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Suggestions for transgender inclusion in classical music: a mini-cycle

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SUGGESTIONS FOR TRANSGENDER INCLUSION IN CLASSICAL MUSIC:

A MINI-CYCLE

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Xavia A. Publius

University of Northern Iowa

July 2015

ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary text examines the lack of transgender inclusion in Western classical music, especially through the lens of opera. By looking at the dearth of transgender characters, singers, and composers, as well as the author's personal experiences as a transgender singer in classical spaces, this project develops a strong position on ways that Western classical music should work to incorporate transgender voices, both literally and figuratively.

Some of these methods are modeled in this thesis, such as consultations with other transgender artists, transgeneric devising, and trans-centric composing. The author worked with local transgender singers to understand their views on opera, and from those sessions composed three arias for transgender voices, which are presented here. These arias are embedded self-reflexively in a performative document that embraces several different writing contexts, such as epic poetry, diaries, Socratic dialogues, legislation, and course writing.

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THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts

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To Nancy Jean Bancale, in hopes you'd be proud of the woman your grandson became.

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PART I

INVOCATION OF THE MUSES AND ADDRESS TO THE READER

O, Ye nine Muses, prithee: this offering may you find pleasing.
 Deign if it suit you to dwell here, for long have I labored upon it.
 Sisters resplendent and wise, may your melody breath fill my lungs as
 I, humble author, speak freely: my tongue and my fingers grant swift wings,
 and may my speech—though simple it be—carry thy divine blessing.
 Sing the great woes of my people, who long have been misrepresented
 by those poets who call you, who speak in our name but not for us,
 and who have rendered us creatures, sad beings of evil and chaos.
 Children of my generation, the battered, broken, and bruised, we
 scream out injustices grave, and demand reparations for our pain.
 Though we have issues aplenty, the arts are your special domain, thus
 Sisters of Mount Parnassus, I supplicate desperately, wildly:
 grant to my thesis your patronage strong. And if I speak falsely,
 or if my tongue doth offend, your eternal wrath may it plague me.

Those readers expecting a standard five-chapter thesis are in for a surprise, hopefully, a pleasant one. A project as expansive as “Suggestions for Transgender Inclusion in Classical Music” requires an equally expansive methodological and theoretical approach, one that transcends the traditional boundaries of genre and discipline. I use the word “transcend” deliberately because a.) I like puns and b.) I think the motion implicit in the preposition “trans”¹ is an important framework for understanding the needs of transgender people in Western classical music. I also think it theoretically intriguing that in French the word *genre* translates to English as both “genre” and “gender”; thus, while not a pun in English, referring to this document as a *thèse transgenre*² provides slippage between my object of study and my method of studying: a transgeneric study of transgender people. This thesis will be a performance

¹ *Trans* comes from Latin, meaning “across; beyond; on the other side of.”

² “Transgender thesis” or “transgeneric thesis.”

of transgender theory in its crossing of traditional genre boundaries. It is a collection of multiple fractured perspectives, all of which serve specific framing purposes in my exploration of these issues. As such, my tone in places might seem significantly less “professional” than is expected in a thesis. I reject the notion that theory cannot be spoken plainly and must be in a style accessible to academics only. However, I have indulged in a richer vocabulary when appropriate and will be discussing topics that do not readily cross disciplines. Because of this, I have included a glossary as an appendix for the reader’s convenience (Appendix A pp. 148-52).

A transgeneric methodological approach is very common in transgender theory. I shamelessly borrow this strategy from Susan Stryker’s “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage” and from Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw*. As Bornstein lovingly describes the style, it’s “sort of a cut-and-paste thing,” with the attendant messiness, playfulness, and crassness the phrase implies (3). Like Stryker, I am “intrigued by the prospect of critically examining [my] rage in a more academic setting through an idiosyncratic application of the concept of gender performativity. My idea [is] to perform self-consciously a queer gender rather than simply talk about it, thus embodying and enacting the concept simultaneously under discussion” (245). That is, to talk about a transgender performance style, I must enact a transgender performance style. This is not to suggest that this is the only way to enact transgender scholarship or performance, but it is a popular one, and it fits my purposes well.

Some readers are probably inclined to humor me in such a project, whereas others might spend most of this process thoroughly confused. I encourage you, dear reader, to be at home with that discomfort and to focus not on stable meaning or unexpected forms, but on your own embodied experience of reading this work. I have been very deliberate in my decisions about how to frame particular sections, because the framework of a traditional thesis does not afford me the ability to speak plainly. As Conquergood so eloquently words it: “subordinate people do not have the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication, free and open debate on a level playing field that the privileged classes take for granted” (146). Since the truths I need to share with you do not easily translate into these conventions, I invite you to observe (and participate in) a more unorthodox approach to scholarship.

Lest you be left completely adrift, perhaps a brief orientation is in order. Our journey commences where mine also originated: my personal experiences as a trans woman in classical spaces (Part II). From there I derive the principles that guide this exploration (III) and use them to divine our goal in this project (IV). I will explain in more detail the tools necessary for our voyage (V), and provide you with a brief history of those composers in whose steps we walk (VI). After a brief check-in to remind us what exactly we seek (VII), we will consult our wise ancestors and attempt some answers to our questions (VIII). At that time we can finally set sail and speak with other trans people to see what they’ve found in regards to their inclusion in classical music (IX). Their insights in mind, we will traverse three arias for transgender voices (X) and work

through how they might provide solutions for the problems we've raised throughout this process (XI). And finally, we redraw the map to locate our next steps beyond the margins of these pages (XII).

So, if you're settled in, let us begin with a story.

PART II

A STORY

I was assigned male at birth and raised as a boy for eighteen years. I was rarely enthusiastic about this fact, but as I was given no other options, “boy” is the label I adopted. If my parents had any suspicions, they kept them to themselves, but growing up my interests were very stereotypically feminine. I always loved singing, and I did so at any opportunity that arose. I was in choir from third grade until I graduated with my Bachelor of Arts in Music with a minor in LGBT Studies. I sang in musicals, I sang in talent shows, I sang in the dentist’s office, and until ninth grade, I loved my voice.

The most beloved aspect of my voice was my stratospheric range. I sang soprano through eighth grade because it made me happy. I loved belting the high notes that even some of the cis girls had trouble executing. While my choir directors were not always enthusiastic about letting me sing soprano, my ability to hit the notes and my insistence on singing them outweighed their concerns about gender.

Unfortunately, my voice broke the morning before I was supposed to sing cantor in the church service. I had dreamed of this solo for years and was one of the youngest people selected to lead it in my time at that church. As I was running through the piece, certain notes refused to come out, notes nowhere near the top of my register. When I forced one of them, it dropped down a fifth, an ugly quacking noise. Terrified, I told everyone I was sick and struggled through the performance. Since that moment, my music instructors slowly funneled me into the tenor section and focused on developing

the part of my voice I wished wasn't there in the first place. Every request to sing soprano I made was dismissed explicitly because of my assumed gender.

Of course, my directors side-stepped the gender issue whenever possible. Rather, they claimed it was because there were so few tenors in the district—apparently doing choir was too feminine for the rural Pennsylvania masculinity my male-identified classmates strived to embody. Stymied, I suffered through singing tenor, surreptitiously popping over to the soprano line mid-work whenever I could get away with it.

Part of my discomfort with singing tenor was that I identified as gay at the time, and by singing tenor, I was automatically assumed by composers to be a masculine man who only likes women. (For a detailed presentation of the vocal stereotypes in opera, see Catherine Clément's "Through Voices, History." There were some exceptions, but they were of the type that prove the rule.) By the time I came out as trans in sophomore year of undergrad, none of those things were true about me. And yet, I was still expected to sing tenor in piece after piece written by composers who didn't seem to think I existed.

I imagine that other female tenors have similar issues with repertoire, but for me this assumed male heterosexuality inherent in the word "tenor" was and is directly tied to the transphobic culture in which I was raised. I learned early in my musical education that the assignment of voice parts is not a neutral process; it is intricately involved in ciscentric, heteronormative modes of bodily regulation, such that all people whose voices are stable below a certain point are automatically assumed heterosexual cisgender men, and all people whose voices are stable above that point are automatically assumed heterosexual cisgender women. This can be found not just in the music we sing but in the

way directors often address the basses and tenors as “men” or “gentlemen” and the altos and sopranos as “women” or “ladies” in rehearsal.

I loved my voice until ninth grade because it was mine. But when it broke, it became a voice not my own. I felt disembodied from my voice, which was in the service of music not meant for me. When I started voice lessons my first year of undergrad, it was assumed that I would be training to sing tenor. It wasn't until my junior year that I felt comfortable telling my voice teacher that I wanted to sing countertenor.³ However by then, I had to unlearn years of improper training. Because I had taught myself how to reproduce high notes with a new voice—my voice teachers and choir instructors refused—I learned bad habits that, while effective, were not healthy and ended up costing me most of my upper register in the long run.

³ “Countertenor” also has gendered associations, which will be discussed in Part VIII p. 55.

PART III

A BILL OF RIGHTS

WHEREAS these experiences illustrate a lack of classical works by, for, and/or about trans and gender-nonconforming people;

WHEREAS these experiences also illustrate a systemic lack of attention to the realities and particularities of transgender vocal production and experience; and

WHEREAS trans and gender-nonconforming people exist and wish to make music in a range of genres, including Western classical music;

Therefore let it be RESOLVED, that:

I deserve to reclaim my voice as my own.

I deserve to sing what I want, when I want, how I want.

I deserve to value all parts of my voice, not just the parts an ableist, transphobic, heterocentric, imperialist, patriarchal musical establishment wants to hear.

I deserve music that reflects my experiences and my vocal journey.

I deserve music by trans people, for trans people, about trans people.

I deserve respect for my gender identity regardless of what notes I hit.

I deserve to be asked how I want to train my voice.

I deserve training that recognizes my specific realities as a trans woman, that recognizes that establishing resonance in the low end of my voice is at cross-purposes to sounding feminine in a ciscentric society that requires me to pass if I want to live.

I deserve a musical culture that does not assume that all basses, baritones, tenors, and countertenors are men, or that all altos and sopranos are women.

I deserved to be told when I started puberty that there exist hormone blockers that could have prevented my voice from dropping.

I deserve an understanding of the musical histories of people like me that is not steeped in racist, colonialist, transmisogynistic, homophobic, ableist rhetoric.

I deserve musical depictions of my identity that are accurate, or at the very least respectful and nuanced.

I deserve an affordable musical tradition that does not exclude trans people—many of whom are poor—from interacting with it.

I deserve to use the only voice I have.

PART IV
THE QUEST

Given these commitments and experiences, I am in search of a way to bring trans bodies, characters, and stories into Western classical music. The place where this project seems most fruitful is in the realm of opera. Unlike a song cycle or a choral work, opera's usage of multiple individual characters within a piece allows for more diversity of representation and nuanced development of those characters. Furthermore opera, once a relatively popular⁴ medium, has become increasingly inaccessible to anyone but rich, educated, older white folks (Abel 64). By reclaiming opera's popular moment, I hope to bridge the gap between the elitist Western classical music world and the trans bodies it erases.

Writing an opera is no small undertaking, so this project will instead serve as a workshop for drafting arias that I would then be able to expand into a full-length opera at a later time. Though presented here as a "mini-cycle," the pieces are more akin to the opera highlights popular in late capitalism (Abel 169). Through these arias, hopefully, a transgender classical music may emerge.

The phrase "transgender classical music" might seem oxymoronic, but it indicates a commitment to the idea that music is not neutral. The rise of New Musicology in the 1980s, and especially feminist articulations of it in the early 1990s (e.g. Susan McClary, Suzanne G. Cusick, Phillip Brett), opened up critical space for alternative conceptions of musical gender. Before this period, discussions of gender and other issues of

⁴ "Popular" in the sense of "of the people."

signification in music were relegated to narrative, lyrics, and other extra-musical sources, while “the music itself” was deemed *absolute music*: objectively beautiful and devoid of meaning. McClary’s *Feminine Endings* paved the way for critical analysis of the compositional structures that encode gender, race, class, and other markers previously deemed irrelevant by a discipline that “fastidiously declare[d] issues of musical signification to be off-limits to those engaged in legitimate scholarship” (4). Other scholars have adapted McClary’s perspective to articulate musics that might be said to be intrinsically female or queer (Brett et al.).

My project is to begin to articulate a way of encoding trans subjectivity into my compositions. Most of the musical scholarship focusing on gender transgression in Western classical music looks at castrati and pants roles (e.g. Dame).⁵ These roles have undeniably queer content yet are not explicitly trans subjectivities, of which there are virtually no examples (cf. Kaminsky; Thomas). In contrast, this project writes trans people into Western classical idioms through both musical and extra-musical means, including putting trans characters in opera and encouraging performance by trans bodies. The composition of the pieces will also come from an explicitly trans perspective, not only because I as the composer identify as trans, but also because my project will search for a musical idiom that encodes transness into its aural fabric.

Of course, one strategy I could employ in a search for a transgender musical idiom is to go outside of Western classical music and look at musics trans people are already making, an ethnomusicological examination of trans artists and their works.

⁵ Both castrati and pants roles can be found in the glossary and in Part VIII pp. 56-62.

However, as someone who thoroughly dislikes the classical canon and who has been oppressed by its transphobia, I want to combat its ciscentrism on its own terms so that other trans-identified persons do not feel as alienated by it as I did growing up in classical music. That is, instead of the traditional queer project of reading trans possibilities into extant works that are canonically coded cisgender/cissexual, I intend to create a work in the classical idiom for trans performers, because especially in those realms where Western classical music dominates (opera houses, film scores, music classrooms, etc.), allowing trans bodies access to this musical genre is an important political task.

On first glance, this project hinges on the idea that there is an essential trans subjectivity, which might undermine the expansion, polyvocality, and anti-monolithic nature of the very word *trans*. I therefore want to make an explicitly subjective work that emphasizes the politicization of the personal and the personalization of the political. I do not intend to articulate The Transgender Method of CompositionTM. I do, however, intend to point the way to trans possibilities and to open spaces for trans creators, performers, and characters who are otherwise hard to find in Western classical music.

Moreover, as a resident of a postmodern world whose academic interests find their home in an inherently multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary space, I do not wish to separate Western classical music from popular or non-Western musics uncritically. Nor do I wish to build bridges; I take much of my vision of trans scholarship from Donna Haraway's mythology of the cyborg, especially through Freya Jarman-Ivens's articulation of its trans and musicological possibilities.⁶ For Haraway's cyborg,

⁶ The insights of Jarman-Ivens are discussed in Part VIII pp. 37-38.

contradiction, disjunction, chaos, and coalition are vital strategies (151). As such, I seek to place classical, popular, and non-Western musics in conversation so that trans possibilities may emerge out of the silences and contradictions. I want to find the possibility within chaos, but I also recognize the fecundity of each of those traditions and the necessity of a transgender idiom in order to make my project legible in each of those disciplines.

PART V
METHODOLOGY

In light of these themes and possible directions, I will mix several avenues of inquiry in this thesis. Insights from performance art, social protest, and feminist and queer musicology will inform the creative aspects of this project, as well as critical reflection and reflexivity in my meta-analysis of the project. In terms of ideological underpinnings, this thesis engages with various texts from musicology, acoustics, history, philosophy, cultural studies, sociology, women's and gender studies, and LGBT studies to create an interdisciplinary picture of how transgender people might be included in Western classical music.

Because of these multiple diverse influences, this project will employ a wide array of methodological approaches. The most prominent modes of inquiry are textual analysis, Socratic dialogue, songwriting, composition, consciousness-raising, and autoethnography. Such a collection of methods will allow for discussion of trans composers, compositional method, characters, performers, dramaturgy, and musicology.

I make no pretense at having written this thesis in one piece. It is not a cohesive whole, presented with the conceit that its genesis is unrelated to time and space. My thesis is explicitly a work in progress. I write this section now, before I've written later sections or conducted workshops, certainly before a final product has taken shape. Whereas in other academic work the process is a way to get to the product, here the process *is* the product. I take this methodology from performance studies and its unique attention to "creativity; embodiment; artistic process and form; knowledge that comes

from doing; [and] participatory understanding” as vital components of knowledge building and thus scholarship (Conquergood 152).

I will work through many of the theoretical issues in conversation. I find that talking out complex problems makes them easier for me to digest, and I’ve adopted that style to the demands of this thesis. I’ve started with an annotated bibliography of sorts noting those few rare examples of trans inclusion in Western classical music so as to get a feel for what has been done before. After this, I present my literature review, cleverly disguised as a conversation with myself and with guest appearances from the theorists who got me thinking about these issues in the first place.

Following the bulk of the theoretical legwork, I consult with other trans performers about strategies for transgender inclusion. These collaborations turn into commissions for pieces, and it is through these compositions that I try to perform some of my theories about what trans-inclusive Western classical music would look like. In some ways these compositions are the *raison d’être* for this thesis, the culminating “product” of my arguments. And of course, I end this journey with humble suggestions for transgender inclusion in Western classical music.

PART VI

A TRANSGENDER SYLLABUS OF WESTERN CLASSICAL MUSIC

Brown, Tona, perf. *Suor Angelica*. By Giacomo Puccini. 1918. Singers Theater. Convergence, Alexandria, VA. 14 Mar. 2014. Performance.

Tona Brown is a violinist and mezzo-soprano who was the first transgender African-American woman to play at Carnegie Hall, as well as the first trans woman to sing for a sitting president (Young). Recently Brown sang The Princess in *Suor Angelica*, an alto role. Refusing the ciscentric notion that her assigned sex at birth limits how we can describe her voice, her identification as a mezzo-soprano is a very important rhetorical move that recognizes her gender identity. Her vocal technique “passes” as a mezzo voice except perhaps in her lowest notes⁷ and is of a high operatic quality, clearly evincing strong training in that register. I look to Brown not just as a maker of history but also as a “possibility model”⁸ for what the transgender voice can do in opera. Brown’s success demonstrates that transgender exclusion is not natural or necessary, but a product of transphobic practices. Furthermore, by being cast in a role that does not specify whether the character is cis or trans, she reminds us that we assume all people are cis unless specified otherwise, an assumption that needs to be deconstructed in order to make room for trans performers. I look forward to the

⁷ See pp. 43-45 on passing.

⁸ “I would never be so arrogant to think that someone should model their lives after me, but the idea of possibility, that idea that I get to live my dreams out in public hopefully will show other folks that that is possible, and so I prefer the term possibility model to role model” (Cox).

day when there are trans Lulus and Violettas, Orfeos and Don Giovannis, and no one finds it out of place.

Carlos, Wendy. *Beauty in the Beast*. East Side Digital, 1986. CD.

Wendy Carlos is arguably the only out transgender classical composer who might be said to have some access to canonicity through her experiments with the synthesizer in *Beauty in the Beast*, which is fully synthesized, and *Turned on Bach* before that. *Beauty in the Beast* also explores non-Western scales and microtonality to create new ways of organizing sound. It could be said, were one to attempt an articulation of a trans compositional technique, that the exploration of microtonality probes the space in-between two semitones in ways that promote fluidity and border crossing. In Western music since the nineteenth century, there are no notes between semitones (e.g. between B-flat and B), but Carlos throws this system out the window in her soundscape. One criticism of Carlos's music is that because most of it is for synthesizer, it sounds dated and simplistic in terms of timbre. That said, much of her experimenting with the synthesizer revolutionized the way we create music in the digital age. As a role model as well as a musical model, Carlos is integral to any discussion of discovering a trans musical idiom.

Davis, Julianne Wick and Dan Collins. *Southern Comfort*. Dir. Thomas Caruso. Perf. Annette O'Toole, Jeff McCarthy, Jeffrey Kuhn, Todd Cerveris, Natalie Joy Johnson, and Robin Skye. CAP21 Theater Company. CAP21 Black Box Theater, New York. Oct. 2011. Performance.

Robert Eads was a trans man who was repeatedly denied healthcare, resulting in his death. His story was the subject of a 2001 documentary *Southern Comfort*, which was turned into a musical in 2011. This show is unique in that it features

more than one trans character; five of the six main characters and several of the actors are transgender. This allows for nuance in its representation of trans lives and centers trans experiences narratively. Trans people are not presented as the subject of ridicule, mockery, or disgust, but are instead valued as complex agents with struggles and joys. It is interesting that the two lead roles were played by cis people even though trans singers were available to fill the remaining trans roles. This brings up the ethics of whether or not cis people should be allowed to play trans roles, especially at the expense of employing trans people. Nevertheless, a musical with such a large number of trans roles is incredibly important.

Kaminsky, Laura, composer. *As One*. By Mark Campbell and Kimberly Reed. Perf. Sasha Cooke and Kelly Markgraf. BAM Fisher, New York. 4 Sept. 2014.

This opera features two singers playing one character: a baritone playing Hannah before transition and a mezzo playing Hannah after transition. Comprised of a series of numbers, *As One* details how Hannah comes to terms with herself as a trans woman, and how she organizes her experiences, eventually integrating these two fractured perspectives and singing “as one.” Trans experience is centered and communicated with empathy. At least one of the librettists is trans, which lends authenticity to the representation. The strategy of two singers of different voice parts might be more effective for stories of AFAB trans men, because testosterone lowers the voice while estrogen has little effect on vocal production (Zimman 54).

LaBruce, Bruce, dir. *Pierrot Lunaire*. By Arnold Schoenberg. Perf. Susanne Sachsse. Die Lamb, 2014. Film.

Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* is one of the pioneering works of twentieth century classical music. Premiering in 1912, the song cycle features Pierrot, the archetypal sad clown, and his wanderings under the moon. The score does not specify a particular voice part, but it is almost always performed by a soprano.

Bruce LaBruce's film version about a century later retains this convention, but instead he portrays Pierrot as a transgender man. LaBruce thematizes masculinity in his production and Pierrot's desperate search for his place in the world.

Through this, LaBruce reminds us that outside *Pierrot Lunaire*, Pierrot is almost always represented as a man, and the convention of the role being sung by a woman is relatively strange. Making Pierrot a trans man not only reconciles these two Pierrots but also opens up a new avenue of interpretation.

Larson, Jonathan, composer. *RENT: Filmed Live on Broadway*. Dir. Michael John Warren. Perf. Will Chase, Adam Kantor, Michael McElroy, et al. Nederlander Theatre, New York. 7 Sept. 2008. Sony Pictures Releasing, 2009. DVD.

A queer update of Puccini's *La Bohème*, *RENT* is a rock opera set in 1980s New York City at the height of the AIDS epidemic with which at least four major characters are infected. It follows the trials and tribulations of a group of friends as they deal with drug addiction, death, infidelity, poverty, and isolation. Love and loss permeate the work to create a tentative hope in the face of certain death, emphasizing the importance of community in coping with adversity. For its time, it was a very progressive work in terms of LGBT representation—indeed the

descriptor LGBT is actually literal for a change because there is a lesbian, a gay man, a bisexual woman, and a trans person shown onstage. However, some of the characters conform to pervasive stereotypes about the queer community, such as the promiscuous bisexual and the trans woman as cross-dresser/gay-man-in-a-dress. This does not take away from the fact that this powerful work brought AIDS activism to the Broadway stage at a time when AIDS was rarely represented there. The musical/opera is an unapologetically queer, anti-capitalist call for AIDS to be taken seriously that breaks the musical silence on the topic as a continuation of the ideas of ACT UP,⁹ which appears in the work. As a rare instance where a trans character appears positively in musical theater, *RENT* provides one possible model of trans vocal and visual representation that allows this character to be both campy and serious, both over-the-top and all-too-real. It also doesn't shy away from portraying her as a sexual/romantic being, allowing her a love duet. While the conversation on trans issues has moved ahead in the almost twenty years since the show's premier, it still provides important insights into staging the trans body.

O'Brien, Richard, composer. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Dir. Jim Sharman. Perf. Tim Curry, Susan Sarandon, Barry Bostwick, et al. 1975. Twentieth Century Fox, 2002. DVD.

The status of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a queer camp classic is rarely disputed, although it is controversial to this day. Based on O'Brien's 1973 stage

⁹ ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) was an activist group founded in the late 80s as a response to the government's non-response to the AIDS crisis. For more on them, see Powell.

musical, *The Rocky Horror Show*, it portrays the shenanigans of three visitors to Earth from the planet Transsexual, including Dr. Frank-N-Furter, a trans woman famously played by Tim Curry. The narrative follows Brad and Janet as they get sucked into the intergalactic drama when their car breaks down outside Frank-N-Furter's mansion. One important aspect of screenings of this film is that there is a strong tradition of audience participation; many people dress up and act out the movie as it screens, or shout obscenities and throw things at designated times. This interactive element is a space where queer identities can be explored and celebrated, as occasioned by an already queer film. The movie itself is deliciously awful in terms of plot, dialogue, and special effects, which is part of its charm. However, more damning criticisms are that through the show's main character it once again paints homosexuals and trans women as sick, monstrous killers who are here to seduce the menfolk. It also normalizes rape in the bedroom scenes and encourages slut-shaming, especially in the audience script, and there is significant ableism directed at Dr. Scott and the Criminologist, among other things (Nyux). These are aspects that call into question whether or not *Rocky Horror* is still politically and culturally transgressive, or if it is instead reifying outdated norms and problematic images. It is certainly a product of the nascent Gay Lib and Women's Lib movements of the seventies with its focus on claiming women's sexuality and celebrating drag and queer love. Because of this, it is stuck within long-problematized modes of critique that are no longer effective. I turn to this work not as a political model per se but as a model of

campy playfulness, as well as of trans celebration in music, which is still rare. It occasions a consideration of the political implications of any artistic decision made and how well these decisions may age.

Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. By Stephan Elliott and Allan Scott. Perf. Jeremy Stanford, Tony Sheldon, Daniel Scott et al. Melbourne Theater Company. Lyric Theater, Sydney. 7 Oct. 2006. Performance.

Based on the cult classic, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, the musical follows two drag queens (Mitzy and Felicia) and a trans woman (Bernadette) on their trip across Australia in their bus, Priscilla. This scenario gives us occasion to understand the complicated relationship between trans women and drag queens. Trans women are often mistaken for drag queens; however, many trans women come out of that culture. The tensions among the three main characters emphasize the distinctions between these identities, as well as the difficulties AMAB feminine people face in society. While the film doesn't operate like a traditional musical, the stage version has the performers sing the songs featured in the movie, allowing the performers to embody the songs instead of lip-synching, which helps Bernadette escape the attitude that she's "just" a drag queen. Unfortunately, Felicia is consistently transphobic towards Bernadette and Bernadette is almost always played by a cis man, but compared to other shows, *Priscilla* handles her story relatively respectfully and accurately. I take from this show an attention to the difficulties of staging popular music and of distinguishing drag queens and trans women onstage.

Thomas, Richard, composer. *Jerry Springer: The Opera*. By Richard Thomas and Stewart Lee. Perf. David Soul, David Bedella, Ryan Molloy, et al. Cambridge

Theater, London. [8 Jan. 2005]. Avalon Television, 2005. Shaunthe4995th. *JERRY SPRINGER the opera*. YouTube.com, 9 Feb. 2014. Web. 8 Mar. 2014.

Despite its many problems, *Jerry Springer* is one of the few operas I enjoyed watching, not only for its entertainment value, but also because the music was both beautiful and relevant to a contemporary audience. The show parodies a typical episode of *The Jerry Springer Show*, including archetypical stock guests such as a “chick with a dick,” a “crack-whore,” an adult baby, and a stripper. At the end of Act I Jerry is killed, and the rest of the show takes place in Hell where Jerry is recruited to facilitate resolution of the family drama between Satan, Jesus, Adam, Eve, and even God Himself. The show is simultaneously a celebration and a scathing critique of both Jerry as a businessman and of the audiences and guests who keep the show running. The show trades in stereotypes along racial, gendered, sexual/romantic, class, regional, and bodily lines that both create opportunities for “real people” instead of conventionally pretty singers and that re-entrench the Othering done by the show. Thus, the characters can hardly be said to be positive representations—especially Tremont as the “chick with a dick.” However, it is extremely rare to have a trans woman played by an AMAB person yet orchestrated in the typical mezzo range, creating a wonderful precedent for trans vocality in opera. To wit, this is the first well-known opera to include an explicitly transgender character, which makes her envoicing of the utmost importance. The fact that this was accomplished in the aural context of a surprisingly classical score makes it all the more relevant to this project.

Trask, Stephen, composer. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Dir. John Cameron Mitchell. Perf. John Cameron Mitchell, Miriam Shor, Stephen Trask, Andrea Martin, and Michael Pitt. New Line Cinema, 2001. DVD.

Even though the main character is somewhat ambivalent about her gender identity, *Hedwig* is an explicitly transsexual musical. The writers and actors often do not self-identify as trans, but the character of Hedwig is deliciously glamorous in her performance of gender. The musical details a love affair gone wrong, involving both the politics of transgender desire and the business moves that Tommy makes to sell her out. Though there is a plot, much of the drama is told between performances by Hedwig, creating an opportunity for her to tell her own story and not have it reappropriated by cis people. As an example of possibilities for the trans voice, Hedwig is a study in contradictions. Her singing voice, though not traditionally feminine, is meant to sound authentic and therefore somewhat respectful of her identity. One poignant criticism of *Hedwig* is that it's not so much a musical about a trans woman as it is about a gay male fantasy of what a trans woman is, especially given that few if any of the people involved in the process of creating it were trans (Jones). However, it is a rare representation of trans bodies on a musical stage that provides great opportunity for exploration of how to orchestrate the voice for trans women, and also the possibilities for using rock idioms to foster inclusion.

PART VII

A QUIZ

1. Is the search for “trans opera” always already essentializing and reifying?
2. Can non-trans people write trans music? Can trans music exist without the performance or the performers? Should it?
3. What is a trans composition method?
4. What should be done about the conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality in voice part assignment?
5. How do we mediate the lack of classical training in many trans people’s vocal journeys?
6. How do intersecting axes of oppression and difference inflect this project?
7. How do/should divisions within the trans community along identity lines affect the aural fabric?
8. What is a trans aural fabric?
9. How/should this project relate to other efforts by trans musicians?
10. What is a trans dramaturgy?
11. Is the boundary between dramaturgy and music productive?
12. What is the appropriate tone of a trans opera? Is there one appropriate tone?

PART VIII

A CONVERSATION¹⁰

May 19, 2015

Enter Xavia and hir alter ego Andromeda, talking animatedly.¹¹

ANDROMEDA

I'm confused; what do you mean by "transgender music"? I'm assuming that's just music by trans people?

XAVIA

Not quite. I mean, we can also refer to music by trans people as trans music, but when I say "trans music" in this context, I mean a particular method of composition, I guess an *écriture transgenre*.

ANDROMEDA

Cixous realness!

LOIS TYSON

For [Hélène] Cixous, women will not learn to resist patriarchal thinking by becoming part of the patriarchal power structure. [...] We therefore need a new, feminine language that undermines or eliminates the patriarchal binary thinking that oppresses and silences women. This kind of language, which Cixous believes best expresses itself in writing, is

¹⁰ Here, I borrow a strategy used by Damen Joe (with some alterations) to model my multiple voices in approaching this subject. Both Xavia and Andromeda are me (Andromeda is my middle name), having a conversation with myself in the form of a Socratic dialogue with copious interjections of direct quotes from other theorists.

¹¹ For a discussion of Xavia's pronoun usage, see p. 65. Andromeda will use she/her/hers pronouns.

called *écriture féminine* (feminine writing). It is fluidly organized and freely associative. It resists patriarchal modes of thinking and writing, which generally require prescribed, “correct” methods of organization, rationalist rules of logic, [...] and linear reasoning. (100-1)

XAVIA

Right, so then *écriture transgenre* would be a transgender method of composition.

ANDROMEDA

So you’re saying the method is transgender even if the practitioner is not?

XAVIA

Basically, yeah.

LOIS TYSON

Although women’s prolonged bonds with their mothers, with their original source of power and energy, have given them a privileged relationship to *écriture féminine*, a man who can get in touch with his early bond with his mother can also produce it. (101)

ANDROMEDA

Okay sidestepping the psychoanalysis stuff completely, doesn’t this sound kind of essentialist,¹² and also incredibly transphobic?

XAVIA

Well yeah, I mean a lot of French psychoanalytic feminism is like that, partially because they’re writing before transgender issues were widely understood and acknowledged, but also partially because they don’t see sex and gender as separate things.

¹² Discussed on pp. 29-30.

ANDROMEDA

You're about to whip out your favorite Butler passage, aren't you?

XAVIA

...maybe.

JUDITH BUTLER

And what is “sex” anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such “facts” for us? Does sex have a history? [...] If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. (11)

ANDROMEDA

But transgender experiences should be a glaring counterexample to this!

XAVIA

Yes and no. Firstly, Butler goes on to argue that it's not sex that creates gender—which is the grossly essentialist argument that most often gets used against trans people because in such a model trans women are “really” men¹³—but gender that creates sex (11). And we can actually see that in the rhetorical strategies trans people employ when talking about their bodies. For example, I consistently refer to my genitalia as my clit, vagina, etc., even though most people would not agree with that usage since I have not had gender confirmation surgery.

¹³ See Raymond.

ANDROMEDA

I...don't think anyone needed that much detail about your hoo-hah.

XAVIA

Whatever, the point is that it's actually very common for both cis and trans people to conflate sex and gender when talking about their experiences. I think many trans activists would argue that the discrepancy is not between sex and gender, but between assigned sex/gender and sex/gender identity. Which is not to say that there aren't trans women who identify as male, or trans men who refer to their genitalia as their vagina, and that certainly doesn't disqualify them from being trans. This might be where we start getting into distinctions between binary and non-binary experiences, or the unique needs of transsexual members of the transgender community, but we can come back to that. We were talking about transgender music.

ANDROMEDA

Right, so can we agree, though, that the defining characteristics of *écriture féminine* are not universal experiences of women but steeped in white, Western, cisgender, heterosexual, middle- and upper-class, able-bodied rhetorics?

XAVIA

Heterosexual is debatable depending on if we want to bring Irigaray or Wittig into the mix, but other than that, yeah. That was one of Kristeva's major problems with it.

LOIS TYSON

[Julia Kristeva] believes that any theory that *essentializes* women (that is, that posits essential—inborn, biological—characteristics for women) misrepresents their infinite

diversity and leaves them vulnerable to the patriarchal essentialization of women as naturally submissive, overly emotional, and so forth. Indeed, for Kristeva, *the feminine* can't be defined because there are as many definitions of *the feminine* as there are women. (102-03)

XAVIA

Which is why I keep wrestling with McClary's analysis of *Genesis II* by Janika Vandervelde. I'm intrigued by her argument about *Genesis II* having a different conception of musical climax (or *jouissance* if we want to keep serving Cixous), but it does imply a very specific experience of female embodiment.

SUSAN MCCLARY

Interestingly, many women students recognize in the clockwork¹⁴ an image of female erotic pleasure—pleasure that is not concerned with being somewhere else, indeed, pleasure that need not even be thought of as tied specifically to sexual encounter, but pleasure that permits confident, free, and open interchange with others. They also recoil in horror when the clockwork is subjected to the assault of the violent string parts.¹⁵ By contrast, many of the men in the classes often report having heard the clockwork as a “void,” and they tend to be relieved when the strings rush in to “make something happen.” (124)

¹⁴ A specific motive she describes as “a minimalistic ‘clockwork’ pattern in the piano: a pattern that repeats cyclically but which, because it is internally marked by asymmetries of rhythm and pitch, is endlessly fascinating. [...] It creates a sense of existence *in* time that is stable, ordered, yet ‘timeless’” (117-18).

¹⁵ Violent in that they employ “the goal-oriented gestures of self-expression and striving that typically characterize Western concert music” (119).

ANDROMEDA

I think it's definitely a very seductive argument, if I may make a pun. And especially if we concede that the structure of Western classical music itself is masculinely gendered (McClary 7-12), then it follows that there are alternative ways to structure music that are femininely gendered (by actual feminine people). And from there, it's pretty easy to theorize gay music,¹⁶ lesbian music,¹⁷ trans music, etc.

XAVIA

Right, and I think that's why it's important to specify that anyone can write transgender music, because if we accept that Western classical music is conceived of in masculine terms, then all this time women have been making men's music to the extent that they conform to classical models.

SUSAN MCCLARY

One need not be a woman, in other words, to be gravely concerned with getting down off the beanstalk.¹⁸ But the deconstructive methods of postmodernism—the practice of questioning the claims to universality by the “master narratives” of Western culture, revealing the agendas behind traditional “value-free” procedures—are also beginning to clear a space in which a woman's voice can at last be heard *as a woman's voice*. (123)

XAVIA

And if men can “get down off the beanstalk,” then cisgender people can write transgender music.

¹⁶See Brett, “Britten's Dream.”

¹⁷ See Rycenga.

¹⁸ i.e. resisting the phallogocentrism of Western classical music.

ANDROMEDA

You're not suggesting though that this *écriture transgenre* is the only possible way to accomplish transgender inclusion in Western classical music, right? Or that this is necessary?

XAVIA

Absolutely not! I think there is great power in expanding all musical structures to include transgender people. However, transgender music might end up being the easiest way to accomplish it. We need a holistic approach to inclusion for it to happen, which includes musical forms that reflect our unique cultural positions.

ANDROMEDA

I'm still hung up on cisgender people being able to compose transgender music. I don't know that I feel comfortable allowing cis people to play trans roles YET AGAIN or perform trans works without trans people, especially since they don't face the same dangers for gender transgression that trans people face.

XAVIA

I definitely think that's an important point to emphasize. I should clarify that we're talking about compositional structures and conventions, not content. I firmly believe that opera, however it's structured, should make room for transgender performers to play transgender roles and roles that do not specify whether the character is cis or trans (which is most of them). In the same way, I don't think it's a problem for transgender music to contain roles for cis people. At any rate transgender music extends past opera to other forms of Western classical music including instrumental genres.

ANDROMEDA

Speaking of instrumental genres, here's your shameless lead-in to an example of what transgender music as a critical lens would look like.

XAVIA

Thanks, Andromeda! Funny you should ask! For a proto-trans model, I follow Lawrence Kramer's essay, "*Carnaval, Cross-Dressing, and the Woman in the Mirror*," which examines the gender play in Robert Schumann's *Carnaval*.

LAWRENCE KRAMER

As my account [...] suggests, [...] the ultimate cultural term of *Carnaval* is gender. In constructing a piece out of miniatures—*scènes mignonnes* he calls them, tiny scenes, cute scenes—Schumann follows a traditionally “feminine” paradigm. For, as Naomi Schor has shown, modern European culture has consistently encoded the art of the miniature, the art of the detail, as feminine. In constructing most of the *scènes mignonnes* themselves out of the repetition of small details—a melodic phrase, a mode of attack or articulation, a rhythmic effect—Schumann follows the same paradigm again. Yet in linking his miniatures through the motivic transformations cited by Dalhaus, and in closing the cycle of miniatures with a recapitulation, in quasi-sonata form, of its opening themes, Schumann also follows a traditionally “masculine” paradigm: the paradigm of mastery in which variegated details are structured into a unified whole. This “bi-sexuality”¹⁹ in Schumann's role as the composer of *Carnaval* is the mainspring of musical action within the cycle. The music constitutes an effort—although not, finally, a

¹⁹ Here Kramer is using “bi-sexuality” in the Freudian sense of pertaining to both sexes (in a two-sex model). See MacDowall for a historical analysis of the word “bisexual.”

sustainable effort—to affirm unrestricted gender mobility as a source of social and artistic value. (306-07)

XAVIA

Basically, Kramer points out that Schumann uses feminine forms and images and presents himself as a fractured subject masquerading as several characters, including women, especially through the use of his famous personal motive.

ANDROMEDA

Wait, are you trying to tell me Schumann was trans?

XAVIA

No. Well, I don't know, I wasn't there. First of all, we should break the fourth wall and remind our readers that drag, cross-dressing, and transgender identity are distinct concepts, as described in the glossary. Secondly, I should specify that I'm using the phrase "transgender music" as a stand-in for the unwieldy "transgender and gender-nonconforming musical style"; remember, it's about style, not identity. Arguing that someone makes transgender music doesn't automatically mean you're claiming them as trans, although Goldin-Perschbacher comes close.

ANDROMEDA

What do you mean by that?

XAVIA

Well, in her essay on Jeff Buckley, she argues that his deployment of emotional vulnerability, female subject positions through songs first performed by and written for women, and vocal style constitutes a transgender vocality.

SHANA GOLDIN-PERSCHBACHER

Buckley's identification with female singers went so far as calling himself a "male chanteuse" or "a chanteuse with a penis."²⁰ These identifications suggest a multiply gendered vocality, one in which the torchy, emotional expressiveness and even vocal ranges of (these) female singers is embodied by a man. It is not that Buckley disavowed his biological [sic] maleness or social performances of it, but that he was not limited by white middle-class heterosexual American standards of it. This traditional notion of masculinity depends, by definition, on *not* being a woman and *not* being gay. White, straight, middle-class masculinity is performed most successfully when one is in control, not out of control, is strong, rather than vulnerable, and takes possession, rather than showing need. Buckley though, did not enforce these standards in his own performances, which, as my examples will illustrate, were often vulnerable and sometimes seemed out of control. And he did not cling to his dominant identifications at the expense of identifying with women, black or queer people, or their music. (215)

ANDROMEDA

Okay, reminding myself that he doesn't need to be trans to make trans music, but what about his performance style makes it trans instead of just an alternative form of cis masculinity?

XAVIA

This reminds me to return to your earlier question about cis privilege and the lack of risk for cis composers of trans music, which makes it feel appropriate to claim that such a

²⁰ Compare this phrasing to the common epithet "chick with a dick" aimed at trans women.

thing is possible. And I think there is a similar risk in allowing men access to *écriture féminine*, but as McClary mentioned above, I believe this uneasy alliance opens up room for transgender people to create musics that serve their needs. And I think Buckley's vocality participates in opening up that room.

SHANA GOLDIN-PERSCHBACHER

Buckley's identification with women and widely ranged gendered singing styles suggest a kind of transgendered [sic throughout²¹] vocality—a vocality that resists identification with his biological [sic] sex. I use the term “transgendered” to describe Buckley's voice, knowing that, for the most part, he was recognizable as a heterosexual male. Thus, unlike many transgendered people, he did not face the everyday oppression and dangers of living in between genders, or having crossed over “untouchable” boundaries. However, his gender transgressions were and continue to be noticeable and defining to almost everyone who hears him, disturbing notions of rock masculinity and influencing listeners' conceptions of their own identities. Since Buckley went so far as to claim that he identified with and emulated the vocal styles of the female roles of the songs he sang, my use of the term “transgendered” is not entirely metaphorical. (215)

XAVIA

Now, in an operatic setting, Buckley's vocality is not as progressive—there he'd just be a countertenor—but Goldin-Perschbacher's argument is basically that Buckley's vocal grain contributes to what I'm calling a trans music project.

²¹ “Transgendered” is a misspelling, one that many trans people find disrespectful. The proper spelling is “transgender,” or “trans” for short.

ANDROMEDA

Vocal grain?

XAVIA

Right, so I use the phrase “vocal grain” in reference to Jarman-Ivens’s working through of Barthes to signify those aspects of the voice that indicate a bodily source.

FREYA JARMAN-IVENS

[Roland] Barthes’s notion of the grain emerges from an earlier set of concepts in his essay [“The Grain of the Voice”], namely a distinction between what he calls “geno-song” and “pheno-song,” borrowing the prefixes from Julia Kristeva’s distinctions between “geno-text” and “pheno-text.” Pheno-song refers to “everything in the performance which is in the service of communication,” those vocal functions that are culturally coded and assimilated: “the structure of the language being sung, the rules of the genre, [...] the composer’s idiolect, the style of the interpretation: [...] everything which it is customary to talk about.” Geno-song, in contrast, refers to the aspects of singing located outside of this. It is not concerned with direct communication and representation, functioning instead as a playful signifier with no culturally recognized signified. The grain of the voice is found within the geno-song, and is identified by Barthes as specifically the perceptibility of the body’s presence in the singing voice: “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.” It can be thought of, then, as those aspects of the voice where the physiology of vocal production is audible. (5)

ANDROMEDA

So then valuing vocal grain is one way to integrate trans voices, because it values the body from which the voice originates.

XAVIA

Exactly! Especially since many trans people don't receive formal voice training.

ANDROMEDA

And trans music would take that into account.

XAVIA

Basically. Trans music should center embodied voices, or play with that boundary between the embodied and the disembodied. Jarman-Ivens makes very fascinating arguments about vocal grain and technology that have bearing on trans music, but I think for the purposes of this thesis we'll stick with "live" opera.

ANDROMEDA

What would centering the embodied trans voice look like?

XAVIA

Well, I think it means taking into account what the possibilities are for trans voices in the early twenty-first century. For trans people who either don't want physical interventions or cannot afford them, their singing ranges will be similar to those of cis people sharing their assigned sex at birth.²² As such, much of the literature on trans voices is about transsexuals. (Zimman is a notable exception, which I'll talk about in a second.) That

²² Unfortunately, intersex vocality is beyond the scope of this thesis, and I'm actually not sure what work if any has been done in this area. While trans and intersex communities are distinct, they do intersect and have some issues in common, which makes understanding intersex vocality an important next step.

said, trans people not seeking formal therapy or physical modifications can still vocally transition to a sound that better reflects how they see themselves, both in singing and in speech.

The most commonly referenced difference between male and female voices is the fundamental frequency (f_0 or F0), or the basic frequency they're using. Translated into pitch for example, if a person is singing A4, their fundamental frequency is 440 Hz. Similarly, "speaking fundamental frequency (SFF) generally refers to the mean or average of the frequencies produced in connected speech sample by a speaker" (Gelfer and Mordaunt 189).

GELFER AND MORDAUNT

Many [transgender/transsexual] clients may have difficulty achieving a SFF that is at or near the mean for women of their chronological age, but this does not preclude them from achieving a perceptually feminine voice. Normative data on women's connected speech reveal that a variety of SFFs are typical. Research literature reports means of SFFs from 224 Hz for females ages 20 to 29, to 187 Hz for the 40 to 50 age range. Fortunately for older [trans women], SFF for females tends to decrease with age. Although women in their 20s may be expected to speak at frequencies in excess of 200 Hz, women in their 30s, 40s, and 50s are reported to be below 200 Hz, which may be more attainable for the [trans woman] client. (192)

ANDROMEDA

Is that why people sometimes mistake you for being in your 30s?

XAVIA

...I like to think it's because I present a mature, sophistic—haha, yeah I can't even finish that sentence with a straight face. Probably.

ANDROMEDA

Anyway, so a lot of voice therapy for trans women focuses on raising the SFF, but it's not that simple, is it?

XAVIA

No. For example, people are still able to tell the gender of pre-pubescent children, even though their vocal tracts are more or less identical in size. Cartei and Reby's work with children has demonstrated that formant frequencies also play a significant factor in voice gender recognition.

ANDROMEDA

Alright, I'll bite, what's a formant frequency?

XAVIA

Mkay, quickie physics lesson. When we sing a pitch, that's not the only pitch that comes out. Usually when we talk about pitch, we mean the fundamental frequency, but the vibration of the vocal folds that makes that sound also makes sounds at a bunch of other pitches simultaneously. The frequencies of these sounds form a specific mathematical series in relation to the fundamental frequency called overtones. However, some overtones are harder to hear than others. Meanwhile, the vocal tract has many resonators, or things off of which to bounce sound that makes them louder. Not only do these resonators make the fundamental frequency louder, but we can also adjust those

resonators to make specific overtones louder. There are certain groupings of frequencies to which our resonators tune called formant frequencies. The relative amplification of one set of formant frequencies over another is how we tell vowels apart (McKinney 146).

ANDROMEDA

Cool. What does that mean for us?

CARTEI AND REBY

Sex identification in adult voices is substantially determined by acoustic differences in fundamental frequency (F_0) and in the overall pattern of formant frequencies (ΔF , or formant spacing), which in turn reflect anatomical dimorphisms in the vocal apparatus between the two [sic] sexes. [...] Several acoustic investigations have shown that, while children of both [sic] genders speak with similar F_0 s boys speak with lower formants and consequently narrower ΔF than girls despite the absence of overall differences in vocal tract length between the two [sic] sexes before puberty. This dimorphism has led to the suggestion that pre-pubertal sex differences in ΔF have a behavioural basis. (1)

ANDROMEDA

Ohhhh, so if formant spacing is gendered, then one way to change the gender perception of someone's voice is to change the formant spacing.

XAVIA

Gold star! Although changing SFF without changing ΔF , or vice versa, is not sufficient to accomplish this; you need to work on both (Carew, Dacakis, and Oates; Hillenbrand and Clarke).

ANDROMEDA

Awesome, and then we're done right?

XAVIA

Not exactly. Hancock, Colton, and Douglas found that semitone range and upward intonation were markers of passing in trans women.

ANDROMEDA

I'm starting to notice two things. First of all, a lot of this research seems to essentialize both sex differences and gender differences. Like, besides the annoying binaristic understanding of sex and sex/gender conflation, this is getting uncomfortably close to a two-culture approach for explaining gender differences in communication.

DEFRANCISCO, PALCZEWSKI, AND

MCGEOUGH

The **two-culture approach** is based on sociolinguists Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker's (1982) paper "A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication," in which they posit that communication problems between women and men are similar to problems that arise when persons from different language groups attempt to communicate. The two groups (men and women) have different cultural goals and rules for conversation (masculine and feminine style), which lead to communication problems or "miscommunication." The original scholars proposed this approach in earnest as a way to identify gender construction in talk, but it actually reveals more about society's gendered binary expectations regarding how to talk like a girl or boy, how to sound

feminine or masculine, than about the diverse ways in which people actually do gender.

(64)

[...] Although researchers find no support for the two-culture approach, cultural expectations continue to influence how speakers are judged. Perceived differences in gender/sex communication style far exceed any actual ones. Even if persons do not communicate in ways that fit binary gendered norms, people expect them to. These expectations are real, and they have real consequences for people's identities and abilities to accomplish their conversational and relational goals. (68)

XAVIA

That's a great point. And I think especially DeFrancisco, Palczewski, and McGeough's note about the expectations and consequences of gender conformance connects in really well with the notion of passing, which absolutely inflects any discussion of trans vocality or performance.

JULES FÜTTY

Brooke Kroeger points out that the underlying theoretical conceptualizations of passing are quite conflicting and controversial: 'In the most general way, it is passing when people effectively *present* themselves as *other than who they understand themselves to be*. ... Passing never feels *natural*. It is a second skin *that never adheres*.' [sic throughout] This conceptualization of passing is based upon the myth of a natural coherent 'self' conceived of as a combination of, and consequently potentially split between, 'inside' [...] and 'outside' [...]. In this understanding, passing is an effective self-presentation as *other* ('outside'), which does not correspond to the self-

understanding ('inside'), and is hence a trick, an imposter. Within (affirmative) transgender knowledge productions this understanding and usage of passing is not only challenged, but the illusion of a natural gendered/sexed self and body is also debunked. Passing most of the time is used to signify the *individual* experience and *moment* of being regarded as how trans people *understand themselves*, or how they prefer to be regarded in respect to their self-identified gender/sex. (62-63)

ANDROMEDA

This is a really important and complex issue in the trans community, because the question quickly becomes: passing as what? Usually the answer to that question is passing as cis. So what I like about Fütty's navigation is that we're only passing as a version of ourselves that is congruent with our identities.

XAVIA

Which is not to say that passing as cis isn't important in a ciscentric and transphobic society.

LESLIE FEINBERG

I have lived as a man because I could not survive openly as a transgendered [sic] person. Yes, I am oppressed in this society, but I am not merely a *product* of oppression. That is a phrase that renders all our trans identities meaningless. Passing means having to hide your identity in fear, in order to live. Being forced to pass is a recent historical development. It is *passing* that is a product of oppression. (qtd. in Surkan 24)

ANDROMEDA

All too true. And that's a question trans music should probably answer or at least explore: What is the place of passing in trans music?

XAVIA

What was the second thing you were noticing?

ANDROMEDA

What?

XAVIA

Back when we were talking about vocal therapy.

ANDROMEDA

Oh, that most of your examples have been trans women.

XAVIA

Ah, that would be because a lot of the research on vocal therapy in trans people has been done on trans women.

ANDROMEDA

Why?

XAVIA

Trans women tend to request vocal therapy more often than trans men, because unlike testosterone, estrogen has little effect on the voice once it's been androgenized by puberty (Zimman 54). Which is not to say that trans men do not also benefit from vocal therapy; they're just less likely to feel like they need it (Adler, Constansis, and Van Borsel 154).

ANDROMEDA

So whereas AMAB trans people who don't have access to hormone blockers before puberty must adapt the voice they already have, AFAB trans people who take testosterone will get the change in f_0 as a result of the treatment.

XAVIA

Yes, however, Constansis warns about taking too high a dose too soon, because this could lead to an entrapped voice, which is not ideal for singing.

ALEXANDROS CONSTANSIS

When testosterone levels increase within the body of an FTM person, both the larynx and, subsequently, the vocal folds begin to lose their bio-female [sic throughout] characteristics. The vocal folds are attached, via the enclosed vocal ligaments, 'in front to the angle of the thyroid cartilage, and behind to the vocal process of the arytenoid.' [sic throughout] Testosterone during bio-male [sic throughout] puberty initially creates oedema on the folds. Then, due to accumulated collagen, the folds' thickening and elongation become permanent and the voice acquires a masculine fundamental frequency. The difference now in our case is that due to the fact that our 'second puberty,' i.e. transition, is happening later than expected in life, an FTM's vocal folds can thicken but cannot become as long as a bio-male's. The reason is that the cartilage cannot grow enough at this stage in order to accommodate the changes. Moreover, testosterone is known to lead to early ossification of the cartilage. [...] In an FTM's voice, this fact becomes an added detriment. What is more, it seems that the difference in development of the non-ossified versus the abruptly ossified areas of the larynx is detrimental to the

overall instrument's structural balance, especially when the immediate high levels of testosterone do not permit the cartilage to adjust gradually. In this case, the new male vocal folds can become entrapped within a less-than-adequately enlarged larynx. The resultant voice will sound weak and permanently hoarse and lack the right harmonics. (par. 15)

ANDROMEDA

And that's why your transmasculine friends started out on lower doses of testosterone and increase gradually.

XAVIA

Exactly.

ANDROMEDA

Now might be a good time to talk about the fact that not all people who pursue hormones are trans men or trans women.

XAVIA

Another quality segue! Like we were talking about before, while passing can be a tool of survival and safety, the question of passing "as" resurfaces in talking about transmasculine vocality, and by extension, transfeminine vocality.

LAL ZIMMAN

One story that could be told about the data I presented [about transmasculine vocal change during hormone therapy] is that some speakers have been more successful than others in masculinizing their voices than others [sic]. And indeed, I did find more extensive acoustic changes among some speakers than others. As I discussed

[elsewhere], the focus on “success” that is found in much of the language pathology literature on trans voices depends on the assumption that trans people share a common stylistic target. Specifically, it would require the assumption that transmasculine people aspire to sound like hetero- and gender[-]normative men. When we consider the complicated relationships these speakers have with masculinity, a more compelling explanation for their inter- and intra-speaker variation alike can be reached by recognizing the possibility of detaching and recombining the multiple layers of sex and gender I have just identified. (186-87)

ANDROMEDA

In other words, transmasculine people don’t take hormones to sound like men; they take hormones to sound like themselves.

XAVIA

Right, which paints an endlessly complex picture of trans voices. Moreover, we need to recognize that strategies that work for binary trans people’s voices may or may not work for non-binary trans people’s voices and vice versa.

ANDROMEDA

So if we’re centering embodiment, especially trans bodies, it seems like any piece of trans music would be specific to its creators. After all, we recognize that every voice is different, and I imagine that composing for a changing voice makes repetition difficult.

XAVIA

Is that a problem?

ANDROMEDA

Maybe, maybe not. Obviously there's a very rich tradition of feminist performance art that is difficult to perform without the originating artist,²³ and trans music would probably fit in well with that style. I know you said that trans music doesn't necessitate a trans body to perform it, but I anticipate that some works in this style would have more at stake when it comes to the privileges (or lack thereof) of the performer.

XAVIA

That may be true, actually, but I don't see trans music as prescriptive. Again, this isn't the only road to trans inclusion, and similarly, there is no one way to compose trans music. I think there is room in this style for linear, scripted opera as well as radical performance art, and everything in between.

ANDROMEDA

I think transgender music almost has to be prescriptive though, because you're prescribing a set of practices that purport to foster trans inclusion. You're certainly not using it descriptively.

XAVIA

(laughing)

I suppose not. Which makes me wonder whether I misstep by only looking at Western classical forms (to the extent that musical theater counts as "classical"), which definitely does not include trans people, instead of looking at the musics trans people are already creating.

²³ For example, I find it hard to imagine anyone but Peggy Shaw performing *Menopausal Gentleman*.

ANDROMEDA

I don't think so; first of all, there's nothing saying you can't merge popular idioms into Western classical music, which could create in-roads for trans people in that world, but beyond that we might as well work on trying to change Western classical music instead of waiting for it to die off.

XAVIA

Yeah, it doesn't seem to be going anywhere, and anyway I may joke that I want to burn the canon down, but I don't disagree that the "great works" of the Western classical canon are important. However, I crave recognition of the contributions trans people have made to music. Unfortunately, a log of trans participation in popular, folk, and other classical traditions is beyond the scope of this thesis, but I began the process of creating one for Western classical music in Part VI pp. 16-24. I take my position on canonicity from Citron's groundbreaking book on the subject.

MARCIA J. CITRON

Which music is deemed canonic says a great deal about the image a society has of itself. In the West the privileged position of art music of the European tradition is telling. It suggests a desire to hold fast to a venerated past. For the United States, especially, the association furnishes a means of affirming self-worth. We like to think of ourselves as a nation descended from Europe—this despite or even because of shifting demographics in favor of other areas, notably Asia and Latin America. Art music, like other European products, provides a useful way of expressing that identity. Its elitist cachet helps to demarcate social strata in a country relatively free from ingrained class divisions,

ideologically if not in actual practice. This canon, however, is partial in more than its cultural exclusivity. It is partial in its gender composition: it consists almost entirely of works by men. While research of the last fifteen years has begun to make a difference in what is studied and performed, women's compositions still occupy a marginal position in relation to the canon. (3-4)

XAVIA

I follow the line of reasoning that we need a multiplicity of diverse canons as well as a critique of canonicity (Citron 219-32). For trans people, that means both a recognition of the contributions trans people have made to classical music, but also locating the forces that keep trans people out of the canon, classical or otherwise. Certainly, there are more than a handful of people in history who might qualify under the trans umbrella and have written music in the Western art tradition. This project is intended to articulate those barriers and reclaim that handful of creators and works we do know.

ANDROMEDA

And obviously you're keeping intersectionality in mind, right? We all know Western classical music, especially opera, doesn't have the best track record when it comes to representing pretty much any marginalized community, not just trans people. And we also don't want to say that someone's most important contribution to the canon is reminding people that trans people exist.

XAVIA

Well yeah, I mean in some ways tokenizing representation is better than no representation at all, but ideally I'd like to see a rich and nuanced understanding of works by and for

trans people. And intersectionality is something I'm very cognizant of as a composer. The last thing I want to do is appropriate and misrepresent other cultures and musical traditions, which is practically a hallmark of Western opera, as Brett notes in his analysis of Benjamin Britten through the lens of Edward Said's concept of orientalism.

PHILIP BRETT

Orientalism, in Said's usage, is the negative term of one of those many "binarisms" whose deconstruction in recent years has helped us to understand more about the culture of Europe and Northern America. In the context in which I have raised the topic, that of the erotic, musical, and colonial, we can see all at once the projection of a male fantasy of the feminine, and the identification of a subject race that, according to the imperialist fantasy, is begging to be subjected. Said sees orientalism as bound up with questions of power, that of rulers over subject races; of gender, because orientalism as an academic discipline "was an exclusively male province"; and of sexuality. [...] Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century music is, of course, deeply implicated in the general Eurocentric perception of the Orient, particularly in France and Britain, the countries Said points to as having the longest tradition of orientalism. A recent study by Ralph P. Locke of Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila* indicates in extensive detail its musical consequences in French nineteenth-century opera [...]. Susan McClary's work on *Carmen* raises the issue in a feminist context, prompted by the portrayal of the title figure in the typical alluring-but-forbidden model of the exotic female Other. (236-37)

ANDROMEDA

Not only racially but for representations of disability, too. McClary's *Feminine Endings* has an entire chapter on the trope of the madwoman in opera.

SUSAN MCCLARY

From Monteverdi's experiments in the *stile rappresentativo*²⁴ or Donizetti's tragic heroines to Schoenberg's *Erwartung* and beyond, composers have long been attracted to the dramatic subject of madwomen. Opera audiences obviously share their fascination: many operas of this genre maintain positions of honor within the standard repertory, and there are even specialized commercial recordings that contain nothing but Mad Scenes, all conveniently excerpted and packaged together so that the listener doesn't have to endure any of the boring stuff between the "good parts." Nor is the musical madwoman confined to operas with explicitly mad characters: Ethan Mordden's book on the phenomenon of the Diva bears the title *Demented*, because (he explains) "demented" is the highest accolade one can bestow on a prima donna's performance—or at least it was so for a particular time among opera buffs at the Met. The excess that marks the utterances of a Lucia or a Salome as insane is thereby elevated to the status of an essential ingredient—a *sine qua non*—of interpretations by women opera stars, regardless of the specific role. (80)

XAVIA

Right, so any effort to represent trans people, especially trans people of color, poor trans people, trans people with disabilities, queer trans people, trans women, etc. needs to make

²⁴ Predecessor to recitative.

sure that it is respecting those identities and not exploiting them. And to be clear, it is the prerogative of those communities themselves to determine what is respectful or exploitative, not members of the majority.

ANDROMEDA

Very true. But we've digressed in a way. I still don't think you've quite articulated what trans music *is*. What is a transgender composition method? What does trans music sound like?

XAVIA

Hmm... well, again I use trans music to refer to a collection of practices that open up trans potential, not one sure-fire "authentic" transgender musical style. However, there are some themes that I think are iconic in terms of those possibilities. As we've already discussed, valuing vocal grain and the embodiment of the performer might get us around the difficulties finding trans voices with classical training and also the universalizing rhetorics common in classical music that disembodiment the voice. Going off our transgeneric structure, perhaps a polystylistic approach allows for boundary crossing in a way that values the multiple identities people occupy simultaneously and the diversity of musical contexts from which trans people come. I don't adopt this strategy in this project, but microtonality and other modes seem fruitful places to look for alternative conceptions of musical gender, considering Gretchen A. Wheelock's exploration of how minor modes are framed as feminine compared to the masculine major mode (202). It's also a vital project of trans music to upset the conflation between bodies, genders, and voice parts. Whether this involves eliminating voice parts entirely, expanding the current

terms to become gender neutral, or coming up with new naming systems that allow for trans voices, there needs to be a recognition that one cannot assume a person's gender from the notes they hit or how well they hit them.

ANDROMEDA

Can you give an example of what you mean by “the conflation between bodies, genders, and voice parts”?

XAVIA

So in a ciscentric vocal taxonomy, men's voices come in three major flavors: bass, baritone, and tenor. Similarly, women's voices come in soprano, mezzo, and alto. These voice parts are theoretically supposed to match one's “natural” singing voice that more or less corresponds to vocal tract length, formant frequencies, fundamental frequencies, and all the other aspects we talked about earlier. Those specific embodiments imply both a gender (man or woman) and a voice part (men's voices or women's voices). Thus, a man who sings in the range typically reserved for women is not called an alto or a soprano; he is called a “countertenor.” By assigning him a separate name, his masculinity is preserved.

ANDROMEDA

And if I remember correctly there's not really a name for cis women who sing in the tenor or baritone range.

XAVIA

Nope, because there's no repertoire for them. Every once in a while The Gingerbread Witch in *Hänsel und Gretel* is sung by a tenor, but even then, usually by a cis male tenor.

In choirs, female tenors are usually only recruited in situations when there aren't enough male tenors to fill out the section.

ANDROMEDA

Now you've got me thinking about not just the musical aspects but also the performance aspects of staging trans identities. I think it's important to look at castrati and pants roles. I'm assuming those don't count as transgender representation?

XAVIA

Not really no, and resignifying them with trans bodies could prove problematic if not done correctly. Let's start with pants roles. Pants roles are a drag role, which as we've mentioned is not the same thing as transgender representation, although they do function slightly differently in opera.

SAM ABEL

To opera's faithful audience, pants roles are a familiar part of the landscape, as much an element of operatic convention as taking an excessive number of curtain calls. But opera provides very few clues to let a first-timer in on the drag secret. Women singing male roles neither look nor sound much like [cis] men, in defiance of twentieth-century expectations of theatrical realism. Yet drag performance in opera generally lacks the self-conscious, self-referential framing, the camp attitude or overt transgressiveness that normally signals a drag performance for a contemporary audience. Mozart, employing the conventions of his own time, simply expects the audience to know Cherubino's sex, as well as that of the singer portraying him, and to negotiate the difference. (147)

ANDROMEDA

Yeah, usually pants roles are catalysts for homoerotic subtext or queer sexual identification instead of trans representation (Hadlock).

MARGARET REYNOLDS

And lesbians? Why do they go to the opera?

Because where else can you see two women making love in a public place?

One of the most obvious ways in which the opera speaks of sex is in the variety of gender play. Once upon a time the Renaissance theater offered the perverse spectacle of the boy actor dressed as a woman, and played self-consciously with the contradictions of that state by drawing attention to the body in numerous undressing scenes, by making jokes around the use of stuffing or prosthetic devices, and by complicating the audience's own gendered speculation by dressing boys as girls who had disguised themselves as boys. Now it is only the opera that offers this sexy tease, but with a crucial difference. For today it is all about girls dressing up as boys or girls dressing up as boys and then disguising themselves as girls. (133)

XAVIA

Precisely. Even as we're supposed to assume that these characters are "really" men, with "really" meaning "cis," we as audience members are never allowed to forget that we are watching a woman play a cis man.

ANDROMEDA

Which is why we have to be careful in simply resignifying trouser roles as trans roles, or putting trans men onstage uncritically. I think there's great potential in staging these

copious pants roles as explicitly trans characters, and some creative dramaturgy could really pull off that critique. However, in doing so we might inadvertently be subjecting our trans man to transphobic assumptions that by convention he's just a girl playing a boy.

XAVIA

Yeah, especially since one common feminist strategy of upsetting patriarchal notions in plays is to practice “cross”-gender casting (Cima 99).

YOLANDA FLORES

In [Susana] Torres Molina's *Extraño juguete*, the characters allude to an advantage men have over women, a socially fabricated leverage that will become a basic experimental trope of the later piece, ...*Y a otra cosa mariposa*, in which the author's only stipulation is that its four male characters be played by women. Structural and thematic similarities between *Extraño juguete* and ...*Y a otra cosa mariposa* include the metatheatrical device of a play within a play, or, more correctly, of a text within a text, that is, the characters of the piece are assigned to act out other roles within the framework of the role they are playing. In this case, I read the cross-gendered performative requisite of ...*Y a otra cosa mariposa* as a theatrical device that is significant for its shock value, by way of reversing the archaic Western theater—from the Greeks through Shakespeare—where only males are allowed on the stage. Furthermore, by having women perform the roles of men lusting after women, it yields the foreshadowing of a homoerotic representation. ...*Y a otra cosa mariposa* processes homosexual desire and naturalizes it. The play brings into motion a transvestite index to create a theatrical dislocation that destabilizes gender

categories; it normalizes homosexuality within the prevailing social codes, forging a deconstruction of heterosexuality, and thus allows the presence of a competing homosexual discourse. (46)

ANDROMEDA

I mean, that's not to say that that's necessarily a bad strategy, it's just only a legible project because the performers and characters are cis.

XAVIA

I think we can also examine legibility through the lens of the reveal scene in regards to trans bodies, especially trans women in film.

KATE BORNSTEIN

Take that great scene in the film, *The Crying Game*. You know the scene: the one that got all the attention—the one you weren't supposed to talk about? The one with the (gasp) full penile nudity—on the body of what appeared to be a woman! To me, the telling aspect of the scene is not so much the revelation of the person as transgendered [sic throughout], as much as it was the nausea and vomiting by the guy who did the discovering. [...] And how about the public silence surrounding *The Crying Game*? When it was released in 1993, no one wanted to give away the “big secret.” The last time there was such a furor about “don't give away the surprise ending,” it was Hitchcock's *Psycho*, about another secretly transgendered person. The public response of “don't say a word” is more than “don't spoil the movie.” What's to spoil anyway? I knew about “the secret” before I went, and I thoroughly enjoyed the film. No, I think the “keep the secret” response on the part of the public was more a reflection of how the gender defenders of

this culture would like to see transgendered people: as a secret, hidden away in some closet. (72-74)

ANDROMEDA

At no point in *The Crying Game* is the word “transgender” uttered, because the old playwrighting adage to “show, don’t tell” prohibits our existence without a scopophilic revelation of what exactly we mean by “transgender.” But placing the genitalia as the site of truth about one’s gender is extremely transphobic, because there is no causal relationship between sex and gender. The reveal scene conflates this relationship in a way that emphasizes the stereotype of trans people being deceitful: that is, they are lying about their “real” gender by “pretending” to be another gender than expected.

Furthermore, in the popular imaginary trans people only become the gender they say they are when they’ve had a surgical intervention on their genitalia. Moe Meyer talks about this in relation to a transsexual dancer named Jeannie who performs a striptease revealing the results of her gender confirmation surgery.

MOE MEYER

Jeannie has only one narrative to express, and that is the one that gave her birth and in which she experiences existence—the Victorian myth of the gender invert. The transsexual striptease, then, is an integral part of the surgery, functioning as a second-level discourse that legitimates the statements of scientific knowledge through citation on the stage. Her dance is a reduplication of the folk narrative which serves as the Logos of the transsexual body while providing the repetition of discourse needed to elevate its first utterance to the status of scientific knowledge. Without a way to reduplicate itself, the

ideology and legitimacy of the sex-change surgery would dissolve, and the striptease would vanish. Without cultural legitimacy, Jeannie would be trapped in a bottle, a no-exit techno-body stripped of meaning. Like her stage character's prototype—Salome—she celebrates the body while flirting with death; for as long as she dances, both the transsexual body and its creative narrative can feed off each other, prolonging life and knowledge. (82-83)

XAVIA

A related problem is in play with the castrati. Similar to transsexual women under the visual logics of the reveal scene, the “threat” of the castrato to cis men is castration anxiety (Jones 454-45). Yet similar to pants roles, we as audience members are unable to escape the awareness that we're watching and hearing a castrated male.

Castrati are distinct from transsexual women in two ways. First, most if not all of the castrati identified as men (our notion of “transgender” is inapplicable to a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century context, when most of the castrati were active). Secondly, castrati had their gonads removed before puberty to preserve their voices, but were not given supplementary hormones as synthetic versions weren't invented until the twentieth century. Thus, while most transsexual women either go through an androgenizing puberty with later gonad removal and hormone replacement, or else delaying puberty then starting estrogenic hormone treatment, castrati matured with little in the way of hormone regulation, creating some health problems for them (Dame 143; de Vries and Cohen-Kettenis). And yet, castrati were definitely seen as occupying a liminal gender space.

JOKE DAME

How do musicologists describe the castrato? It is striking that they all use terms like “androgyny,” “hermaphroditism,”²⁵ and “sexual ambiguity,” for images that correspond with the common image of the castrato, for instance, in literature. Their discourse also conveys the idea of the neuter, the suggestion of “the empty spot,” “the void” upon which all sorts of fantasies can be projected. [...] Some musicologists stress femininity rather than ambiguity in their descriptions of the castrati as “feminine men,” “perfect nymphs,” “more beautiful than women themselves.” [...] Ultimately, the castrato is effectively excluded from the category of humanity at all. He is called “angelic,” “mechanical,” “constructed,” “artificial,” “a singing machine.” (142-43)

ANDROMEDA

Given these descriptions, we could try and claim castrati as trans because they share similar narratives and did occupy a different cultural gender of sorts, but that project fails to the extent that they are a historical gender no longer accessible. That is, the social conditions that gave rise to the castrati no longer exist; indeed our current social conditions (AKA a stricter binarism between male/men/masculine and female/woman/feminine) are what drove the castrati extinct in the first place (Abel 145).

XAVIA

Right, so in creating a historiography of proto-trans and gender-nonconforming experiences in classical music, castrati might be an important place to look, but they don't really help us get trans people in the door.

²⁵ “Hermaphrodite” is considered a slur when applied to humans. The proper term is “intersex.”

ANDROMEDA

And I think given all that we've just talked about, developing a way to encode trans subjectivities into music is only one part of your project.

XAVIA

For sure. We need to look at who's performing, what they're performing—both musically and onstage—how they're performing, and why they're performing. We need to overhaul the entire framework: from composition to casting to rehearsal to production to performance to preservation.

ANDROMEDA

So now what?

XAVIA

Now we see what other trans people think about these issues.

PART IX

DATA COLLECTION

The Backstory

Originally, this project was envisioned as a collaborative effort between me and other performers, a tidbit I reflect on below. When I recruited the performers, I envisioned drafting numbers through devising and rehearsal instead of writing the music beforehand and bringing it to them. For this reason I tend to refer to these meetings as “workshops” throughout this document. Though six two-hour workshops were planned, only two were conducted. I met with the group for two hours on February 6, 2015, and met with Jared two weeks later on February 20. I always intended the initial meetings to involve discussions with my collaborators about their experiences of Western classical music as trans people, which is reflected in naming the first meeting “The Focus Group.” After this meeting, I changed the nature of the project from a collaborative devising process to a more traditional model of composing for specific voices, hence “The Commissions.” When these arias are expanded into an opera, I hope that it occurs in the context of a collaborative trans performance company, because I am still fascinated by the possibility of devised opera.

A note on the make-up of our group before I introduce the individual members: while two of us identify as non-binary, all four of us are interested in some form of physical transition, especially vocally, which limits the scope of this project. As noted above, articulating a transgender musical idiom is complicated by the different experiences of binary and non-binary trans people. In my imaginary future trans opera

performing company, more non-binary experiences and performers would be represented to give a more nuanced picture of transgender vocality. Also, it should not escape notice that we had three transmasculine people and only one transfeminine person; more representation from transfeminine, androgynous, and gender-neutral people is needed. Finally, all four of us are between the ages of 18 and 23, inclusive, meaning we likely have a very specific view on transgender inclusion compared to other generations of trans people.

Dramatis Personae

Xavia, our narrator, is white and identifies both as genderqueer and as a trans woman.

Xavia uses she/her/hers pronouns to refer to herself in speech, but ze/hir/hirs in writing, a convention that is followed throughout this document. Ze is a graduate student in UNI's Women's and Gender Studies program and has a long history of participation in choirs, musical theater, and performance art. Ze has been on estrogen for three years.²⁶

Jared is white and identifies as a trans man, using he/him/his pronouns. He is a first-year psychology major at UNI who plays in marching band. As of this writing, he has not begun testosterone, though wishes to.

Morgan is white and identifies as a demiboy, using they/them/their pronouns. They are a junior Studio Art major at UNI and had six years of vocal training. They began testosterone immediately after the workshop period.

²⁶ I note hormone status not because hormones are an essential aspect of transgender experiences, but because hormone therapy, specifically testosterone, can affect the voice. Not all trans people are interested in or have access to hormones.

Dominick is Filipino and identifies as a trans man, using he/him/his pronouns. He lives in Waterloo and works at a used clothing store. He is active in community theater. He has been on testosterone for several years.

The Focus Group

February 6, 2015

It has occurred to me that one of the biggest barriers to compiling a transgender performance group is getting everyone in the same room. Perhaps it is this particular group of people and their diversely busy schedules that made finding a time to meet nearly impossible, and indeed the academic context of three of the four potential collaborators meant that scheduling conflicts were almost inevitable. However, one could also tie our meeting struggles to larger conversations about factors hindering trans success in the performing world. Because the majority of us are university students, we met at night after classes in Cedar Falls. Dominick's changing work schedule and distance from Cedar Falls made it difficult to coordinate times with him, and in the end, we were unable to include him in this initial workshop. Similarly, many of us experience chronic depression and anxiety, which complicated the scheduling process because we would routinely need to postpone meetings, and they would not be rescheduled right away. I supply this information because any discussion of trans inclusion in Western classical music needs to take into account the limiting factors that poor and working class trans people and neurodivergent trans people face, especially since trans people have

higher rates of homelessness, depression, anxiety, suicide, and unemployment/underemployment than the general population (Grant, Mottet, and Tanis 2-10).

When we decide on a date and time, Morgan, Jared, and I meet in a practice room in the music building to have a conversation about the struggles trans performers face in Western classical music. I begin by asking if they've ever seen an opera. Jared has seen bits and pieces of works he cannot name in music classes, but never a full production. Morgan has seen Gioachino Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* and excerpts from other operas. Like me, neither of them is a fan of opera. I ask them why, to which they respond that opera is inaccessible. Not only is opera expensive to see live, but it is relatively rare to find an English-language opera, and Western operatic singing style does not allow for easy comprehension of the words. The lack of dialogue is also a barrier to understanding and therefore comfort; given their greater exposure to musical theater, they've come to expect plain speech in the place of recitative. This is a problem for them because they crave a clear plot in opera, rejecting the notion that the plot is just a trivial conceit necessary for the music to exist; raised on Stanislavskian principles of realist theater, they are frustrated by opera's incomprehensibility and tendency to care more about the music than the drama.²⁷

Similarly, the music is often inaccessible in the sense that it sounds nothing like the popular musical idioms to which they are accustomed to listening. While they appreciate classical influences on their music, Morgan's musical interests are in punk and

²⁷ While the trend through the centuries has been generally towards increased attention to drama, the plot has often been more of a side concern in opera compared to other performance traditions (Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca 386).

metal genres. As for Jared, his tastes are more eclectic (“anything but country” in his words), but skewing more towards pop-punk and indie. They seem to be willing to forgive the musical style if the story is clear, but due to opera’s combined musical foreignness and unintelligible plots, opera gives them the sense of being over their heads.

Part of this idiom is the singing style performers use, which is very different from operatic singing.²⁸ Combined with the difficulty of comprehending the words, we appreciate this singing style but don’t particularly like it. The technical mastery, volume, and stamina of the operatic voice is respected, but we don’t find it as engaging as the works of artists such as Amy Lee (Evanescence), Hayley Williams (Paramore), Florence Welch (Florence + the Machine) and Troye Sivan. What many of these artists have in common is their prominent vocal grain. The reference to Evanescence is interesting, because of the clear classical influences. Morgan also makes this connection, saying they appreciate when pop artists incorporate classical elements into their songs.

When I open the discussion up to musical theater, especially operatic musicals, they are much more receptive. Pieces such as *RENT*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Into the Woods*, *West Side Story*, and *Repo! The Genetic Opera* are well-liked, and while some opera scholars would loathe the idea of calling any of these pieces opera, I think an expansion of the generic conventions of opera to include such pieces might lead to an increase in opera-going audiences. After all, given the skewed demographics of the typical opera audience, maybe the reason these aren’t considered operas—despite having recitative, through-composition, theme development, and even references to operatic

²⁸ See Björkner for some proposed differences between musical theater singing and operatic singing.

canon—is because they appeal to someone other than white, cis, straight, rich people (Abel 64).

Musical theater itself is a much richer source of enjoyment for us, especially Disney film musicals. Due to theater often being too far away and too expensive, film musicals were the only exposure we tended to get in terms of musical theater. One musical we strongly identified with was *Mulan* (1998), detailing the story of Fa Mulan, who impersonated her father in the Chinese Imperial Army and became a national hero. As young proto-transgender children, *Mulan* was for each of us the first positive representation of a trans narrative we'd ever seen. When compared to films such as *Dude, Where's My Car?* and *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, *Mulan* didn't treat our experiences as weird, evil, manipulative, or worthy of violence and derision.²⁹ One of the most popular songs from the film, "Reflection," is a queer anthem thanks to the lyrics, "when will my reflection show who I am inside?" (Wilder and Zippel). Even though *Mulan* is revealed to be a woman and retains that identity, the possibilities this movie opened up were crucial to our development.

In fact, the rarity of such positive representations of transgender themes was a problem we addressed in our dislike of opera. Having little exposure to opera, they were unaware of the histories of castrati and pants roles that opera scholars in gender tend to point to as transgender subjects, and I think they would question whether that's enough to "count" as actual representation. Similarly, they assumed that as in film and television,

²⁹ Both movies involve exploitative reveal scenes of the genitalia (covered by panties) of trans women for comedic value. Both women—Dt. Lois Einhorn (Sean Young) in *Ace Ventura* and Tania (Teresa Tunney) in *Dude, Where's My Car?*—are antagonists and are presented as mentally ill and aggressive.

any trans or gender-nonconforming characters that do exist probably die at the end. And in many ways this is true, as has been noted extensively in the literature about sexual transgression in opera (Clément, *Opera*; McClary). Furthermore, the general sexism of opera plots does not appeal to us, and in fact, alienates us from enjoying the show. Morgan specifically mentioned this in relation to *The Marriage of Figaro* and how even when they could understand a section, what they saw was sexist and heterocentric and not at all relevant to their life.

Given the dearth of positive and well-rounded representations in any media but especially opera, we would like to see opera open up to a range of gender identities and expressions both onstage and behind the scenes. We would like explicit mentioning of transgender identities, an intersectional range of trans experiences, and trans people who exist as more than just “the trans character.” Finally, we would like more roles for trans singers.

Morgan took voice lessons for six years, from sixth through twelfth grades. They were also involved in show choir. They sang soprano II and alto, despite wanting to sing tenor. Jared was in choir in ninth grade and show choir in eleventh grade. He sang alto II but wanted to sing tenor. Both of them shared frustrations about not being allowed to sing the voice part they wanted, because directors insisted their voices and genders were better suited to other sections. All three of us felt that traditional voice designations (soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, bass) carried implicit gender assumptions that made being in those sections a trigger for what we came to recognize as our dysphoria. Jared mentioned that certain notes set off his dysphoria, and Morgan added that they experience

dysphoria more by not being able to hit certain notes. This is often a barrier for trans people attempting to continue in Western classical music; all of us stopped singing more or less because of dysphoria and not having our identities recognized.

Hearing Morgan and Jared's insights was very eye-opening in terms of the differences between the experiences of AMAB transfeminine people like me and AFAB transmasculine people like them. Both of them wear binders to diminish the appearance of breast tissue. Binders are notoriously uncomfortable and cannot be worn for too long without causing breathing problems and even cracked ribs. It is very difficult to sing in a binder because the singer cannot draw in enough air with their chest constricted. Similarly, the breathing issues can affect vocal health by putting strain on the cords and weakening the immune system. Also, testosterone affects the voice in ways estrogen does not (Zimman 54). This makes composing for transmasculine voices difficult because the nature of that voice can change significantly over time.

At the end of the workshop, we talked about the plan for the second workshop two weeks later. I instructed them to come up with a text they wanted me to set and a song for us to rehearse with.

The Commissions

February 20, 2015

I instructed Morgan and Jared to sign up for a 30-minute timeslot within our previously-agreed-upon two-hour window so that I could get a sense of each of their voices. Morgan was unable to make it, so I had them email me this information. Here is

what they replied: “My range is D3-E5, and I was going to use ‘It’ by Kavi Ade [as the text].” On the subject of what parts of their range sets off their dysphoria, they responded, “I’m comfortable with all of it.” It is unclear what their range will be once they start testosterone.

Jared came in during his slot and told me the text he wanted me to set was Tyler Knott Gregson’s “Typewriter Series #741.” He told me off-hand that he wasn’t wearing a binder, and I realized that I had forgotten to remind them not to bind for this. It seems to go without saying for him that one cannot wear a binder while singing. After warming him up, I tested his range to see where his vocal limits were. His lowest possible note was C3, with E3 being his lowest comfortable note. His *passaggio* was between G4 and B4, with his break being around B4. Any note above B4 (in other words, his head voice) sets off his dysphoria. We were already over time when we finished warming up and exploring range, so he went home.

May 14, 2015

For the third selection, I will write an aria with my own voice in mind. I have written a text for this occasion entitled “Let Down Your Long Hair.” As of today, my lowest possible note is F#2, with A2 being my lowest comfortable note. While I’m still not entirely comfortable with notes below C3, this region of my voice used to trigger my dysphoria severely. However, my experience singing bass in a virtually all-female a cappella group has made it easier for me not to consider those notes exclusively masculine and thus sing them without incident. My *passaggio* is between E4 and G4,

with the break at A4. It is glaringly obvious that I am not as warmed up as I should be. My highest note reached is Bb5, with my highest comfortable note at G5.

A Reflection

Devising proved to be a lot harder than I predicted. These workshops were my first experience with devising, and there were several aspects of such a collaborative process that I did not anticipate. Firstly, none of us is particularly interested in opera, and I am the only one who has enough experience with opera and classical composing to feel confident writing music. This lack of confidence probably could have been overcome with proper guidance, but at the time I had not studied strategies used by directors of devised work. Moreover, such guidance is very time consuming and through these workshops I learned that I did not have the time I needed to create a performance-ready excerpt. This is through no fault of my collaborators; my schedule and my disabilities limited the time I was able to commit to this project in ways I should have expected. Finally, none of my collaborators seems to be under the impression that a composer-performer relationship is problematic. It appears that from their perspective, consulting them on their experiences is sufficient input on the process to feel heard.

Their preference for realist theatrical systems or a blend of realist/non-linear narratives has exciting implications for theories of feminist theater. I would argue that the strength of realist theater for marginalized people is its reliance on empathy, because if the audience can see a person with a marginalized identity as a human with agency, especially if portrayed positively, they are more likely to be invested in that character's

success, and by proxy the success of the character's equivalents in real life. I certainly recognize that materialist theater, for example, accomplishes important goals in revealing and challenging the assumed universality and neutrality of realist theater, but such a theater is not the only path towards changing ideas of gender and sexuality, and is only truly effective for those identities that are already legible or even recognized as possible.³⁰

It is personally validating, and politically disconcerting, to me that Morgan and Jared shared my experiences with Western classical music in high school. Furthermore, we were able to talk about our frustrations with voice part assignment as if it were a given and not an exception. That is, none of us was surprised that we had similar experiences; in fact, we would have been more surprised if one of us did not have a tension between the part they wanted to sing and the part they were told to sing. It is highly likely that this is because all three of us deal with body dysphoria. As mentioned, not all trans people experience body dysphoria, but in our case body dysphoria is a central part of our experiences as transgender. Not only does being misgendered as tenor or soprano cause frustration and discomfort, but physically singing notes not typically associated with our gender identities can also trigger body dysphoria. As Krell observes in his portrait of Lucas Silveira, the difference between how one sounds to others and how one expects to sound can be jarring for transgender people, especially singers (484-85). When combined with a context where the person's gender identity is not recognized—Morgan and Jared were not out as trans for most of their musical experience

³⁰ For a refresher on the differences between materialist and realist theater traditions from a feminist lens, see Chapter 6 in Jill Dolan's *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*.

and I did not come out as trans until well into my musical career—this dysphoria is heightened and becomes harder to articulate. This has many implications for vocal pedagogy, especially in relation to young voices, and further study into what those implications are is long overdue.

Working with these three reminded me of the vital importance intersectionality has as a critical lens. Because of our class status, opera is not an important part of our artistic world, and my relative interest in it compared to the others reflects my educational privilege. (I went to an adequately-funded public high school and to a private, sub-ivy university for my B.A.) Furthermore, none of us can currently afford voice lessons. I was only able to take lessons when I became a music major at Colgate, because the fee was covered for majors. Thus, even if we did have vocal coaches that understood transgender issues and knew how to train transgender voices (e.g. Constansis), we would not be able to pay for it. Furthermore, often transgender people who want physical interventions are unable to afford them, which requires innovative ways to work around vocal dysphoria without encouraging poor vocal health.

On the subject of vocal health, I wonder what work has been done in relation to opera and disability studies. There are strong overlaps between transgender and disability rhetorics, not only because of the higher rates of mental health issues among transgender people (Grant, Mottet, and Tanis 2-10), but also because transgender identities are highly medicalized.³¹ Furthermore, at least in my case, claims of “vocal

³¹ For detailed discussions of trans medicalization see Stryker, “Transgender History” and Singer, “From the Medical Gaze to *Sublime Mutations*.”

health” and a lack of “strength” in feminine-coded registers were used to prevent me from rehearsing those registers.

If I may digress with another personal story I find illustrative of the intersections, I mentioned earlier that I learned bad vocal habits in junior and senior high to compensate for a lack of proper education in my upper registers. I had to use my head voice in secret and on my own time, because it was my “falsetto,” my little false voice. Ironically, to me my “falsetto” was my most authentic voice. (If I were in charge of voice classifications, I’d label my chest voice my falsetto; just because it fits Western, heteropatriarchal, ableist standards of “quality” doesn’t make it more real than the voice that sounds like how I hear myself in my head.) I would also overcompensate by pushing my voice too hard to reproduce the notes I was losing through puberty and by singing in that register too long, too loud, and too frequently.

It was in this context that senior year of undergrad, I marked a solo in choir with the intent of auditioning for it when the time came. There was some ambiguity in the gender assignment of the solo sections, so when I did it, I sang it in my head voice. The conductor stopped us and told me to sing it down the octave. When I did, there were several sounds of approving shock in the choir, and he made a pleased noise. I didn’t audition. I think there’s a project in the intersection of vocal health, transgender studies, and disability studies, because oftentimes there isn’t enough attention paid to balancing mental health and physical health in the voice studio or choir rehearsal. I can now sing in my chest voice relatively healthily. My head voice is still shot. More importantly for my

argument, only my healthy chest voice is valued in classical spaces, as if my upper register weren't my voice but a mistake.

Perhaps that's a factor in why I and my collaborators listen to other genres besides classical: the singers sing in a voice comfortable to them, almost always written with them in mind, and it sounds like it comes from their body. Jarman-Ivens comes at her discussion of vocal grain from a place of desire for the voice and the body it implies (1-3). This is not to say that opera singers do not also have vocal grain; Jarman-Ivens devotes an entire section to opera singer Maria Callas, and the pleasures of the operatic body are the major subject of Sam Abel's *Opera in the Flesh*. Moreover, recording technologies tend to obscure the body by allowing producers to modify the sound independent of the body from which it emanated. Nonetheless, the vocal grains of artists in popular genres are closer to our own vocal grains, which means we're much more likely to pull off singing a song by Evanescence than by singing a Handel aria. Said another way, we have a relative ability to sing popular musics that we do not have for Western classical musics.

On the subject of ability, the impracticality of singing in a binder presents several challenges for an opera producer. Breath support becomes a critical issue in rehearsal and performance. The costumer must devise ways to disguise breast tissue in gender-appropriate ways without constricting airflow. There are similar issues for users of certain types of gaff, but to a lesser degree. For those re-appropriating control-top pantyhose, care must be taken not to constrict the diaphragm. Creative costuming might make such a garment unnecessary, but personal experience and the testimony of my

collaborators indicate that even if nothing “shows,” the feeling of certain body parts not being constrained can still trigger dysphoria.

The impact of film and television musicals on our queer development is interesting. We seem to follow James H. Sanders III in mapping our burgeoning identities onto the media we consumed as children, especially their queer possibilities (44-45). That all three of us in attendance at the focus group had similar reactions to *Mulan* growing up points to strong queer potential in the film. Our first exposure to *RENT*, and thus to the cultural legacy of *La Bohème*, was through the film version, which came out when I was in ninth grade. I’ve noticed that when I come up with ideas for operas, I subconsciously envision them through cinematic strategies such as close-ups, pans, and jump cuts. Perhaps film opera might be more conducive to trans inclusion and trans audiencing than stage opera.

Overall, I’m disappointed I didn’t get an opportunity to work closer with these fabulous individuals, Dominick in particular. However, I’m immensely grateful for their help in clarifying my thoughts on these issues and for giving me new directions to explore. I look forward to the challenge of composing for them, especially now that Morgan informs me their voice has already dropped noticeably. Speaking of compositions, without further ado I present:

PART X

ARIAS FROM SUGGESTIONS FOR TRANSGENDER INCLUSION IN WESTERN

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Aria I: "Let Down Your Long Hair"

Music and lyrics by X.A. Publius.

English

Duration ca. 4' 30"

Instrumentation: voice (trans woman), acoustic guitar, flute, viola, piano, drum set

Range: A2-Ab5

Lyrics

She lives in books and borrowed drags,
in airtight doors and garbage bags.
She wears her hair too long for fear
a cut will make it disappear.
Rapunzel loves her big strong tower,
too scared to own up to her power
to step outside with flowing locks
instead of counting dirty socks.

She drinks off her anxiety
and ventures out, but let her be
for she is fragile porcelain,
don't wanna face your smirks again.
Wish I could say that she'll be fine
but her unwieldy fears are mine
and she's too tired of handsy boys
who try to climb her, steal her joys.

Or is she more afraid of home?
More freedom means she's more alone.
The dishes glare, the textbooks sneer.
Dilemma of a pretty queer:

to fight the empty feeling down
or hide so no one sees her drown.
She wishes she could wash her hair
in sparkling rivers far from there
and live in a reality
where body, mind, and heart agree.
But here she sits in crumbling bricks
exhausting every bag of tricks
to capture life in any way
she can before the light of day
brings 7,021
more reasons not to see the sun.

The rhythm is the only sound
Rapunzel heeds, says 'stick around'
so she puts on her fuck me pumps
and smiles at every ghost she dumps.
And maybe in a year or three
the urge to fail will let her be.
Well, until then Rapunzel sings
the trans girl blues. Oh how they ring!

Let Down Your Long Hair

Lyrics: XA Publius

Music: XA Publius

♩ = c. 60

Lead Vocals

Rhythm Guitar

Flute

Viola

Piano

Drum Set

♩ = c. 60

The musical score is arranged in a grand staff format with six parts. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked as c. 60. The Flute part includes dynamics like *mp* and accents. The Piano part includes dynamics like *p* and *pp*. The Drum Set part includes a tempo marking of c. 60 and a dynamic marking of *p*.

3

p

Ld. Vox. *She lives_ in books and bor - rowed drags,___ in air - tight doors and gar-bage bags.*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

5

Ld. Vox. *She wears her_ hair_ too long_ for fear___ a cut_ will make it dis-ap-pear.*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

7

Ld. Vox. *Ra- pun - zel loves her big strong tow - er, too scared to own up to her pow-er to step out*

Rhythm.

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

9

Ld. Vox. *side with flow-ing locks in-stead of coun - ting dir-ty socks.*

Rhythm.

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

11

mp

Ld. Vox. *She drinks off her_ an-xi - et-y_ and ven - tures out,_ but let her be.*

Rhythm *mp*

Fl.

Vla.

Pno. *dp* *mp*

Dr. *mp*

13

Ld. Vox. *For she_ is fra - gile por - cel-ain, don't wan - na face your smirks a-gain.*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno. *dp*

Dr.

15

Ld. Vox. *Wish I _____ could say_ that she - 'll be fine_ but her_ un wuel-dy fears_ are mine*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno. *mp*

Dr.

17

Ld. Vox. *— and she's_ too tired of hand - sy boys_who try_ to climb her,steal her joys.*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

19

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 


Fl. 


Vla. 


Pno. 


Dr. 


22


Ld. Vox. 
Or is she more a-fraid of home?_ More

Rhythm 

Fl. 

Vla. 

Pno. 

Dr. 

24

Ld. Vox. *free-dom means she's more a - lone. The dish-es glare, the text-books sneer. _*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

26

Ld. Vox. *Dil-em-ma of a pret-ty queer: to fight the emp - ty feel - ing down*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

28

Ld. Vox. *or hide so no one sees her drown. She wish - es she_ could wash her hair*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

30

Ld. Vox. *in spark - ling riv - ers far from there.*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

32

Ld. Vox. *And live_ in a re-al-i-ty where bo - dy, mind, and heart ag-ree. But*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr. *mp*

34

Ld. Vox. *here she sits in crumb-ling bricks, ex-haust - ing ev - ery bag of tricks to*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

36

Ld. Vox. *cap - ture life in an-y way she can be-fore the light of day brings se - ven thou - sand twen - ty one more*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

39

Ld. Vox. *rea - sons not to see the sun.*

Rhythm

Fl. *f*

Vla. *f*

Pno. *f*

Dr. *mf*

41

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

44

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

47

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

50

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

52

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Fl. 

Vla. 

Pno. 

Dr. 

54

Ld. Vox. 

The rhy - thm is the on - ly sound Ra- pun - zel heeds, says 'stick a-round,'

Rhythm 

Fl. 

Vla. 

Pno. 

Dr. 

56 *mf*

Ld. Vox. *so she_ puts on_ her fuck me pumps_ and smiles at e - very ghost she dumps.*

Rhythm *mp*

Fl. *mp*

Vla. *mp*

Pno. *mp*

Dr. *mp*

58 *mp*

Ld. Vox. *And may - be in a year or three_ the urge_ to fail will let her be_ well un-til*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

60

Ld. Vox. *f*
 then Ra - pun - zel sings the trans girl blues; oh how they ring! —

Rhythm *mf*

Fl. *mf*

Vla. *mf*

Pno. *mf* *f*

Dr. *mf*

62

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm *f*

Fl. *f*

Vla. *f*

Pno. *f*

Dr. *f*

64 *ff*

Ld. Vox. *Ah!* *Ah!*

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr. *mp*

Detailed description of the musical score: The score is for measures 64, 65, and 66. The key signature is three flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor). Measure 64 begins with a forte (*ff*) dynamic. The vocal part (Ld. Vox.) has two 'Ah!' exclamations. The Rhythm part consists of a series of chords. The Flute (Fl.) part has a melodic line with slurs. The Viola (Vla.) part has a melodic line with slurs. The Piano (Pno.) part has a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The Drum (Dr.) part has a steady eighth-note pattern. Measure 66 ends with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic.

Aria II: "It"

Music by X.A. Publius

Lyrics from "It" by Kavi Ade

English

Duration ca. 4' 30"

Instrumentation: voice (demiboy), acoustic guitar, flute, viola, piano, drum set

Range: N/A

Content Warnings: queerphobia, sexual assault, street harassment

Lyrics

[Redacted Due to Copyright Restrictions]

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It

Lyrics: Kavi Ade

Music: XA Publius

$\text{♩} = \text{c. } 82$

The musical score is arranged in three systems. The first system includes Flute and Piano parts. The second system includes Flute and Piano parts. The third system includes Rhythm, Flute, Viola, Piano, and Drums parts. The score is in 4/4 time with a tempo of approximately 82 beats per minute. Dynamics include *mp*, *mf*, and *f*. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

Flute

Piano

Fl.

Pno.

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

Music licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>

Lyrics Redacted Due to Copyright Restrictions. Contact the composer (xapublius@gmail.com) for lyric placement.

8

Ld. Vox. *mf*

Rhythm

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

11

Ld. Vox. *mf*

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

14

Ld. Vox. *mf*

Rhythm

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

17

Ld. Vox. *spoken*

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

Musical score for measures 17-19. The lead vocal part (Ld. Vox.) is marked *spoken* and contains a triplet of eighth notes. The rhythm part (Rhythm) features a consistent pattern of chords and eighth notes. The piano part (Pno.) consists of sustained chords. The drum part (Dr.) has a steady bass drum and snare pattern.

20

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

Musical score for measures 20-21. The lead vocal part (Ld. Vox.) continues with spoken notes. The rhythm part (Rhythm) maintains the same pattern. The piano part (Pno.) has sustained chords. The drum part (Dr.) continues with the same pattern.

22

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

Musical score for measure 22. The lead vocal part (Ld. Vox.) has a few spoken notes. The rhythm part (Rhythm) continues. The piano part (Pno.) has sustained chords. The drum part (Dr.) continues.

23

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Pno. 

Dr. 

24

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Fl. 

Vla. 

Pno. 

Dr. 

26

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Fl. 

Vla. 

Pno. 

Dr. 

28

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Pno. 

Dr. 

30

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Pno. 

Dr. 

32

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Pno. 

Dr. 

34

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

36

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

38

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

40

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

42

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

44

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

46

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Pno. 

Dr. 

48

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Pno. 

Dr. 

50

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Pno. 

Dr. 

52

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Fl. 

Vla. 

Pno. 

Dr. 

54

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Fl. 

Vla. 

Pno. 

Dr. 

56

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

58

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

60

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

62

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

64

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

66

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

67

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Pno. 

Dr. 

69

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Pno. 

Dr. 

71

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Vla. 

Pno. 

Dr. 

79

Ld. Vox.

Fl.

Dr.

Detailed description: This system covers measures 79, 80, and 81. The lead vocal line (Ld. Vox.) begins with a rest in measure 79, followed by a triplet of eighth notes in measure 80, and continues with eighth notes and another triplet in measure 81. The flute line (Fl.) is silent throughout. The drum line (Dr.) features a consistent eighth-note pattern with occasional rests.

82

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

Detailed description: This system covers measures 82 and 83. The lead vocal line (Ld. Vox.) features a triplet of eighth notes in measure 82 and continues with eighth notes in measure 83. The rhythm line (Rhythm) has chords and eighth notes. The piano line (Pno.) has chords. The drum line (Dr.) has a steady eighth-note pattern.

84

Ld. Vox.

Rhythm

Pno.

Dr.

Detailed description: This system covers measures 84 and 85. The lead vocal line (Ld. Vox.) features two triplets of eighth notes in measure 84 and continues with eighth notes in measure 85. The rhythm line (Rhythm) has chords and eighth notes. The piano line (Pno.) has chords. The drum line (Dr.) has a steady eighth-note pattern.

86

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Pno. 

Dr. 

88

Ld. Vox. 

Rhythm 

Pno. 

Dr. 

Aria III: "I want a life measured"

Music by X.A. Publius

Lyrics from "Typewriter Series #741" by Tyler Knott Gregson

English

Duration ca. 2' 45"

Instrumentation: voice (trans man), acoustic guitar, flute, viola, piano, drumset

Range: D3-G4

Lyrics

[Redacted Due to Copyright Restrictions.]

I Want a Life Measured (Typewriter Series #741)

Lyrics: Tyler Knott Gregson

Music: XA Publius

♩ = c. 100

The musical score is arranged in a grand staff with six parts. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 6/8. The tempo is marked as ♩ = c. 100. The Solo part begins in the fourth measure with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The Rhythm Guitar part plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment starting from the first measure, marked *pp*. The Flute part plays a melodic line starting in the first measure, marked *p*. The Viola part plays a similar melodic line, also marked *p*. The Piano part is mostly silent, with a *ppp* dynamic marking in the fifth measure. The Drum Set part plays a simple pattern of quarter notes, marked *pp*.

Solo

Rhythm Guitar

Flute

Viola

Piano

Drum Set

♩ = c. 100

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Lyrics Redacted Due to Copyright Restrictions. Contact the composer (xapublius@gmail.com) for lyric placement.

18

Solo

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

mp

pp

mf

p

mp

23

Solo

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

p

28

Solo

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

34

Solo

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

mf

mf

mp

subito mp

mf

mf

mp

37

Musical score for measures 37-38. The score is in 3/4 time and B-flat major. It features six staves: Solo (Soprano), Rhythm (Piano), Fl. (Flute), Vla. (Viola), Pno. (Piano), and Dr. (Drum). The Solo part begins with a melodic line in measure 37, followed by a rest in measure 38. The Rhythm part provides harmonic support with chords in measure 37 and sustained chords in measure 38. The Fl. part has a melodic line in measure 37 and a rest in measure 38. The Vla. part has a melodic line in measure 37 and a rest in measure 38. The Pno. part has a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes in measure 37 and a rest in measure 38. The Dr. part has a steady eighth-note pattern in measure 37 and a rest in measure 38.

Solo

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

p

mf

mf

39

Musical score for measures 39-40. The score is in 3/4 time and B-flat major. It features six staves: Solo (Soprano), Rhythm (Piano), Fl. (Flute), Vla. (Viola), Pno. (Piano), and Dr. (Drum). The Solo part has a melodic line in measure 39 and a rest in measure 40. The Rhythm part has chords in measure 39 and sustained chords in measure 40. The Fl. part has a melodic line in measure 39 and a rest in measure 40. The Vla. part has a melodic line in measure 39 and a rest in measure 40. The Pno. part has a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes in measure 39 and a rest in measure 40. The Dr. part has a steady eighth-note pattern in measure 39 and a rest in measure 40.

Solo

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

42

Solo

Rhythm

Fl. *mp* *mf*

Vla. *mp* *mf*

Pno. *mf*

Dr.

45

Solo

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

48 $\text{♩} = c. 44$
mp

Solo

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

mp

mf

mf

p

$\text{♩} = c. 44$

p

54

Solo

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

60

Solo

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

mp

mp

Detailed description: This system of music covers measures 60 to 62. The Solo part (treble clef) begins with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes in the second and third measures, with slurs and a '2' indicating a doublet. The Rhythm part (treble clef) features a steady eighth-note accompaniment with slurs. The Flute part (treble clef) plays eighth-note patterns with slurs. The Viola part (bass clef) has a long note in the first measure followed by rests. The Piano part (grand staff) has a treble clef with eighth-note patterns and a bass clef with a long note. The Drums part (bass clef) has a simple quarter-note pattern. Dynamics include *mp* for the piano and drums.

63

Solo

Rhythm

Fl.

Vla.

Pno.

Dr.

mf

f

mf

mp

mf

mf

Detailed description: This system of music covers measures 63 to 66. The Solo part (treble clef) has a long note in the first measure, a quarter rest in the second, and a long note in the third, with dynamics *mf* and *f*. The Rhythm part (treble clef) continues with eighth-note accompaniment, with dynamics *mf* and *f*. The Flute part (treble clef) plays eighth-note patterns with slurs, with dynamics *mf* and *f*. The Viola part (bass clef) has a long note in the first measure followed by rests. The Piano part (grand staff) has a treble clef with eighth-note patterns and a bass clef with a long note, with dynamics *mp* and *mf*. The Drums part (bass clef) has a simple quarter-note pattern, with dynamics *mf* and *f*.

PART XI

A META-ANALYSIS

I find it ironic that in the context of this thesis, for which I had the most license to completely break classical conventions, I created some of my most tonal works to date. Which is not to say that I necessarily did tonality “correctly,” but compared to my previous attempt at trans opera for my undergraduate thesis, the idioms I employ are shockingly conventional. Part of this may come from the experience gained by completing my undergraduate thesis in terms of how to construct conventional forms, but another large part is that this is a completely different project with a different approach to the issue.

In *To the Seven Winds*—the opera I wrote (at least the first 20 minutes of it) for my undergrad thesis—I was much more concerned about ideologies and theoretical fidelity than about the music, which is evident in the clunky “Overture,” the nearly unsingable vocal lines, and the decidedly unoperatic libretto.

I should note that when I say conventional, I’m referring to harmonies and tonality, not necessarily genre. Generically, *To the Seven Winds* is much more recognizable as opera. The Xavia of 2013 is clearly trying and failing to be Wagner with his unsubtle use of leitmotif, annoyingly polemical lyrics, and quirky thoughts about chromaticism. I was unabashedly serving *Gesamtkunstwerk* realness in my many hats as librettist, composer, and intended star (which, of course, I’m still doing, but a lot less pretentiously).³² In contrast, the arias above are more obviously rooted in popular forms

³² On Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* see Burkholder, Grout and Palisca 692-3.

such as blues and rap. I think it's fairly easy to map this difference onto the distinction between liberal and radical politics. In a liberal model, the system itself is not the problem; the problem is unequal access to the system, which can be solved by simply increasing the amount of a marginalized group in the system to balance things out. That's what I was doing in *To the Seven Winds*; I ultimately did very little to upset the ideologies of Western opera (but not for lack of trying!), just adapted them to allow for a trans protagonist. In a radical model, on the other hand, the system itself requires critique and restructuring to take into account the needs and differences of the marginalized group. The arias above evidence a radical critique of operatic convention by employing non-classical traditions (indeed referencing two traditions started by African-Americans, who are also traditionally left out of opera), non-operatic vocal production, and de-linking the sex-gender-voice part triangulation that has been used to render trans presence in opera illegible in the first place.

One convention that I stuck with from *To the Seven Winds* is my tendency to cycle rapidly through keys. The overall structure of *To the Seven Winds* was based around a tone row, from which I generated my two main themes. This tone row was also used to determine the keys of each scene in the opera; there were fourteen planned scenes in total, one in each key plus an atonal scene and a scene in all twelve keys. The overture also demonstrates this structure in that the order of the keys through which it cycles is the retrograde of the tone row. In order for the overture to remain under five minutes, I therefore could only spend precious little time in each key before moving on to the next.

By not lingering too long in one tonal world, and certainly not following the conventions for order of keys, I enacted a border-hopping decentralization of tonal realism.

While the key order in “Let Down Your Long Hair” is decidedly more predictable aurally, the key changes occur in fairly unexpected places. The half-step key change is rare in Western classical music, which tends to move to the subdominant or dominant key before returning to the home key (Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca 512-13). It is however common in pop music. Traditionally, a key change of a half-step or a series of such changes is used as a vamp, repeating the immediately preceding material but in the next key. The reason this type of key change works so well is that the tonic of the first key is the leading tone of the second key, meaning that in theory this series of key changes could go on indefinitely and still make musical sense. A great example of this is *Love on Top* by Beyoncé.

In “Let Down Your Long Hair,” on the other hand, the key changes indicate moves to different musical material. The lyrics are in four stanzas of eight lines of iambic tetrameter with the third stanza being a double stanza. The music reflects this in its AABA structure, an indirect reference the *da capo* aria and to sonata form. Starting out in E major, the second stanza begins by seeming to be a repeat of the musical material from the first verse, but instead providing the closure to a pseudo-binary-form exposition. At the key change to F major, we begin to deal with the double stanza, which is divided up into its own ABA format of sorts. The first half of the stanza uses new musical material in F major, and then moves on to F-sharp major for the second half and its musical themes. An interlude in G major follows which uses the same musical material

presented in F-sharp major, with the addition of the flute and viola lines from the F major material. In sonata form, this would be the development. Finally, the original musical material returns for a recapitulation, given the last stanza is standard size. However, the material has been transformed into A-flat major, a diminished 4th above where we started.

By refusing to return to the home key, this song unsettles the notion that E major is the “real” key of the piece with the other keys being aberrant distractions, “false” keys. Especially since, as McClary points out, the transitional keys in sonata form tend to represent the feminine to the home key’s masculine (14-15), I use the terms real and false keys to draw attention to the transphobic policing of bodies that require any femininity occurring in bodies assigned male be passing deceptions with an eventual return to masculinity. The music in “Let Down Your Long Hair” doesn’t see its slippage into other keys as a distraction from identifying as E major but the identity itself; that is, the song lives in all five keys it presents, emphasizing the connectedness of them in one unity.

The blending of these keys is an important project because of the way certain keys are gendered, as unpacked by Wheelock. Moreover, “Let Down Your Long Hair” displaces the harmonies from being clearly major or minor and from lining up exactly with the structure of the lyrics. I accomplished this by turning to blues. The eight lines of four beats mean that sixteen-bar or eight-bar phrases would be the logical choice to set this text. I went with twelve-bar blues instead. The first stanza lines up with an extended sixteen-bar blues progression, but after that we get four bars of the tonic in F major. The remaining eight bars carry the first eight lines of stanza three, beginning on the

subdominant. There are only nine measures in F-sharp major, one of introduction and eight carrying lyrics. The progression is shortened yet again to a simple I-IV-V-I progression, two measures a chord. After this, there is a twelve-bar interlude in G, and then the move to A-flat, but instead of a return to a sixteen-bar structure to round out the symmetry, the opening material is condensed into twelve measures after a two bar introduction. Also, the chords deviate from a standard blues progression. The progression I set up in the first section was:

I7—I7—ii7—I7

IV7—IV7—I7—I7

(in the sixteen-bar version I repeat the first row here)

V—V7—I7—I7,

whereas in the second section the progression goes:

I7—I7—IV—I7

vi—vi—I7—I7

V7—V7—I7—I7. The lyrics stay in the first eight measures of the progression.

Whereas in a standard twelve-bar song the first line is repeated to fill out the bars, here the lyrics consistently refuse to line up with the overarching musical plan. By disjoining the congruence between narrative structure and musical structure, the naturalness of that congruence is called into question, an important project for trans music.

A similar strategy is evident in “I want a life measured,” but there the resistance to tonality is in the cadences. The progression considered most “stable” in Western music theory while still including all seven chords in a key is: I—iii—vi—ii—IV—V—

vii°—I.³³ “I want a life measured” adapts this progression but always refuses the finality and inevitability of the progression through a series of deceptive cadences, which are bolded:

I—I7—iii—vi—ii—IV7—V—**vi7**—iii—iii—vii°—**IV9**—V7. The move from vii° to IV9 is especially surprising because unlike V, vii° almost always needs to resolve to I in traditional music theory, which it does in the melody of the singer but not the accompaniment. The true cadence comes in the next measure, after the voice has already stopped singing. This thirteenth measure connects us back to the beginning to start off a second verse through a very traditional V7—I that doesn’t feel traditional because it’s a thirteenth measure.

At the end of the second verse, we expect the V7 to resolve to I again, but instead we get a V/V, the F major chord, signaling the key change to B-flat in the next measure. Once again, an E-flat in the melody is our bridge between across these unexpected juxtapositions. After going through this B-section, we end on the tonic in B-flat, which is of course the dominant in E-flat, to which we return. As I said above, this move from tonic key to dominant key back to tonic key is a masculine figure, which makes sense in a song for a trans man. The first progression returns, but once again instead of the V7 resolving to the I, we take a detour through iii. This V7—iii—I cadence as the ending of the piece upsets the hegemonic telos of traditional cadences (*pace* Schenker). However, it still sounds like a cadence because the iii chord contains the leading tone. “I want a life

³³ This progression is derived from harmonic relationships based on descending fifths, the fifth being the first non-octave overtone (see p. 40). Thus it has a greater claim to being a “natural” progression than others. Thanks to Rebecca Burkhardt for pointing this out.

measured” thus embodies the masculine tradition while still poking holes in it to provide for alternative masculinities, constantly refusing the inevitability of the progressions it relies on.

I would like to make a quick side-note about the term “deceptive cadence.” The movement from V or vii° to anything other than I is called a deceptive cadence, because the listener expects the tonic and doesn’t receive it. The underpinning ideology of this is that tonal chord progressions are normal and other progressions are not only abnormal but deceitful to the extent that they usurp traditional codes of musical signification. I bring this up because as I mentioned earlier, there is a very common stereotype that trans people are deceitful, and I think this is an unfortunate connection to make to music theory. I still don’t know how I feel about whether reclaiming deceptive cadences as transgender is politically effective or not.

Like “Let Down Your Long Hair,” “I want a life measured” plays with binary and ternary structures. In “Let Down Your Long Hair,” the meter stays firmly in 4/4 while the harmonic structure shifts between binary and ternary: in number of bars (minus intros and outros, 16—12—8—12—12) and in form (A A B C C/B A). In “I want a life measured,” the meter begins in 6/8 but phrases are more or less in fours; after the four bar intro, we expect a twelve-bar phrase but end up with thirteen. This thirteen-bar phrase repeats, giving a binary form A section (the form of the song is AABBA). In the B section, we switch to 4/4, but six-bar phrases, then back to the A section’s thirteen bar phrases. Furthermore, the singer frequently uses duplets and hemiola figures in the 6/8

sections. All of these are common strategies in Western music, but I put them in service of trans music to reinforce the boundary-crossing impulse of trans music.

The vocal ranges I used may seem, *prima facie*, to be strange choices for trans inclusion, but if we remember that trans men are not just sopranos in pants and that trans women are not just tenors in dresses, it makes sense that the ranges used by trans bodies are as diverse as those bodies themselves. Trans music values the trans body and the complex relationships many trans people have with their voices. For example, because Jared is not on testosterone and his dysphoria disallows notes in his falsetto, he effectively has the range of a tenor, and indeed identifies as a tenor; hence, his song is a tenor song. In some ways, it's transphobic to assume that the voice parts trans men sing should be different than those that cis men sing, or that a song written for a trans man should be noticeably different from any song written for cis tenors. Because of this, cis tenors could just as easily sing "I want a life measured," and in fact I encourage them to do so: I wrote this song for a male voice, whether cis or trans.

"Let Down Your Long Hair" takes a different approach. Because I have a much wider range than Morgan and Jared, my song covers that range in the voice part. In tandem with the rising keys, the vocal part rises from the depths of the bass clef to the heights of the treble clef, spanning an almost unheard-of three-octave range in one song.³⁴ In doing this, I play to the strengths of my voice as it currently exists instead of once again forcing it to sing in places it can't. While the reason my voice is so strong in my lower registers is transphobic training, I turn that training on its head by also

³⁴ The only operatic precedent for this of which I'm aware is Tremont's aria in *Jerry Springer* which is also a trans role (probably not coincidentally, although I didn't have this aria in mind when I wrote mine).

including sections in the registers I like to use. I can rely on the support and relative ease of my chest voice while still allowing for the color and gender validation of my head voice. Moreover, the extreme range of the piece makes traditional designation of voice parts nearly impossible, upsetting the idea that the traditional categories are exhaustive. The closest possible term would be “countertenor,” but even countertenor repertoire usually never gets that low and given the contradiction of a usually male association with the term countertenor being deployed on a song about “trans girl blues,” the term can be easily evaded. Through this, I can finally sing in the tenor range without being a tenor.

All three of our bodies had a profound effect on the choices I made as a composer. My range allowed for the dynamic vocal line in my aria. Jared’s and Morgan’s use of binders made it necessary to ensure I included plenty of opportunities for them to breathe. In our one-on-one session, Jared admitted he’s easily swayed from the key, so I tried to limit the level of chromaticism and amount of awkward leaps. Given that Morgan’s voice was changing during this process due to testosterone, I thought it was safer to give them a piece where the pitches aren’t as important as the rhythm, that way they could use it throughout their transition.

Featuring explicitly trans content in the lyrics was also an important strategy for me. While Jared’s was not written specifically about being trans, and as far as I know was written by a cis man, the lyrics for “Let Down Your Long Hair” and “It” are written by trans people about the experience of being trans. Staging trans issues using trans bodies and trans authors and composers is probably one of the most important ways we can foster trans inclusion in classical music (though by no means the only way).

I had an immensely difficult time trying to figure out how I wanted to set “It,” because the performance style of the author is already so embodied. Unlike “Typewriter Series #741” and “Let Down Your Long Hair,” “It” is a spoken word poem, which is an oral form that is often extremely personal and embodied. Not only does the lack of meter and rhyme scheme create problems for setting it to music, but I worried about divorcing the work from the performer. I mentioned this issue to myself back in Part VIII, but I don’t think I ever proposed a solution, and I’m still not convinced my way is the perfect solution. On the one hand, the poem definitely resonates with other trans people’s experiences; otherwise, Morgan wouldn’t have chosen it, and I wouldn’t get chills every time I hear Ade perform it. On the other hand, “part of the power of spoken word is the audience’s faith in the performer to tell things that are true” to their personal experiences (Ailes). Ailes reminds us that especially if the person covering the poem has a different positionality from the author, it could easily become problematic: “For me as a white woman to perform a poem written about the experiences of being a black male in America would be a form of appropriation, even if I didn’t intend it in that sense.” Given that Morgan is white and Ade is a person of color, even though both are transmasculine and the piece isn’t immediately “about” being black, I strongly hesitated to indulge the request, especially as a white composer.

Ultimately, I decided to go ahead with setting “It” because a.) I had a deadline and a lack of back-up plans, b.) there is a tradition of cover slams,³⁵ and c.) I think the danger of whitewashing trans experiences is greater in this case than the danger of

³⁵ Technically speaking, slam poetry is spoken word poetry performed at a slam (contest), so a cover slam is a poetry contest where the contestant performs another person’s work (“What is Poetry Slam?”).

appropriation. (Of course I'm more than willing to be told I'm wrong about that assessment.) It should be noted that the other popular forms I've integrated were also pioneered by people of color, and it is not inherently problematic for me to use such an idiom with the understanding that I do it respectfully and by giving credit to the artists who came before me and whose work I build upon. And I think I've also been collapsing characters and performers in my thoughts about these pieces. Ultimately, while I'm writing this piece with Morgan's voice in mind, I'm writing for a character, who may end up being played by Morgan, but also eventually may be played by someone else. While deeply embodied performance is one possible aspect of transgender music, it is not the only approach, and maybe the opera from which these arias will come can take a blend of approaches.

At any rate, "It" was the hardest musical challenge I faced in this process not only because of the difference in tradition, but also because my solution to the problem of honoring Ade's performance style was to make the song a rap, which has similar yet distinct qualities in comparison with spoken word. I have never written rap, partially because I'm not as familiar with the rules of the genre, but more because I have a horrible sense of rhythm. My dyslexia makes complex rhythmical structures difficult to process (Huss et al.), which is an unfortunate situation for a composer. Nevertheless, I tried to be as faithful as possible to Ade's performance style while still fitting it to a 4/4 meter.

When I asked about favorite genres, Morgan's major suggestion was metal, so this song became my attempt at rap metal. This is certainly a transgeneric endeavor,

though not an unprecedented one.³⁶ It occurs to me that in order to have a successfully transgeneric work, a composer needs to be fluent in those genres, or else work closely with those who are. If I'm serious about including radically different genres in my music, it behooves me to become a better student of those traditions.

One of the great things about rap in terms of vocal grain and embodiment is that rap only has one voice part: yours. Yes, there can be sung notes, but rap is rarely notated, and terms like soprano, alto, tenor, and bass don't easily apply. Because rap, like spoken word, tends to reflect the unique vocality of the creator, it might open up a similar avenue for trans performers. Then again, I am certainly not ignorant of rap and hip hop's rampant issues with misogyny and homophobia that make this a seemingly unlikely choice for a project about including trans people in classical music.³⁷ But I think trans music should embrace those contradictions and serve as a platform to critique multiple disciplines at once while still opening up more space for trans people in classical music.

Because the beat in "It" has to stay relatively steady for the performer, I had the chance to find ways to showcase the diverse instruments I have been using. I felt a piano intro sets up the tone of the rest of the song and gives the pianist and flautist a little more to do than they had in the other two numbers. Tonally, the song is pretty clearly in A minor, but it slips fairly regularly between natural, melodic, and harmonic minors. The arpeggiations in the piano and flute outline seventh chords that don't follow a standard progression, constantly rising (and later falling) by thirds. This has the effect of creating

³⁶ The work of Linkin Park comes to mind as a prominent example of rap metal.

³⁷ For an excellent exploration of social issues in hip hop, see Hurt. I also don't mean to imply that there are no trans rappers, which is clearly false.

strong harmonic tension, cueing the listener into the tumultuous tone of the poem being set. When the beat drops, the viola comes in centering around B, constantly furthering the tension because it could just as easily resolve to C as to A. This viola line serves as the marker of breaks in the lyrics. The poem flows freely in its original form, which doesn't give the rapper or the listener much of a break. Because of this, I took the natural pauses in the story as places to add a little more breathing room, hence the viola, which keeps the tension while still providing a relative pause. As for the guitar, it has the all-important task of helping the drums keep the beat. The guitar also furthers the tension by never resolving in its repeated figure. Like the viola, the measure always ends on a passing tone or neighbor tone instead of the root of whatever chord is being played. Thus, we always expect the resolution in the next measure, yet that resolution is never satisfying until ultimately the guitar disappears. I'm not saying harmonic tension is inherently trans, but the relatively static nature of that tension directs our uncomfortable attention to the words of the rapper, who is absolutely trans. Even when the music cuts out for a three-measure exchange between the rapper and the drums, it is striving for heightened tension that doesn't quite feel resolved with the final piano note.

As a set, these three arias don't seem very coherent, and on the surface have a tenuous claim to the designation "arias." The genres are non-classical and the instrumentation is...unique. Not notated in the score, the vocal style of these pieces is not operatic, because none of us consistently sings in that style. Most of Morgan's training was in jazz singing; Jared's vocal style is more indie; and my voice could best be described as "eclectic." These are arias not because they "sound like" opera, but because

I have called them arias and performatively designated them part of the opera tradition.

In the end, that's how trans people have to get their foot in the door: by letting opera

know we're here whether they want us or not.

PART XII

CONCLUSION

What, then, is “transgender music,” exactly? And what is transgender music’s relationship towards trans inclusion in classical music? Pinning trans music down as one concrete thing defeats the purpose of the phrase; the purpose of writing trans music is to serve as one avenue for trans inclusion, and that means all trans people, not just those who conform to ciscentric models of how trans people should be. Trans music is an approach to composition that breaks down structures founded in oppression. This can be accomplished through radically inventive soundscapes unrelated to traditional forms, or through repurposing old forms and sounds to further a trans-positive agenda. The arias I produced above are examples of the latter strategy. If I may summon the strength of the Muses once more, let this thesis inspire more makers of transgender music!

Calling this a conclusion is a touch disingenuous, because I conclude by encouraging us to begin. If opera wishes to remain relevant in the twenty-first century, it needs to adapt, not just to the changing demographics of the audience but also to the changing musical context of Western society. Perhaps opera has a reputation for being stuffy because the idioms it uses are centuries old. Or perhaps it’s because younger audiences have no connection to the language, the music, the plot, or the politics. Like I said, calling this a conclusion is disingenuous because I draw no conclusions. I’m not even sure I’ve answered my own questions. I’m merely making a few suggestions:

- Write more operas about nuanced, diverse trans subjects.
- Hire trans people to sing the roles and to aid in production.

- Train trans singers in such a way that is both healthy and affirming.
- Question the gendered ideologies of the libretti and music you write.
- Upset the notion that voice part and gender are linked.
- Conversely, respect trans people who link their voice part to their gender.
- Invest in trans musicians and their education.
- Write music trans people actually want to listen to and perform.
- Help trans people locate the history of trans contributions to classical music.
- Develop respectful staging techniques and critical methods.
- Support trans artists financially, politically, organizationally, and personally.
- STEP ASIDE so trans people can do all these things for themselves.

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APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY

ableism— discrimination and oppression based on a person’s actual or perceived physical, mental, or social ability.

absolute music— the contention that instrumental music is not “about” anything, and functions outside ideologies; the idea that music has no meaning, only objective (formal) aesthetic value.

AFAB— assigned female at birth.

alto— a singer coded female and woman who sings lower than sopranos and slightly higher than tenors.

AMAB— assigned male at birth.

aria— a usually stand-alone song in an opera, fully orchestrated often involving a pause in the dramatic action.

baritone— a singer coded male and man who sings somewhat low notes.

bass— a singer coded male and man who sings the lowest notes.

binder— a garment worn by some AFAB trans people to reduce the prominence of breast tissue.

bisexual— (abbr. bi) someone who is sexually attracted to two or more genders.

castrato— (pl. castrati) male-assigned performer who underwent castration (now-unpracticed) before puberty to retain his mezzo- or soprano-ranged voice. These roles are commonly played by female women in present day.

cisgender— (abbr. cis) describes a person whose gender identity matches the gender associated with their sex assigned at birth.

ciscentrism— the bias in society towards assuming all people are cisgender and that being cisgender is normal, with all other gender alignments being abnormal.

classism— discrimination or oppression based on social rank, wealth, education, and/or cultural capital.

colonialism— a practice of invading territories and establishing political, economic, social, and cultural control over those territories and the peoples that inhabit them due to attitudes of inferiority and inhumanity by colonizers towards indigenous inhabitants.

countertenor— a singer coded male and man who sings in the range traditionally sung by altos, mezzos, or even sopranos. Countertenor roles are fairly rare except to substitute for castrati roles; however, they are seeing a resurgence in twenty-first century music.

cross dresser— (formerly “transvestite”) a person, usually cis and heterosexual, who habitually dresses up in clothing of another gender for fun or fetishism, not as an aspect of their identity.

demiboy— someone who identifies as partly male, regardless of assigned sex at birth.

demigirl— someone who identifies as partly female, regardless of assigned sex at birth.

drag— a style of performance where people dress up in exaggerated styles pertaining to a certain social position; for example, a **drag queen** is (usually but not always) a cis man who dresses up as a woman as part of a performance or character.

feminism— a theory and practice that focuses on gender-based oppression in striving for social, cultural, legal, economic, and political equality across genders, especially centering women.

FTM— female-to-male; outdated.

gaff— a garment worn by some AMAB trans people to reduce the prominence of their genitalia in garments.

genderqueer— someone who identifies as neither man nor woman, but somewhere in-between masculinity and femininity.

heterocentrism— the bias in society towards assuming all people are heterosexual and that being heterosexual is normal, with all other sexualities being abnormal.

heterosexual— also called straight, someone who is sexually attracted to people of a gender different than their own.

homophobia— discrimination and oppression based on someone's actual or perceived same-gender orientation.

homosexual— also called gay or lesbian, someone who is sexually attracted to people of their same gender.

intersex— an umbrella term for a variety of people whose chromosomal, hormonal, primary, or secondary sex characteristics do not align with those typically coded male and female.

LGBT— abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

libretto— the book of words to an opera or musical.

mezzo(-soprano)— a singer coded female and woman who sings somewhat high notes.

misogyny— hatred directed at females and/or women.

MTF— male-to-female; outdated.

neurodivergent— “having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of ‘normal’” (Walker). Examples of neurodivergence include autism, schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, dyslexia, ADHD, brain injury, etc.

pants role— also called trouser roles or performing *en travesti*, male roles written for sopranos or altos, whether by design or as replacement for castrati roles. Regardless, the characters are cis men in the world of the show, even if the performer is a woman.

passaggio— term used to describe transitional areas between vocal registers, the primary one being from chest voice to head voice.

passing— the ability of a trans person to be perceived as their presented gender.

patriarchy— literally rule of the father, a systemic bias towards male domination of and control over women in legal, social, economic, political, and professional settings.

racism— discrimination and oppression based on one’s actual or perceived non-white race or skin tone.

recitative— sections of music in an opera, often accompanied by few instruments, that are less melodic in nature and carry more of the plot; comparable to the spoken lines in a musical between numbers, only sung.

sexism— discrimination and oppression based on one’s actual or perceived status as a gender other than man.

soprano— a singer coded female and woman who sings the highest notes.

tenor— a singer coded male and man who sings higher than baritones and slightly lower than altos.

transfeminine— an umbrella term for a range of gender identities and expressions tending towards femininity in trans contexts.

transgender— (abbr. trans) umbrella term for anyone whose gender identity is different from the gender associated with their sex assigned at birth.

transmasculine— an umbrella term for a range of gender identities and expressions tending towards masculinity in trans contexts.

transmisogyny— the unique intersection of transphobia and misogyny used to police transfeminine and AMAB gender-nonconforming people.

transphobia— discrimination and oppression based on a person's actual or perceived gender-nonconformance.

transsexual— an older, medicalizing term that refers primarily to transgender people who experience body dysphoria or who pursue a physical transition. Transsexuals form a subset of the transgender community.

APPENDIX B
RECORDINGS