had given a speech in the parliament, all the delegates would stand and applaud but since no-one ever wanted to be the first to stop it meant that minute after minute might pass with each person petrified to cease.[78]

As I noted in the introduction, the aim for *The Praise Songs* was to improve on the two previous attempts by virtue of appearing more holistically unified as an artistic expression. In this ending, I think that holds true from a character perspective – the main character of Hill has a reluctance to sing because of what singing implies for his own sense of self – it will taint him – but not only does he sing but he will continue singing after the opera has ended.

[77] Geoffrey Hill, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 61.
[78] N, Skradol, 'Laughing with Comrade Stalin: An Analysis of Laughter in a Soviet Newspaper Report', *The Russian Review*, 68 (2009), pp. 26-48 (p. 46).

In summary, in the first chapter of this thesis, I argued that libretti can and should be categorised by creative decision-making rather than geographical or chronological considerations, where or when the libretto was written. The reason was that it acknowledges that *choice* is present in all aspects of the composition of the verse; the choice of what to depict along with the decision of with what level of realism to depict it; the choice, since space is always scarce in a libretto, of what to centre and what to side-line; above all, as I have argued, should be the choice of what tradition is being followed, Verse-Drama or Sung-Play, and how exactly one works within this choice.

I argue that the first two libretti written for this project suffered due to either an ignorance of such choices or an abnegation of such choices, particularly when faced with the latter of these concerns. In both pieces, there is evidence of refusing to weigh the positive or drawbacks of any option and so ended with desiring the individual librettos to be all things, a desire that went a long way to undermining their creative potential. It was only later, in the writing of *The Praise Songs*, that I better understood the trade-off between each stance (realism, unreality; believable dialogue, lifted lyrics) and was better able to create a stronger, more cohesive libretto. Similarly, in a historical context, I saw my own work as now more naturally standing as an evolution and continuum of earlier, mid-twentieth-century Verse-Drama works.

Re-Evaluating the Musico-Dramatic Considerations

On Wednesday 26th October 2022, our opera, *Drought*, made from my second libretto, was performed to a live audience at the studios of the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. Sitting in the audience, it was the first time I had heard the finished version and been given the opportunity to appreciate the exact transformation that my words (and drama) would undergo when making connection with the music. Listening to the opera unfold, I became especially aware of the rhythm of our particular libretto for *Drought*. As already summarised in Chapter Three, the composer asked that the libretto be manufactured to very specific considerations:

- One page dialogue
- One song (solo) – no more than 12 lines
- One pages dialogue
- One song (of a different tone/nature) – no more than 12 lines
- Two pages dialogue
- One song (duet) – no more than 18-20 lines
- Two pages dialogue
- Final song (solo) – ending the libretto – no more than 12-16 lines

Over the course of the opera, I was better able to understand my composer's wishes to demarcate this spacing between songs. Constructed in this manner, there is a rhythmic quality to the build-up prior to a song, culminating with the song itself, followed then by a renewed build-up to the next song, with this structure, with this pacing generally being played out from beginning to end of the opera. The recitative between the songs serving a double function: as a means of pushing the dramatic action, where the songs stop to signpost and elevate the emotional stakes, and also as a palate cleanser between the ornate songs.

From a musical perspective there is a satisfying rhythm to the opera when viewed in its entirety; the opera sways between recitative and song at regular intervals. Each song has been given its space to shine. But what I wish to focus on in this section is a broader point: the musico-dramatic considerations of the piece and how they, in retrospect, were not fully utilised in *Drought*. This chapter being concerned with improvements and principles around which to base future libretti, I want to outline what I see as the musico-dramatic problems with *Drought* and how the third libretto of this project served as a means to rectify these issues to better harness the songs not just as artistic expressions but also utilising these songs for dramatic purposes.

To begin, it is useful to consider the purpose of singing in opera. It is more nuanced than a simple display of beauty or musical expertise. Opera being a convergence of music and drama,

songs, arias, duets, all have the potential to function just as much as dramatic expressions as much as purely musical displays. In 'Performing Opera, A Practical Guide for Singers and Directors', Michael Ewans gives an explanation of what effects are in action during a character's song:

> When a singer is singing solo, the inflections of the vocal line normally portray the expressed emotions which go with the text – the character's uppermost feelings; the orchestra portrays inner feelings and thoughts which lie underneath those explicit surface emotions. The orchestra's role is to give depth to the overtly expressed feelings by illuminating the deeper energies behind them.[79]

The solo, through its words and the accompanying music, is an expression of the character's 'inner feeling' and 'thoughts which lie underneath'. The song is to 'illuminate the deeper energies behind [the character's expressed feelings]'. In all ways, then, the singing of a solo unveils this character to the audience – by dint of being party to both their expressed feelings and their inner drives, we are drawn into a better understanding of the character. This way sympathy, or empathy, can be generated. And, we are given an opportunity to be more invested in this character; knowing now their inner life, there is a chance for dramatic heightening since we should now care more about this character's arc, whether or not they achieve their goal or fall short.

When implementing my composer's structure, the four requested songs ended up being assigned in this order: 1) to Charlie (the mother), a song about an idealised 'better past' aimed at appealing to Coll and making him stay; 2) The Radio Song, envisioned as exhibiting a strange encroachment of the outside world into the small life of the isolated farm (this was also mandated as a chance for the composer to experiment with different musical styles; in the finished opera this is an electronic-style piece to juxtapose with the overall traditional/classic formulation of the music; 3) a duet between Coll and Charlie, where Coll announces his

[79] Michael Ewans, *Performing Opera : A Practical Guide for Singers and Directors* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016), p. 15.

desires and outlines why he wants to leave, while Charlie rails against him; 4) Coll's final song, where he is undone and sings both about his fear and his demise.

In retrospect, and after reflecting on Ewans's remarks, perhaps the single biggest missed opportunity when implementing the composer's wished-for song structure, and assigning who should sing where, was in having the libretto's protagonist (Coll) not singing until the midway point in the opera, and even in this moment it being a duet rather than a solo. An aria is a chance for a character to unburden themselves, to showcase to the audience their own particular world-view. It is a chance for the character to set out their emotional stance and set out the reasons for the behaviour. The importance of capitalising on such an opportunity can be seen across a wide variety of opera: in Auden's *The Rake's Progress*, the very first appearance of the protagonist (Tom Rakewell) has him singing in a duet with his beloved. Not only are we introduced to Tom as a character who is in love, and able to articulate this love in song, but the very act of his duet signposts to the audience the importance of Tom and Anne's relationship. Similarly, in *Nixon in China*, at the outset of the opera as soon as Nixon first steps foot on Chinese soil he breaks apart the formal procedure of the day, the introductions to various delegates, to launch into a song about his own particular worldview. Even as other characters try to interrupt him, he ignores them and continues to sing. Not only are we creatively introduced to Nixon's worldview through the *content* of his song – we are also introduced to him as a headstrong, egotistical character as we are witness to him brushing aside all other concerns but his singing of the moment. Lastly, and to show the historic principle for such considerations, in Bizet's *Carmen*, the title character is only on the stage a matter of seconds before her first aria; again, this aria is a vocalisation of her personality, her desires and perception of things around her, aiding the audience know with whom they are acquainting themselves from the outset.

Committing to my composer's structure, opening with a page of dialogue before the first song, I introduced my main character through recitative and dialogue. However, the one who is first able to offer a type of 'worldview' or display any properly envisioning 'inner drive' is not Coll, but Charlie with her song:

Come here – just try to close your eyes,

remember, remembering, the drumming sound
of downpours in the daylight.
No thirst – or want – just the thrilling soak –

drip, drip – it filled the feeding troughs
and filled the wells.
Drip, drip – you worked in it,
shirt as heavy as an iron bell.

Drip, drip – drip, drip – you were so happy then,
cassia and wildberry at our ankles,
light on your back – and the rain will come again.
Be patient – want less – give it time

The song *explains* her by showing facets of this inner life: flower names are mentioned (cassis and wildberry) showing her to have a connection with the natural world around her. She is shown as hopeful and emotionally alive: 'just try to close your eyes,/ remember, remembering, the drumming sound/of downpours in the daylight'. All the while, the character to whom we are meant to feel connected with has displayed none of such qualities. He is a closed book. We only have his exterior life: his complaints of dust and hunger. His dissatisfaction. We are not party to his inner life.

There are positives to how Coll is introduced: he articulates his dramatic impetus to leave the farm, he articulates his disappointment with his lot – he is dejected yet bitterly playful (in the reimagining of their kitchen as a restaurant) so we understand that here is someone ripe for action. However, I believe that if he had also been given the opportunity to sing then this would have made the audience more closely invested to his plight. Knowing him better, they would have been more moved by whether or not he would transform/escape his situation.

There is a clear change of priorities in the last libretto from this project. In *The Praise Songs*, acknowledging the value in giving the central character an early opportunity to let the character be aware of their inner feelings, I wove his song into his first moments on stage:

(Citizen leaves – Hill, a further citizen, arrives. He is middle-aged, unremarkable. Evidently nervous and unsure of how the position they have found themselves in.)

King Offa: Even listening to my praise
is tiring – you are last today –
be worthy of such position.

Hill: Sire, could I…

King Offa: Sing! This is not a conversation.

Hill: Small mouse, I know his shadow's length; (*All sung awkwardly*)
he built the skyscraper out of glass,
we, servants, hold our breath until he's past
his is different to other men…

King Offa: Stop!
What is this? Is this a joke
to lay such small coins at my feet?

For my part, I like the twist on the theme: Hill is being charged with 'singing the king' but, all the same, he is at that moment also singing himself. For the audience, Hill positions himself as 'small mouse' and 'servant' – he articulates his 'inferiority', showing his reduced scale by comparison both to the King's threatening shadow and his actions (building the glass tower). He also sings of his fear when in such company – 'hold our breath until he's past'. What type of man is Hill? He is not usually one to rebel – he is someone who waits for danger to pass, hoping not to draw attention to himself. Establishing this, giving Hill this moment to (almost inadvertently) display himself, means that when he does think of rebelling we see it as a growth, a change, a disturbance of his character. He goes outside himself when thinking to challenge the king. Consequently, when he fails, the failure is made more impactful: this is a person who would not normally do such a thing – but now, on the moment that he has entertained thoughts of rebelling, he has been caught, humbled and forced to degrade himself and repent.

If there is a difference between *Drought* and *The Praise Songs* and their handling of song, it is that in the former, song (specifically aria) is used too much as a purely musical manifestation. It is seen mostly as a means to be creative in terms of rhythm and form. The growth in the latter is not limiting the aria to musical/lyrical expression but tying it directly to the act of story-telling and using it as an opportunity to connect the audience with the central character. The lesson for future libretti is to make sure that song is never just song.

The Music and Beyond: Acknowledging the Points of Contact in Opera

This chapter, using the framework of my own writing's evolution, has sought to offer insights into how a successful libretto might be shaped. I have looked to display how a more comfortable and confident libretto might situate itself inside its tradition, and sought to cover and chart my enhanced understanding of musico-dramatic values in operatic writing to give a practicable example of the theory we have covered across the previous chapters. However, as a last point of focus, and as a means of extending this review of libretti beyond the general

relationship between words and music, I will look at one further element of operatic writing that enhances our perception of the challenges that comes with the role of librettist. To end, complementing the discussion of the intermedial relationship of the words awaiting the musical component, I will showcase the awareness that a successful libretto has that the piece being written is also likely destined for the stage and, in the construction of the piece, that there is a responsibility to take this further transformation into account.

As this thesis has sought to explain, too often the role of librettist has been reduced to putting words on the page, ignoring the complicated relationship between words, drama and music, and the relationship between librettist and composer. Further to this, this perception of the librettist has also failed to take into account the work the librettist does when considering the staging of the final opera into the initial drafting of the material. In this regard, I will focus on one specific element that falls within the librettist's control and whose improved application is discernible across the three libretti of my own project: the sensitive handling of scenery/staging and how, though not commonly acknowledged as an important facet of the librettist's work, it has a direct influence on the telling of the story.

This subject I feel to be a particularly useful extension of the thesis focus since these are matters not frequently touched on across in the academic literature surrounding libretti. Also, in a project that has sought to display the intricacies of a librettist's art, it adds an extra layer of nuance to the creative role of the librettist, since ease or difficulty of staging will directly impact the likelihood of any actual performance of an individual opera. The reasons for this are financial: in the case of the number of singers/characters required, there will be the associated cost of contracting large number of cast members, and, in a similar manner, excessively demanding scenery or scene-changes will impact the movement of props and the stagehands required to reset the stage between scenes. In both cases, excess is prohibitive – in both cases, also, the librettist can ease or complicate the transition.

One of the key aspects that stands out about the libretto of *The Rainmaker* is that there are seven staging changes needed across the short opera. The opera moves from 1) outside farmhouse, 2) to neighbour's shearing shed, 3) to outback desert at fence perimeter, 4) to a return to exterior of the farmhouse, 5) to deep outback desert, 6) to fire-strewn farm, 7) to

return to exterior of farm. In nearly every scene across the entire libretto there is a change of location. In such a manner, the staging is a problem that will require a solution. It is a hurdle that will need to be overcome. An opera company thinking of optioning the opera would need to consider this level of repeated stage-setting, bearing in mind also how many set-hands might be needed or how it might limit the stage-dressing to make such changes easier to manage. Staging has its own practical demands that a director must address.

As has been the case in most facets of the libretto's construction, there is an improvement in the libretto for *Drought*. The libretto is set in a single-space: the farmhouse kitchen; while the dramatic action of the piece unfolds in one continuous movement: there are no passages of time between the first lines of the libretto (when Coll wakes up) and its ending (when Coll opens the door). In the first section of this chapter, I wrote how *Drought* did not so much adapt to its relationship with unreality as avoid it, and in a similar manner I feel that while there are no errors in how *Drought* tackles its staging nor do I think it made the most of such opportunities that staging can offer a librettist. The libretto goes about its scene construction as if with the mindset of causing the least amount of friction: there are no time-jumps and no location changes. And while I feel there is no trouble, I also feel as though there is no unifying vision when it comes to the considerations of staging.

I was intent that in *The Praise Songs* that there would be a much more assertive interaction with the possibilities of how the characters could be represented on stage. As part of this, I looked again to the work of Martin Crimp, specifically his short opera *Into the Little Hill* and its premiere performance at the Opera Bastille in 2006.[80] The performance of this opera, itself an overt re-telling of 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin', presents just two singers on separate walkways – one singer represents all the townsfolk and the mayor, the characters of the human world; the second singer focuses on The Piper and elements of the narrative that feature him/her. In the performance, when a character is participating in the scene they walk forward and their walkway stage is illuminated, and they pull back to the rear of their walkway when not participating in the scene. The separate walkways represent the difference between

[80] Martin Crimp and George Benjamin, *Into the Little Hill,* Altoarchives, 24 November 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJQ96uag1IM> [20 May 2022]

the characters in their outlooks and morals: there is a literal gulf between them. The staging is elegant and symbolic in its simplicity. While elements of this vision will be drawn from the opera director, it is evident from the libretto for *Into the Little Hill* that Crimp has factored such a structure into its formation, his characters named 'one' and 'two' already embodying this interpretive split.

Returning to my thoughts on my own work, in his book *On Poetry*, Glyn Maxwell has an interesting passage on the synthesis of the successful poem: that it be an amalgam of 'solar, lunar, musical, visual' or as he also puts it 'prime meaning, resonant meanings, way it *sounds* sans meaning, way it *looks* sans meaning'.[81] It is particularly the first two on this list that my mind turned to when conceiving the staging of the new libretto: its solar or prime meaning (where it was staged as a physical place) along with its lunar or resonant meaning (its potential for metaphorical or symbolic representation).

For me, *Drought* by its simplicity can be understood to somewhat lack this lunar dimension, this second life. The house door especially is not given any potential second or resonant meaning. For *The Praise Songs*, I wanted to find a way of adding an extra layer to the performance that went beyond the words and impacted the non-verbal aspect of the opera. Here, with none of the actual character dialogue or songs, are sections from the stage directions of *The Praise Songs*:

Scene 1

The stage is demarcated into two sections. On the right is a king sitting on his high chair. All day, as has been ordered, each citizen has come to sing the praises of his rule. As his accolades are sung, he nods his head – in the silences as the citizens come and go, his body slumps again into boredom.

[81] Glyn Maxwell, *On Poetry* (London: Oberon Books, 2012), p. 26.

The day is wearing on. From the left-side of the stage, a new citizen, a small brown-haired man, has entered and begins to sing his master's praises.

*

(Citizen leaves – Hill, a further citizen, arrives, taking his position on the same side of the stage as the citizen has just vacated. He is middle-aged, unremarkable. Evidently nervous and unsure of how the position they have found themselves in.)

*

Scene 2

The king's half of the stage darkens – and only Hill's side is illuminated. Alone, at first, they seem frantic – but slowly a calm is restored.

*

Scene 3

Hill's half-stage turns dark. We leave their euphoria. The King's stage illuminated we see him asleep on the same high chair. He is plagued by dreams. He startles himself awake. He seems old – in turmoil from his reign.

*

Scene 4

The stage is set the same as before. The king to the right. His full stage is lit, he is waiting in his chair. Hill arrives – but there is someone else waiting, too. A further citizen, much the same: poor, a commoner. They stand ready to supplicate themselves before the king.
Beside the king are now two shapes – perhaps mannequins could be used, blank, faceless and bare – these are Hill's partner and child.

As shown above, the last libretto not only considers the metaphoric value of how the characters are represented on stage, apportioning them sides that displays their divergence, it also extends this handling to how the staging reacts to individual characters not being 'present' in the scene. Despite there being four different location movements (courtroom, Hill's room at night, King's room alone at night, return to the courtroom) all can be presented without any need to clutter or re-set the stage. I argue that the symbolic aspect of the staging actually makes the staging simpler rather than more complicated – the split stage, the use of lighting – all means that even the changes of location and turn from day to night scenes can be represented with no more than the brightening or dimming of lights.

The Praise Songs shows an improvement on the previous libretti, as it shows a consideration in even small details that might enhance the dramatic elements. Here, as a librettist, I feel that I show an extension of the art, away from just drama as an act of writing, becoming instead an act that goes past the words and better sees the opera as a relationship between music, drama/words and its staging. This small stage direction displays exactly this: *Beside the king are now two shapes – perhaps mannequins could be used, blank, faceless and bare – these are Hill's partner and child*. The use of mannequins serves both story and practicality. For story, they lean into the unreality of the piece, they are as real as we decide them to be, they are blank and haunting, extending this mood of the libretto. Furthermore, on a practical level, where the first libretto did not consider the changes of so many locations and all its needs, this libretto understands the second advantage of using mannequins: using them also

means that two further actors are not needed, simplifying the casting and the associated costs that two further actors with no lines and only a few minutes on stage would necessitate.

This third libretto, even in such small gestures, displays a more fully holistic understanding of the genre, that is able to harmonise the writing with the demands of the music and with the needs of the performed spectacle. In all ways, I feel that such observations highlight the capability to see the fingerprints of the librettists in elements that touch nearly all parts of the opera. Such scope and influence underpin this defence of the librettist as a partner in the creation of an opera.

Chapter Five

Thesis Conclusion

This doctoral project was an experiment. Rather than the standard format of an individual undertaking research in a chosen field, this assignment was to be a collaboration which brought together a composer and a poet as a first-time librettist to document how they would create a new opera. My own journey, as librettist in this collaboration, began with both excitement and confusion. Before the project commenced, I imagined my role was to assume responsibility for the written, textual work, that this would be my domain; whereas the composer, for the most part, would assume majority control of the musical element. There would be collaborative dialogue and we would begin by setting out a shared vision for the work, but it would be roughly along this framework that we would generate the opera together.

However, it did not take long to be faced with a complication in this conception of how an opera is created. Beginning to read around what little literature there was on the construction of libretti, I bridled somewhat at the stance that W.H. Auden, the main 20th Century voice on the subject of opera writing, took on the matter:

> The verses which the librettist writes are not addressed to the public but are really a private letter to the composer. They have their moment of glory, the moment in which they suggest to him a certain melody; once that is over, they are as expendable as infantry to a Chinese general: they must efface themselves and cease to care what happens to them.[82]

I hesitated when faced with Auden's quote, itself one of the most famous on the role of the librettist, because it went against all aesthetic considerations that I had built up so far in my writing life: for me the poem was to be created so that no part was expendable. The moment of glory, also, was exactly to be when it reached the public – the poem was to be the meeting of the writer and the reader across the lines of the poem. Further complicating the matter, and in many ways my main concern with his quote, was Auden's willingness to voluntarily reduce the role of the librettist to facilitator and support, rather than as equal partner. I was, even at the outset of this project, rather instinctively ready to 'defend' the position of the librettist and to try to give its role a more respectable onus.

The thesis was initially conceived as a means of offering an argument along the lines of what a poet such as myself, drawing from a lyrical tradition, might be able to bring to the art of libretti. Beginning the work, such an argument proved almost impossible since what was needed first, even before making this case, was a foundational argument constructed around how a libretto works. Indeed, my study began with the need of generating a defence of the art form itself. And, not only has it been the purpose of this thesis to detail exactly how such a defence should be articulated, it has also been the duty to outline exactly on what grounds the defence should be made.

This thesis has sought to imbue the work of the librettist with greater significance by outlining and examining the choices faced by the librettist. Creativity, across all arts, involves decision-making and it is by better acknowledging the librettist's choices, how they harness their role, that we can better showcase the value that a successful librettist can bring to their position.

[82] W.H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 472.

Previously, much of the dialogue surrounding the act of writing libretti has emphasised its inactive role: there is Auden's famous quote, there is also Mozart's assessment of the libretto being 'Music's obedient daughter'[83] (a position of being dictated to rather than one of assertion), alongside the extracts from Ulrich Weisstein's *The Essence of Opera,*[84] shared in the introduction, where the conversation between composers made sure to underplay the significance of the role.

My means of retrieving the integrity of the librettist's work has been to focus on three central aspects of the libretto:

1) The libretto as a product of interpreting and choosing between potential traditions, Verse-Drama or Sung-Play

2) The libretto as an intermedial art form, where the composition understands and makes room for the musical component

3) The libretto as a product of collaboration/cooperation, and how ideas of ownership might cause friction or undermine a sense of creative ownership.

The first aspect, between Sung-Play and Verse-Drama, has been shown to be the first main choice of the librettist as they begin the libretto. While there is a reasonable presumption that this is a decision primarily made by the composer, I have been able to show through comparison between my own libretti that the level to which the decision is applied will often lie in the hands of the librettist. I have shown in Chapter Four how in *Drought*, the opera performed as part of this project, though the framework was imposed almost wholly by the composer, that the means of its application still were a consequence of my own writing. And, I have also displayed, that it was only in the last libretto, *The Praise Songs*, that I was fully

[83] Sabine Lichtenstein, *'Music's Obedient Daughter': The Opera Libretto from Source to Score* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), p. 2.
[84] Ulrich Weisstein, *The Essence of Opera* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1969), pp. 362-364.

capable of understanding the freedom and responsibility of this first decision, and how it bore out in the 'songishness' of the piece and in its likely handling of its real or imagined world.

This first element had ramifications for the structure of a libretto, its use of aria and recitative, its placement of songs, alongside further consequences for the drama, and how strictly tied it needed to be to believability. The focus of the thesis presented a defence of the libretti based on its actual content, particularly the way it is written and how its lyrics are or are not comparable to poetry. Here, I argue, is perhaps the key insight of the thesis. Not content with the stance of the Austrian School's investigation of intermediality in finished pieces, I have strived to show that the intermedial aspect is a conscious element of the written composition as it is being written.

The librettist must be aware that the needs of opera are different to that of the poem and adjust their writing accordingly – as such there is a noticeable need to provide more immediate (less thoughtful, or intellectually over-stimulated) verse. The librettist must be immediate but balance this with an ability to be musical and impactful, to be crafted as well as felt.

That the lines are intended to be sung have ramifications for how much detail or information can be loaded onto them. Here, for the librettist, simplicity is best. But here too, it is a worked, ordered simplicity. It is a stance that reminded me of Baldesar Casteglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1588), where it argues: 'Accordingly we may affirm that to be true art which does not appear to be art; nor to anything must we give greater care than to conceal art'.[85]

For the librettist, the key is to work to make artistic endeavour appear simple. Here is where we must apply discipline and effort so that the lines can be graceful and effortless. The gap then between the poetry of the page and the poetic lyrics of a libretto are discovered to be

[85] Baldassare Castiglione, (2022 [1588]) The Project Gutenberg eBook of *The Book of the Courtier* [Online] [Date Accessed 25th April 2023] https://www.gutenberg.org/files/67799/67799-h/67799-h.htm, section 26

not so much a consequence of poor or slack writing but as a means of conscious effort to leave room for the music to enhance and complicate.

Lastly, it has been the function of this thesis to delve beyond the page, and give context to the act of collaboration. As much as an opera is the union between music and words, the opera is also the coming together of the librettist and composer. This, in many ways, is a more complicated matter since no two collaborations are the same. Even Auden, who wrote in favour of the librettist's supportive role can be seen in Chapter Three to grow tired of such a position, taking on a more domineering role when dealing with Hans Werner Henze on *The Bassarids*.[86]

A benefit of this doctoral project's design is that it allows for my own first-hand account to support and augment the historical examples of those who have worked in the genre. As a means of broadening the conversation around operatic collaboration, I have sought to present how I perceived a gap between our project's ideal collaboration method as initially envisaged and the template that asserted itself, which favoured the composer's creative vision. This change is not presented as de facto negative; as is shown, its framework became similar to the relationship between Auden and Stravinsky when they worked together on *The Rake's Progress*. Rather, I have aimed to show that this change has implications, for the collaborators and for the project, especially where ideas of creative ownership are concerned.

There has been a complete change in my relationship to libretti in the four years since this project commenced. Whereas at the outset I felt usure of how exactly my own poetry intersected and complimented this art form, I now am able to say that I have a clear conception of how page-poetry diverges from this 'poetry' that is intended to be sung, that their relationship is related to one being associated with thought and the other with the pressures of a character's immediate feeling.

[86] W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of Auden, Libretti 1939-1973*, edited by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 679.

This thesis has intended to reposition libretti as an individual art form, worthwhile and independent, with its own internal logic, rather than one that exists as a satellite to either page poetry or to literature more broadly. In *The Praise Songs*, there is a clearer conception of what opportunities there are for a librettist to take advantage of, both in the formation and construction of the lines of its verse and in its dramatic movement.

In the Foreword to this thesis, I quote from Patrick J Smith in *The Tenth Muse*, as he argued for what he understood the librettist to be:

> The librettist therefore cannot be considered merely a word-smith stringing out lines of mellifluous verse; he is at once a dramatist, a creator of word, verse, situation, scene, and character, and – this is of vital importance – an artist who, by dint of his professional training as a poet and/or dramatist, can often visualize the work *as a totality* more accurately than the composer.[87]

I have already explained where I take issue with his description of the librettist as someone who can take 'a view of the thing as a whole'. In many ways, Smith is too general in his attribution of roles for the librettist. This thesis has argued for a way to be more specific, and it is on this note that I shall end:

A librettist is one who must have as their concern: the depiction of the opera's world and its relationship to reality; every word of the line, its tense and immediacy, its simplicity and patterning; a focus on the drama through the selecting of who should be given words and in what order; and a concern with bringing the action to a point where the characters have no option but to sing.

[87] Patrick J Smith, *The Tenth Muse, A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1970), p. XIX.

Appendix

The Rainmaker: A Libretto

Text by Niall Campbell

This libretto was the first text created for this opera project – and was completed in the summer of 2020

Act 1, Scene 1.

A Stranger: (*different in look from rainmaker* - a*ppearing like an old memory – strange clothes, alone – exiting when the speech/song is done)*

Better than grain,
the wood, than walls, than wiring,
come taste the waves
the cold current of the stream;
it fills your starving mouth with light –
it does – yes – drink, drink, drown in it.

Outside Australian Farm – the scene evokes a dryness – it is early but already it is getting hot. Dust lifts from each step. The way of life, like an old empire, is failing, only the momentum and habit keep things moving. Charlie, a sheep farmer, showing all signs of weariness, is in conversation with a stranger who has arrived at her farm.

Charlie:
You've seen the farm – our animals,
stick thin, licking the sand;
they see water where there's none,
the dead one's stomachs are filled with stones.

Rainmaker:
And isn't this why I've come;
I have an offer for you –
too long
this drought has scorched the land, too long
has burned down everything
– you've worked to the bone,
and no-one cares you are alone –
but, imagine, the grass long
again, the rivers flowing from
a hundred sources to a hundred mouths –
and nothing less than you deserve
just things your parents had – full troughs,
bright grain.

Charlie:
And what is this to do with you?

Rainmaker:
I'm here to make it real –
you work hard – but you need rain;
and this is what I'm offering:
wet ground – the troughs all filled –
a wet shirt heavy as an iron bell,
on necks and porches. On the hooks of barb-wiring…

Charlie: (*unimpressed*)
How long have you been in the sun? Do it then –
flood away, the ground is waiting…

Rainmaker:
My father had a lesson: the bargaining.
It's ten thousand from each farm in the place.
I wish it were free – but this is the cost.
But a small price – for what your father had.
Think of it.

Charlie:
I thought you were mad – but you're a leech.

Rainmaker:
No leech – I understand your doubts
they're all we have, these days, in life –
But look around – feel the heat –
I'm offering something strange – but different –
it is a risk – but think about your choice:
look up, the sky, it promises
more heat, more breathlessness,
then closure, and it's all lost.
trust me – pay me – just take the risk…

Charlie:
Do it first –
then take whatever you want.
I promise – you can hold me to it.

Rainmaker:
I like that offer – a free pick – but look
my father did something like that once –
he worked – he played their tune –
then they stiffed him. No, payment first.

Charlie:
I don't have time for this – get out.
Everything is dust – everything
is burning up – and now you come
another wild dog smelling blood.

We know what to do with wild dogs here…

Rainmaker:
It only works if you say yes –
but look, I'll go – but I'll come back…

Charlie:
Go.

Rainmaker:
… Just think of this
the music of water in the desert,
the red rocks singing –

Charlie:
Go

Rainmaker:
A downpour on the dust.
A new old start. I can give it.

Exit Rainmaker – Enter Coll, Charlie's son.

End Scene.

Act 1, Scene 2

Coll, Charlie's son, appears from behind the porch door. He is a young man – his dirty clothes giving off the impression of slovenliness or despair. He is curious about the woman and is about the age that he should be looking at what options he has in life, but he is aware he has none.

Charlie:
Coll is here --- the farm is saved. (*ironic*)

Coll: (*he goes to a tap – he dampens his hands and washes his face then wets his hair back*)
Leave it.

Charlie: (*she continues to needle him)*
He's here – he's here – he came –
Better than grass, than everything.
He's here; he came.

(*Coll goes to dampen his hands again*)

That's enough – leave it in the well,
go dirty – there's no-one to impress.

Coll:
There's not. (*Looks at her)*
That girl – she wanted something?

Charlie:
She did – she wanted someone all heart,
someone soft – a moth to the flame…

Coll:

We must be good picking – we have so much:
she must have seen – the rusting truck,
our palace, here, our fields of dirt.

Charlie: (*sensitive to the insult to her life*)
You can't see it
– it just needs work and luck.

Coll:
And a weather that we don't have
and good prices at the market –
and this to be repeated for years on end.

Charlie:
Toughen up.
The rain can come or not,
we do the same: work our hands raw,
lift until our backs break, go on.
You have your tasks:
check what sheep we lost last night;
dig the pit; shear the ones you haven't,
– and go to the Hildebrands
beg for some feed for the low field…

Coll:
He won't…

Charlie:
Go ask – go beg – steal it, if you must.

Coll:
You should have been a priest.

Charlie:
Amen to that:
Blessed be the ones who break their backs,
eat sunlight, drink dust
– and damn the rest

Coll:
Yes, damn the rest. (*Sarcastic*)

Charlie:
Amen?

Coll: (*he goes to turn on tap again to fill cup with water – it coughs and splutters – water and air comes out*)
It's almost out.

Charlie ignores him. She walks off.

Coll switches tap back on and lets it pour over the dirt – he watches it drain – then turns it off.

Exit Coll.

Act 1, Scene 3

Exterior of shearing shed – the floor is strewn with dusted white wool – hoists hang down from the ceiling beams. It is hot – the air is already thick with the smell of sheep. A couple work at a few tasks - but their hearts do not seem in it. She, white hair, tired, rough but with a glean of kindness, works a broom across the floor gathering the smaller sections of wool – he, old but the old of a bull or a bull-fighter – toughened and unbowed – lifts the full, shorn pelts into large sacks.

Hamm:
Sweep, sweep. You're losing the wool.

Agnes:
Sweep, sweep. Yes. Sweep. Sweep. Look. (*Gesturing that she is working*)
I'm only saying the heat is different –

Hamm:

I'm tired enough – not now…

Agnes:
It's true.
You were sleeping, dead to the world,

Hamm makes a gesture to sweep faster

Sweep, sweep. Yes. --- I heard it –

Hamm:
The wind's taking the wool – sweep,

Agnes:
Sweep, sweep, sweep…
The sea can sing, why can't the desert –
there's a song to waves against the beach,
why not in dust burning off the earth,
the ground cracking –

Hamm: (*He is worried about her mind*)
Do we need to do something about this?

Agnes:
It's not like that – I promise.
But it was there –

Hamm:
Enough – stop – look –
(*Shouting to Coll)*
You. Come to repay the feed you lent?

Agnes: *(greeting him)*
Our young neighbour.

Hamm:
We are busy – what do you want?

Coll:
The animals need feed. We're asking…

Hamm:
Again?
You're not eating it yourselves?

Coll:
We just need our neighbour's help.

Hamm:
You aren't neighbours – you are weights
around our neck –

Coll:
I'll tell her that.

Hamm:
Tell her to chase her sheep
into the bush – they don't need food
they need released from you –

Agnes: (*suddenly ecstatic*)
Listen – I can hear it again…

Hamm: (*turning with panic to his wife*)
No, not now.

Agnes:
The heat, it's so soft
but it's there – listen…

Hamm: (*to Coll*)
You've had your answer.

Enter Rainmaker

Rainmaker: (*to Hamm*)
I've been all looking for you…

Hamm:
Whoever you are, it isn't the time.

Rainmaker:
It is – I've come with a gift –

Coll:
This woman came to us…

Hamm: (*to Coll*)
I don't care about your advice –

(*to Rainmaker*)
and you, I heard of you –

Rainmaker:
You've heard,
but you need convinced…

Hamm:
I need nothing but to get my wife
out of this heat.

Rainmaker
She needs just to be listened to –

(to Agnes)
Darling, I hear the desert, just like you.

(now addressing Hamm)
And you need something else:
a taste of what I want to give.

Agnes:
Yes, she hears it
it's loud as…

Hamm:
We need to go.

Rainmaker
Wait – here, let me help – (*she puts her hands on either side of his head and as she talks brings him down to his knees*)
You are desperate, I can see it,
you're strong - but all this brightness,
this sunlight branding you, it takes
each bit of breath – let me give you just a taste

open your mouth – look up, just a drop…

Hamm: (*breaking away from her*)
I… what was that? I tasted – it – landed on my tongue,
my god, I'd forgotten the…

My god, yes, yes anything.
Whatever you need, anything.

Act1, Scene 4

Charlie appears – she is feeding what remains of the feed to the animals in the field. She sings then the scene moves on.

Charlie: (*Throwing feed pellets*)

The market's calling, so is the town,
so is the king in his old fine crown;
but grow your wool, and just you wait,
I'll bring you there on a clean white plate.

Exits.

Deep in the outback – fences have fallen down – Coll is tasked with repairing them. He walks side by side with the Rainmaker, intimidated by her, but captivated. The sun is up and beats down hard on both of them.

Rainmaker:
Usually it's so easy to tell –
but not with you.

Coll:
There's nothing there.

Rainmaker:
You're telling me that if, somehow,
you were given a wish, just one,
you'd say 'no thanks – I'm good as I am'

Coll:
You're giving wishes now?

Rainmaker:
Just questions, and
you're not helping.

Coll:
I have a question:
why don't you help us out – make it rain,
I've seen you can.

Rainmaker:
Never be kind, my father said –
and my father wasn't kind –
show them a gift, he'd say,
they'll use it up until it's gone.

Make them pay.

You think he's right?

Coll:
Maybe.

Rainmaker:
But rain's not what you want – that's them –
what about you – no needs? No secret dreams?
I come back in ten years' time
and you're still here.

Coll:
….no. Damn.
Don't say that.

Rainmaker:
So I was right –
there's something there… [*beat*]… Can I
tell you what I would want for you?

Coll:
More flies. More dust and sand.
More stinking animals.

Rainmaker:
No – a softer life:
bare-foot – long grass beneath your feet,
maybe a house above a hill,
the breeze made soft with mist.
I don't meet many – but I think
you are a good man. Quiet. Kind.

Coll:
Don't tell me anymore.

Rainmaker:
It's there – a small house.
A path of wet stones –

Coll:

No, this is all there is – sweat
and work – wild dogs and broken fences.

Rainmaker:
It's ok to want – to hold out –
hold on for a different life.
Picture it – listening to the sound…

Coll:
…rainfall on stone

Rainmaker:
Yes, rainfall on stone – and more.

Coll:
My voice at the top of the hill.

Rainmaker:
On top and inside it – I know a place.
You, there, and a second voice –
from the house – calling you back.
Wet grass. Wet stones. Starlight.

Act1, Scene 5

Evening outside the farmhouse. Charlie and Hamm are arguing. Both are coated with dust from the day's work – both are exhausted and agitated.

Charlie:
One last time: I will not pay,
not for rain and not for air
and not for heat or rocks or sunlight.

She's got you.

Hamm:
She's not –

Charlie:
Look at yourself: she's the farmer – her hand stretched out –
and you're the animal licking it.

What world do you live in now?

Hamm:
This one – drought after drought,
the grounds split – the river spent –
the animals – buried by the herds
a flocks of bones – and then she held
my head and opened my mouth,
and I tasted something different.
Your son knows –

Charlie:
Him – cattle know as much.

Hamm:
I see you – you want us to suffer,
to match your suffering.

Charlie:
Go pay – do what you want. Old fool,
go eat rocks, drink the red dirt. Good
company for your wife.

Hamm: (*Stunned by the insult*)
We'll take the rainfall – and you,
you think this is an oven now…

Charlie:
You, you've shamed yourself.

We'll look back on this – and I'll say:

The world went mad, but I survived.

Hamm:
Just wait.

(End of Act)

Act 2 Scene 1

A Stranger: *(Arriving and leaving, same as in opening moment)*
Come follow me,
let's play a game of marching
of hide-and-seek.
Ignore your parents calling;
they're old and strict and they don't know –
the hill with light behind its door.

Exits.

The bush – the heat is almost unbearable and the dryness breaks the ground underfoot. Coll and Charlie have been searching for sheep that broke through the fence – it has been a long and exhausting search. That they searched so long shows how desperate they are.

Coll:
They are here – all of them.

Charlie: (*Entering behind him she sees the ten dead animals*)
They broke the fence,
and all for this:

Ten less – wool and meat. Ten less.
Even the animals turn against us.

Coll:
It drove them mad – I tell you what,
I understand – food, shade, water.

Charlie:
No, they are like us – made for it.
Strong backs, small needs. Bury them with a curse,
of all the things, they did the worst:

Here's to those that give up,
that don't hold, don't trust;
Roam lost, roam starved and thirsting
until the whole moon turns to dust.

Do it. But don't break your back.
This is just the first thing on today's list.

Exits

Coll: (*addressing the dead animals*)
She doesn't know – but I know. Just rest –
sometimes a song is heard –
and you resist until you can't. Just rest –
this isn't a good place to have a bed,
but if death has land, go eat its grass.
Who can judge you? Not us.

Charlie comes running back on stage.

Charlie:
Don't you see it – smoke!

Coll:
Where? What?

Charlie:
It's her – them – they're burning us out.
The ground's so dry –

Coll:
The other animals, the farm.

Charlie:
We have to beat it back.

Both Exit

Act 2 Scene 2

Everything is on fire. The air is smoking and though it is dark an orange haze falls over everything. The two of them have been fighting the fire – but it is a hopeless task. It is all now lost.

Coll: (*calling into the smoke – his dialogue spoken*)
It's over.
Mum, I can't see you – we need to go.

Charlie: (*appearing)*
No. No. No. (*still sung)*

Coll: (*reappearing*)
Why are we still here – it's all on fire?

Charlie:
Should we leave it burning? I
can't do that. And you – you should
say the same -

Coll:
We're beaten.

Charlie:
I raised a coward.
We have it all: and it's all turning
to ash – it's ours
the land, the dry river, the sky.

Coll:
A dead land, a river dried to chalk,
and who wants this sky – it's killing us.

Charlie:
Another one! Another one!
My own son – coward – quitter –
the world's on fire and you gave in.
Stay here and watch it burn. I'm not done.

Exits

Coll: (*Shouting to where she's left*)
Did the sunlight blind you -
– there was never anything here.
Nothing's burning – just your dream
nothing real – nothing of mine

Let the buildings burn, burn the trees,
there was nothing ever here.

Suddenly there is a crack in the air - it begins to rain.

Act 2 Scene 3

Exterior of farmhouse – Charlie is casting feed to a few sheep – her leg is bandaged and she is in pain, nearly immobile. It still lightly rains – but neither the farmer nor the animals care. There is a freshness in the air.

Charlie: (*throwing feed to the sheep*)

Lord, give me a green young day,
and all the animals calling;
Lord, give me a field and spade,
and rainfall in the morning.

Enter Rainmaker

Rainmaker:
I love to hear your singing voice –
so different.

Charlie:
What do you want?

Rainmaker
You've burned your leg – it must hurt.

Charlie:
Like glass was used to peel the skin –
Was it you (*who started the fire*) – you're safe, I'm injured –
but did you set the fire in our desert?
Did you burn us out?

Rainmaker:
I didn't.

Charlie:
Tell me you did – you lit a flame –
you did –

Rainmaker:
You live inside a bad dream –
but I'm here about the other thing:
I made it rain – for you – the downpour –
That saved it all - this river running now –
and as is right I now want paid.
What's fair is fair, my father said,
I think the same. I saved your farm.

Charlie:
I'll set alight each animal,
and I'll step into the fire again;
peel off all my other skin,
before I give one coin.

I'll drag you – I'll grind you down
to dust and sand – no, listen! –
even if it makes more desert –
you'll get nothing – and you deserve worse.

Rainmaker:
You're all the same – the things you say –
you struggled and I took the rain down,
I know its name and I called it
and now – no thanks – just threats and curses –
ungrateful
but have it your way -

Enter Coll

Coll:
What's this – I didn't think I'd see you here…

Charlie:
She came to get her pay – imagine –

Rainmaker:
Don't listen to her.
I came for you and nothing else.

Charlie:
What's this – don't listen to what she says –

Rainmaker:
I promised rain and then it rained
(*To Coll*)
but that isn't what I promised you –
– your promise was different.

Coll:
The soft grass – the hill and...
Was it a promise?

Rainmaker:
It was.
It seems a strange dream, but it's real,
warmth in the cold, stars inside the hill.

Charlie:
Don't listen to her.

Rainmaker:
There's nothing here.

Coll: (*to Charlie)*
There's nothing here –
This is your make-believe – it isn't mine –
wake up and look around:
rust, dirt – work – for what?

Charlie:
I'm awake – this sand is here, this sun is there –
the world's gone mad, don't go mad with them;
son, don't go inside the hill,
She'll lose you there – it isn't real.

Go and the whole thing falls apart –
it shuts and crumbles – the animals go off,
the house door closes shut –

Rainmaker:
Trust me – my heart –
the old things go – the new takes its place –
she had her chance – but she'll survive
but we can live, two people with one life –

Coll:
The two of us – it's real, say it is:
the house, the bed, the different life…

Charlie:
It isn't…

Rainmaker:
It is… Come with me – we can leave now –
across the fields, into the hill
where everything is sun and stars,
dark and bright.

Coll:
I want to go.
Don't think bad of me – I have to.

Charlie:
No. no. no. no. no.

END

Drought: A Libretto

Text by Niall Campbell

This libretto was the second text created for this opera project – and was completed in Summer 2021

A large room divided into two sections. – a kitchen with sink and a large, long table. Over to the right side is a recreational (of sorts) area: a small cabinet with radio and an armchair.

Charlie is sat at the far end of the table – close to her on the far wall is the door to the outside.

Coll enters from his bedroom, through a door to the left handside. He is irritable since he cannot sleep. It is still dark – lamps are lit in the room.

Charlie is a greying farmer – but she sits resolutely, calm as a statue. Tiredness has not broken her. Coll wears his age worse. He looks middle-age and beaten by it.

Coll:
My mouth is full of dust –
I close my eyes and I can feel it –
Dust. Grit. Sand. Falling on me.
Damn the drought.
I need to leave.

Charlie:
We want rain first – remember that.

Coll: *(dismissive)*
Yes, yes…

Charlie:
That first – nothing else.

Morning's not far off.

Coll: (*taking a seat at the table*)
Then it is breakfast time –

Turns over his plate and picks up the cutlery.

Shall I close my eyes? Will that help?
Or what about this:

Begins rhythmically beating his hands on the table and hitting his cutlery together.

Mother bring the wine; Waiter bring the feast;
Don't spare the cost – bring all of it.

Mother, you haven't moved. (*Looking down at his plate*)
Nothing – nothing again. Nothing always.

Charlie:
Nothing's what we've got. Eat it. Drink it.
Do what you want – it's all we got.

Coll:
Ah, this old chestnut. (*Kicks back from the table*)
Make do, eh? Make and mend, eh?

Mum, that's not for me – thank you for the meal;
You stay – I'm gone.
I'll tell you what – you can have my future share of meals –
Make a feast – nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. *(Pointing at the empty plates on the table).*

Charlie:
You are not going – you know it
and I know it.

And more than that – you know I need you here.
This is not a one-person life out here.
It would fall apart.

Just shut up… *(gesturing to sit back down at the table)*

Come here – just try to close your eyes,

remember, remembering, the drumming sound
of downpours in the daylight.
No thirst – or want – just the thrilling soak –

drip, drip – it filled the feeding troughs
and filled the wells.
Drip, drip – you worked in it,
shirt as heavy as an iron bell.

Drip, drip – drip, drip – you were so happy then,
cassia and wildberry at our ankles,
light on your back – and the rain will come again.
Be patient – want less – give it time.

Coll
Drip drip – Is this water torture?
Drip drip. (*mocking*) It wasn't anything like this.

Hell was green and thick instead of dust. How great!
It was always one thing: work, work, work.
Never…

Charlie:
Never what?

Coll:
…Never… anything else.

<u>He walks over to the radio - turns it on then takes a seat in an armchair away from Charlie and the table.</u>

Charlie:
You are like one of those dogs that yelp
and whine and paw – just before they do something stupid.
Be careful.

<u>Coll ignores her – and the radio plays louder.</u>

Radio <u>Song – I imagine it as a strange almost disconcerted, distorted song. A sort of shifting mirror into which a main character sees the image that they want to see. While to everyone else it appears unclear or alternative. It is shifting and liquid with perhaps the lyrics overlapping each other.</u>

Need. Brightness. Taste the…
Overflowing… And silver…

Grapes and… We made figurines
from the wheat. Lips kiss and… Endless.

Silk and pearl and… insurance is more
important now than ever…. wild fire. Osiris welcomes…

Thorn. Pure roses and… luck…
order now to receive your... Ice flow and dance…

and – *This is the first night of the rest of your*…
This is it... Skin and breath and…

Charlie:
What do you even hear when that is playing?

Coll's Reply <u>(I thought that after something strange like the radio song it would be an interesting about-turn to do something like a ballad form. Very clear, faster, and more narrative.)</u>

Coll:
I hear the sound of wine poured out
of plates being smashed and night-time shouts
I hear the sound of speeding cars
and blood like thunder inside my ears

I hear the sound of hard desire,
wildness spreading like a new struck fire
and me walking down the dim lit street
star and moon and completely free

Charlie:
And then – you know that I know this –
You'll drink until it spills across
your clothes, the floor, the thirsty ground

Coll:
Perhaps, perhaps – but boy, what fun

Charlie:
You'll touch it all - but waste it too

Coll:
I'll eat the forests and drink the moon

Charlie:
You'll use it up – and throw it off.

Coll:
I'll swill the oceans around my mouth.
'Here' is the land of always thirst –
'There' is the land of more, more, more than enough.

He dances around the room with the radio.
Only it begins to stutter and fail.

Coll:
No – it needs to keep playing. Keep playing!
What is wrong with you *(to radio)* – piece of junk,
piece of garbage – just like everything else,
it falls apart, it hates it here.

The machine continues to falter – he hits it.

Charlie:
Let me see. Give it to me.

Coll:
You broke it – what did you do when I was sleeping?

Charlie:

Nothing – I did nothing.
It broke – all things break – get used to it.

Coll: (Snatches back the radio – it momentarily comes to life then distorts and completely stops)
Always the same – it all breaks.

What am I meant to listen to now? (Goes to window)
I've heard that song too much: dry earth,
dead animals, want.

That's your song.

Charlie:
I wouldn't say that.

Coll:
It is! You sing it: dry earth,
Dry earth, animals, want.

I bet you dance to it.
I bet your heart pounds to it. (*Perhaps bangs a beat out on the table*)

Charlie:
And what's yours then? Comfort?
No, it's not even that – you are an empty cup
that nothing ever fills.

Coll:
"You have nothing – be happy;
Here, now have less – be happier…"

Why should I stay – for you –
To keep your farm from falling apart?
Nah, not for me.

Charlie:
No – not for you. Here, there isn't much
But let me help you pack: *(reaching in her pockets)*
A few coins – let me spit on them for luck –
Some wool – I know you like your softness;

And here – take this memory of me
Saying this to you – you are an embarrassment,
Weak, slow, lazy, a thorn tree
with not one bit of fruit.

Coll: (*stunned – but recovers*)
Fine – fine; it's a desert inside too, is it?
Keep is all. I'll pack light – I'll leave you all the dust
and all the heat – it always was your element.

Charlie: (*regretting herself)*
No, son. I'm sorry.
I can't do this on my own.
Be patient – you can go – but not yet
Just another…

Coll:
Week? Month? Just another season?
No – it's time we go our own ways:
My body's hungry – hungry.

Charlie:
And what way's my way? Here alone?
All done?

Coll:
I thought you said the rain was coming.
It isn't. It's all a lie.
I'm going.

Charlie:
No -patience. It's coming. It's coming.
Listen can you hear it?

(Cacophony of noise – is this the rain?)

Coll:
No – it isn't it never comes.
You choose to stay – stay.
You choose to have nothing – have nothing.

(Cacophony quells to nothing)

I want it all – not nothing. (*Goes to open the door)*
My throat – good god. I'm so thirsty.

Charlie:
No, son. Not the door.

Coll:
(*looking at his hands*) Why am I old?
I need to leave….

Last Song – he runs out to open the door to escape – it closes behind him at the end.

Oh lord, oh throat, oh thirst,
what is this darkness behind the door?
Why is the void here?
Mother – please open up again

A storm is coming – I can hear it,
I don't want to be alone out here alone.
I just wanted to bite the apple once…
then once, again. Then once and once

then all of them.
I thirsted more than others
I don't know why. Rain quenched nothing –
and now it's raining dust and dirt – not rain
and now it's raining dust. Did I waste everything?

Oh god, am I being pulled back – to do it all again.
No, give me rain. Please no, give me rain.

A storm of sound envelopes everything.

END

The Praise Songs: A Libretto

after Geoffrey Hill

Text by Niall Campbell

This is the final text of our project – completed in Summer of 2022

For 3 Singers:
King Offa,
Hill,
Citizen 1 & 2 (both parts by same singer)

Scene 1

The stage is demarcated into two sections. On the right is a king sitting on his high-chair. All day, as has been ordered, each citizen has come to sing the praises of his rule. As his accolades are sung, he nods his head – in the silences as the citizens come and go, his body slumps again into boredom.

The day is wearing on. From the left-side of the stage, a new citizen, a small brown-haired man, has entered and begins to sing his master's praises.

Citizen: High king – the setter of our feast;
gold coin in an age of brass,
he brought the trains to the underpass,
first iron, closed mouth, man of grace.

(King Offa lulled by the singing – looks up, surprised, when it stops.)

King Offa: I like it well enough. But it
is short – was there nothing else?

(*The citizen is panicked by the rebuke.)*

Citizen: There was! Please, please, forgive.
I didn't want to waste your time –
there were a million things to say,
but I…

King Offa: Shhhh, I forgive – but next time you're called
don't be so meagre. Sing me better.

Did I not build the shopping mall?
Am I not a hawk, wide wings, bright talons?
Am I not a moon, that holds your darkness?
Next time, remember, mention these…
It would be wise. Now go.

Citizen leaves – Hill, a further citizen, arrives, taking his position on the same side of the stage as the citizen has just vacated. He is middle-aged, unremarkable. Evidently nervous and unsure of the position they have found themselves in.

King Offa: Even listening to my praise
is tiring – you are last today –
be worthy of such position.

Hill: Sire, could I…

King Offa: Sing! This is not a conversation.

Hill: Small mouse, I know his shadow's length; (*All sung awkwardly*)
we, servants, hold our breath until he's past
he built the skyscraper out of glass,
and gave his name to this countr…

King Offa: Stop!
What is this? Is this a joke
to lay such small coins at my feet?
And if I bite them are they copper
or brass or coins of dirt? You insult your king.

Hill: I don't mean to insult you.

King Offa: But your song is much too small…

Hill: I was called, like everyone,
to come and sing. I came and sang…

King Offa: You came, did you? From where?

Hill: Ox-hill.

King Offa: And do my works not stretch to there?
You were asked, like everyone,
to grace these halls – and sing of me –
you sing me badly.
Close your eyes,

think of your home, your family, (*becoming more cruel and threatening*)
your roof that is not on fire,
or think of knives and silences –
I do not care. But close your eyes
and sing me – sing beautifully.

(*Struggles – but can't force his mouth to sing)*

Hill: Sire, I cannot do it.
I was entering the town,
and saw the ramparts, their spiked heads;
I was called, like everyone.
I came.
But you ask too much.
I can't ask my mouth to sing, it won't.
I know you, so can't sing your praises.

(*King Offa considers – furious – but cruelty overriding his thoughts. He masters himself*)

King Offa: Those heads – along the city walls…
I arranged them like a silent choir…
I go to them to hear their singing
their blue tongues hanging open.
I won't take your head –
but I demand
that second song. I want it,
better, longer, sweeter on my ears –
Tonight you'll write it – tomorrow
you will come again and sing.

Hill: Please, sir, I call you sir to show
I'm not rebellious, I'm not –
I just want to be someone who
says a thing and means it – it is
my one thing in life: I am not brave,
not smart, not brilliant. Only honest.
I don't love my heart, just my tongue.

King Offa: No – more than ever it's decided!

Do you know the sweetest blood?
It is when you take a stone
and crush it, crush it in your hand.
It might take days – but part by part,
a drop is bled – I have licked at such.
Rare honey does not taste so good!

You'll come tomorrow – and you'll sing.
You will. And I will lap it up.
For now, get out.

Hill: But sir…

King Offa: Get out.

Hill leaves.

Attendant! Find his house –
If he has any family
I want them here within hand's reach.
They'll make a perfect audience.

Scene 2

The king's half of the stage darkens – and only Hill's side is illuminated. Alone, at first, he seems frantic – but slowly a calm is restored.

Hill: What doubts I had are gone. If I
am made to choose, I won't be shamed.
I'll sing the true song of his country.
Nothing else matters. He'll stand and listen.

King – you are the black leech,
the crane, the wrecking ball's strike,
You are the poison in the well,
You are the petrol, the burning fields,
Your year is winter, winter, and
You are the knife, knife-handle, and the hand.

Scene 3

Hill's half-stage turns dark. We leave their euphoria. The King's stage illuminated we see him asleep on the same high chair. He is plagued by dreams. He startles himself awake. He seems old – in turmoil from his reign.

King Offa: Where are the drums? Where are the harps?
Why am I left alone and silent
in the dark. Attendants!
Bring lights – help me – please, bring noise.

Scene 4

The stage is set the same as before. The king to the right. His full stage is lit, he is waiting in his chair. Hill arrives – but there is someone else waiting, too. A further citizen, much the same: poor, a commoner. They stand ready to supplicate themselves before the king. Beside the king are now two shapes – perhaps mannequins could be used, blank, faceless and bare – these are Hill's partner and child.

King Offa: My singer comes. But you won't sing (*addressed to Hill*)
just yet.

See what a king can do:
here is your wife and child. I called,
they came. We all will listen to
your song – *them* most. I hope it pleases…

Hill: Sir, no. Please, just you and I…

King Offa: No.
Your song is theirs. And theirs is yours.
It is the beauty of a family.
If I were you, I would be thankful:
do well, and they do well, too. Your child
is pale with pride.

Hill: But if I can't….

King Offa: Silence is the most terrible song.
But here, I brought a citizen
to set a good example. Singer…

Citizen: Yes, your highness.

King Offa: You come to sing?

Citizen: I do.

King Offa: And are you forced to?

Citizen: No, sir. It is all my honour.

King Offa: And is any part of it a lie?

Citizen: No lies. No, sire. It is all true.
Every word and every part.

King Offa: These types of songs please me the most!
Please, start when you can. I'll listen.
(*Towards Hill*) And you – listen with intent.
They do not lie – and still they sing.
Your turn is next.

Citizen: Thank you, sire. For allowing me
such a moment…

He lifts his hand, it is our roof,
He lowers it, it smooths the earth,
He makes a fist, protecting us.
Our ruler in his kindness.

His highways dug into the hill
He built our church, he is our church
A voice of love, protecting us.
Our ruler in his kindness.

King Offa: Thank you. Thank you. It is so good
that you can see my role. You see it.
My sacrifices for my people.

Citizen, you can go. But tonight,
were I to wake into the dark,
I'll think of this. You know my heart.

<u>The citizen departs – leaving only Hill</u>

Hill: Please, king. I have a song for you,
send my family away –
I don't want them to hear it.

King Offa: But they will hear – and so will I.
Your song is one I'll value most
because I'll know it will be true.

Now, let us start:

you have come to sing? (*Repeating his line of questioning?)*

Hill: I have. I came from a cold country.
A small house – and this small family
that are so close beside you.

King Offa: And are you forced to?

Hill: No, sir. It is my honour.

King Offa: And, is any part of it a lie?

Hill: No lies. No, sire. It is all true.

King Offa: Then sing to me. Tell me of me.

Hill: Family. Do not think less of me.
Even though I will be less.

(*Begins his song)*

Overlord and architect.
Guardian of the true stone bridge
And all that follows under it.
You do no wrong – our one, true king.

Saltmaster, guider, friend to us.
Father, here in your stone house.
You break us for our betterment.
You do no wrong – our one, true king.

(*Breaks down and weeps)*

King Offa: I liked that. Such depth. If it
was a bow it would have touched the earth.

Hill: Please. King, sir. With all respect.
I want to leave. I want to go
where there are no songs. Let me hold

my wife and son. His skin is white
and she is shivering – I'm done,
I've finished. Let us head home.

King Offa: Citizen. You have a voice.
And do you know, that I was right:
this stone's blood has the sweetest taste.
Your song, such sweetness, such freshness.
And you thought you couldn't sing
your own king's praises.

Hill: I sang your praises.

King Offa: And I liked it. Now, sing it again.

The End

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