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Degree sought:	Doctor of Musical Arts
Program:	AMUSD: Music – UIUC- 10KS0265AMUS

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IMPROVISATION AS A GENERATIVE TOOL FOR NEW OPERA:
AN EXPLORATION OF METHODS AND PARAMETERS

BY

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SCHOLARLY ESSAY

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctoral of Musical Arts in Music
with a concentration in Performance and Literature
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, 2016

Urbana, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

This scholarly essay explores the subject of improvisation in opera and vocal music, tracing its historical antecedents, providing examples of contemporary, classically-informed improvising singers and opera companies, and presenting an overview of possible methods and parameters. Chapter 1 examines the historical background of extemporaneous counterpoint in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the flourishing of improvised ornaments and embellishments from the Baroque era to the *bel canto* style of the nineteenth century, and the eventual decline in the use of improvised ornaments and cadenzas in the late nineteenth century.

Chapter 2 covers first the subject of contemporary improvisation, including experimental techniques from the 1950s and 1960s, with reference to the use of improvisatory elements in composed scores. The second area involves a discussion of singer-composers Cathy Berberian, Meredith Monk, Pamela Z, and Bobby McFerrin. The third area explores current opera creators and performers using improvisation, focusing on the improv-comedy-based groups Impropera and La Donna Improvvisata, and two "devised operas": Ann Baltz's OperaWorks production of *The Discord Altar,* and Ellen Lindquist's *dream seminar*. Much of this newer material has yet to be the subject of much scholarship.

Chapter 3 presents an exploration of methods and parameters used to generate operatic material, including the author's work in vocal improvisation at the Indy Convergence annual arts residencies; the methods taught by Ann Baltz in her OperaWorks training programs for emerging and professional opera singers; and harmonic methods used by Christopher Azzara, Edward Sarath, Jeffrey Agrell, Jamey Aebersold, and Adam Rudolph.

The contents of this paper were presented as part of a lecture-recital on March 11, 2016, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, incorporating video examples from the works discussed, followed by a live performance of a short improvised opera, *Homo Homarus*, directed by and with a libretto written by the author. This essay concludes with a description of some of the methods and parameters used in the project recital.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

"The propensity to make music is the most mysterious, wonderful and neglected feature of

humankind."[1] This quote, by archeologist Steven Mithen from the preface of his book *The*

Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body, is a good reminder to

those of us who study music that we are privileged to be able to access this mystery. Few

musical processes are as mysterious as improvisation because, though it has been a part of music

from the beginning, it is by nature more elusive and difficult to study than the record left behind

in a notated musical score.

Improvisation is not commonly practiced in traditional operas. Singers are expected to

learn the music as notated by a composer, with some flexibility in the use of ornaments and

cadenzas; even these however, are often passed down by tradition. The genre of opera is, by

nature, one of the most interdisciplinary art forms, with its combination of libretto, music, acting,

dance, and design. We are fortunate to have traditional operas of various eras still flourishing in

our time in theatres across the world. Some of these theatres focus primarily on masterpieces of

the past,[2] leaving room for alternative companies to explore the vast potential of opera in new

ways. Examples of companies participating in the growing trend of presenting innovative opera

include The PROTOTYPE festival in New York,[3] and the Tête à Tête festival in London.[4]

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[1] Steven Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), vii.

[2] For example, a graph posted on Tumblr in October, 2014 by Suby Raman using data compiled from the Metropolitan Opera Database shows that the median year of composition for operas performed since 1910 was around 1870. See Suby Raman, "10 Graphs to Explain the Metropolitan Opera," accessed April 10, 2016, http://subyraman.tumblr.com/post/101048131983/10-graphs-to-explain-the-metropolitan-opera .

[3] See "PROTOTYPE Opera," accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.prototypefestival.org .

[4] See "The Opera Revolution Starts Here - Tête à Tête Opera," Tête à Tête, accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.tete-a-tete.org.uk/ .

In this essay, I explore operatic improvisation and its potential future development. This discussion begins with an overview of historical antecedents in Western classical vocal music, then provides examples of contemporary, classically-informed vocal and operatic improvisation. I conclude with a survey of methods and parameters I have studied and used in my own improvisatory work. In this essay, I intend not only to shed light on the practice of vocal improvisation, but also to demonstrate the potential development of new improvised operatic works performed by classically trained singers and instrumentalists.

CHAPTER 1 – Historical Antecedents: An Overview of Improvisation Used in Western Classical Vocal Music of the Fifteenth-Nineteenth Centuries

Though it is impossible to know what the earliest forms of human music sounded like, one can

presume that vocalization played a large part. Prior to the advent of any musical notation, all

music would have been either composed and memorized, then taught by ear and/or improvised.

Some argue that music predates language. This discussion has been going on at least since

Charles Darwin, who wrote in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* in 1871 of a

"musical protolanguage."[5] Archeologist Steven Mithen proposes that compared to language,

"musicality has a significantly earlier appearance in human evolution and was utilized by a wide

range of hominin ancestors and relatives."[6] In any case, it is reasonable to imagine early human

music as including improvised singing. Though sung improvisation has continued throughout

recorded history, it has ebbed and flowed in usage, and is not easy to trace by virtue of the fact

that few improvisations are notated after the fact. Fortunately the accounts of theorists and

performers can shed some light on this practice.

Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Improvised Counterpoint

For the purposes of this discussion, I will begin with an overview of vocal improvisation as

practiced in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century counterpoint, as theorists and practitioners of this art

have left behind a substantive record. Foremost among these is Johannes Tinctoris (c. 1435-

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[5] W. Tecumseh Fitch, "Musical protolanguage: Darwin's theory of language evolution revisited," *Language Log*, February 12, 2009. Evolutionary biologist and cognitive scientist Fitch has written extensively about the subject in *Cognition* and various other journals and books. Research indicates that singing and speaking utilize different parts of the brain, as has been demonstrated in work with stroke patients who lose their language function but can still sing. See Nancy Helm-Estabrooks, "From Singing to Speaking," *Stroke Connection,* Sept./Oct. 2005, 26-27.
[6] Steven Mithen and others, "Review Feature: The Singing Neanderthals: the Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body, by Steven Mithen," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 16:1 (2006): 98.

1511). In the introduction to his translation of Tinctoris's 1477 *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (The

Art of Counterpoint), Albert Seay calls Tinctoris "a representative of the most enlightened area

of musical thought of the fifteenth century."[7] Tinctoris referred to extemporaneous counterpoint

as *super librum* (upon the book) in order to distinguish it from *res facta* (composed polyphonic

works).[8]

   Other names for this same practice include *chanter sur le livre*, *cantare super librum*,

and *singen opten boeck,* as mentioned by Rob C. Wegman,[9] and *déchant sur le livre* or

contrappunto alla mente as described by Paul Henry Lang.[10] Ernest T. Ferand refers to the term

sortisatio for improvised vocal counterpoint*,* loosely translated as "by chance."[11] Ferand notes

that the term can be found from the end of the fifteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth

in Danish, German, and French sources, and suggests that the practice dates back to the very

beginnings of polyphony; clearly, improvised singing was more than a peripheral practice in the

Renaissance.[12]

   Different styles of Renaissance vocal polyphony are usually associated with a particular

composer. However, Wegman points out, drawing upon the writings of Tinctoris and others, the

"apparent indifference," at least in the musically prodigious Low Countries between 1450-1500,

as to whether this music was composed or improvised, and argues that "the level on which these

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[7] From Albert Seay's introduction to Johannes Tinctoris, *The Art of Counterpoint*, trans. and ed. Albert Seay
(Middleton, WI: American Institute of Musicology, 1961), 2.
[8] Ibid., 103. Tinctoris was writing in Naples, but familiar with the music of his time throughout Europe.
[9] Rob C. Wegman, "From Maker to Composer: Improvisation and Musical Authorship in the Low Countries, 1450-
1500," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 49:3 (1996): 417.
[10] Paul Henry Lang, "Ornamentation and Improvisation," in *Musicology and Performance,* ed. Alfred Mann and
George J. Buelow. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 225.
[11] Ernest T. Ferand, "'Sodaine and Unexpected' Music in the Renaissance," *The Musical Quarterly* 37:1 (1951): 10.
[12] Ibid.

practices were different . . . might have been considered less significant than the level on which . . . they could be perceived to be the same."[13] One must keep in mind that the concept of the professional composer was still in its youth, and musical authorship carried less weight. In addition, music printing was still a relatively new art,[14] and it may have been more efficient at times to give singers well-versed in harmony a book of plainchant upon which to improvise than to spend time copying out parts. A trained singer in a court chapel would have been expected to improvise consonant intervals against a *cantus firmus*, and by the late fifteenth century, could have studied the work of Tinctoris. Moreover, Wegman gives examples of characters appearing in fifteenth century miracle and mystery plays discussing improvised discant, to demonstrate the ubiquity of this practice not just in chapel, but in daily life.[15] Ferand's work confirms this by citing German music theorist Heinrich Faber's (before 1500-1552) assertion in 1548 that *sortisatio* in Germany, at that point, was more a practice of "laborers and mechanics" than church singers.[16] What had been a profession of the learned had become more of a music of the common people, and had begun to be considered less scholarly than composed music.

   As the art of music printing advanced, there would have been less need for singers at court or chapel to improvise their parts in polyphonic works. However, a parallel trend in improvisation, the use of improvised embellishments upon a melody, was to flourish. Ben Bechtel notes the appearance of Sylvestro Ganassi's (1492-mid-sixteenth century) treatise *Opera*

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[13] Wegman, 478.
[14] For an overview of music printing in the Renaissance, see Paul Nelson, "Music Printing in the Renaissance," accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.pnelsoncomposer.com/writings/MusicPrintingRenaissance.html .
[15] Wegman, 418-419.
[16] Ferand, 17.

intitulata Fontegara (Venice, 1535),[17] which provided instruction on improvisation techniques on the recorder to ornament a melody.[18] Ornamentation became the means by which vocal improvisation thrived well into the Baroque era.

The Use of Improvised Ornamentation in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Opera

The end of the Renaissance was marked by many stylistic shifts, among them, a different attitude toward the relationship between vocal music and text, which in turn helped give rise to the new genre of opera. The seeds of this new way of thinking can be traced back to the mid-sixteenth century, particularly in the work of the humanist-theorist Girolamo Mei (1519-1594) who, working in Rome, studied the musical practices of ancient Greece, around the same time that the aforementioned Faber noted the decline of improvised polyphony in Germany. Mei's work did not simply report on what music must have sounded like in ancient Greece, but compared it favorably against the polyphonic music of his time, and argued for, as he wrote in a letter to Vincenzo Galilei in 1572 "the marvelous effects of the music of the ancients in moving the affections."[19] To his ears, the elaborate Renaissance polyphony of his time, with its differently pitched voices, different melodies and rhythms in each voice, and words occurring at different rates not necessarily intelligible to the ear, could not arouse one single unified affect, or feeling, in the listener. His thoughts became the foundation for the group commonly known as the

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[17] The title translates as "The Book Entitled Fontegara." Hildemarie Peter, in the editor's preface to her edition of the book, suggests that it may refer to Ganassi's probable birthplace, the town of Fontigo, though she also offers other possibilities. See: Sylvestro Ganassi. *Opera Intitulata Fontegara*, ed. Hildemarie Peter, trans. Dorothy Swainson. (Berlin-Lichterfelde: Robert Lienau, 1959), 4.

[18] Ben Bechtel, "Improvisation in Early Music," *Music Educator's Journal* 66:5 (1980): 110. Though this treatise concerns playing the recorder, Bechtel notes that it was the first printed treatise on ornamentation.

[19] Girolamo Mei, "Girolamo Mei: Letter to Vincenzo Galilei (1572)," in *Strunk's Source Readings in Music History, revised edition, Vol. 3: The Renaissance*, ed. Gary Tomlinson (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 491.

Florentine Camerata, a circle of thinkers who met at the home of Count Giovanni Bardi in

Florence beginning around 1573, including Vincenzo Galilei and Giulio Caccini.[20] Ruth Katz

describes the group as "Behaving almost like a circle of scientists, they focused . . . on a problem

(how to make language attached to music audible); they agreed upon a methodical approach to

its solution . . . and they agreed on the types of phenomena to be manipulated and observed (the

power of music to 'move the passions of the mind')."[21] The letters between them elucidate many

of these thoughts. Giovanni Bardi, writing to Giulio Caccini, makes mention of the old practice

al libro cantare (what Tinctoris had called "singing upon the book") in a negative light: "I

become nauseated when I recall some singers I have heard, whether solo or accompanied by

others, improvising on a choirbook, not caring if any of their words were understood."[22] Vocal

improvisation however, did not cease to be a part of the training and expectation for professional

singers, but shifted in focus from knowing how to extemporize counterpoint to knowing how to

embellish and ornament a melody, preserving and enhancing clarity of the text. This also aided

singers in moving the affections of the audience when portraying a character in the new dramatic

form of opera.

What composers notated in this new *stile recitativo*, or reciting style, was often more of a

road map than a complete score, with a melody and bass line to be fleshed out and fully realized

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[20] Claude Palisca, *The Florentine Camerata: Documentary Studies and Translations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 4-5.

[21] Ruth Katz, *Divining the Powers of Music: Aesthetic Theory and the Origins of Opera* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986), 2.

[22] Giovanni Bardi, "On Ancient Music and Good Singing," trans. Claude V. Palisca, in *The Florentine Camerata: Documentary Studies and Translations,* ed. Claude V. Palisca (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 123.

by singers and continuo players.[23] In some cases, the composer wrote out ornaments or provided

some instruction on how this was to be done, from which we can surmise the types of

ornamentation that might be applied in similar works. For example, Caccini wrote out

ornaments for his songs in *Le nuove musiche* (1602), using the preface to exhort singers to

"conform to the manner so lauded by Plato" and avoid excessive ornamentation.[24] For this early

to mid-Baroque vocal music, the types of ornaments to improvise, when not suggested by the

composer, can be found in treatises such as Christoph Bernhard's *Von der Singe-Kunst oder*

Manier (On the Art of Singing, or *Manier*) from ca. 1649 in Germany; *Manier* being the German

singer and theorist's term for ornaments. In France, Bénigne de Bacilly's 1668 *Remarques*

curieuses sur l'art de bien chanter (A commentary on the art of proper singing) details

ornaments to be used in the *air de cour*.[25] To the modern performer, it seems daunting to know

which type of ornaments to apply where in Baroque music, as this varied greatly depending on

the time, country, and style of each composer. But for the singers of the time, this was their

vernacular, and they often worked directly with the composer or a pupil of the composer.

Knowing how and when to improvise a *cascata*, or quick descending scale, in Caccini's time, or,

in the eighteenth century, how to ornament the *da capo* section of a Handel aria, would have

been an expected part of their skills.

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[23] This is not unlike jazz, and similarities between Baroque music and jazz have been noted at least as far back as 1949; see Hans-Peter Schmitz and Dominique-René de Lerma, "Baroque Music and Jazz," *The Black Perspective in Music* 7:1 (1979), 75–80.

[24] John Bass, "Would Caccini Approve? A Closer Look at Egerton 2971 and Florid Monody," *Early Music*, 36:1 (2008), 82.

[25] For more treatises on ornamentation, see Roland Jackson, *Performance Practice: A Dictionary-guide for Musicians.* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

By the late Baroque era, the *stile recitativo* had given way to a strong distinction between recitative and aria, and the *da capo* aria allowed singers the most freedom to improvise by embellishing on repeated material. George J. Buelow analyzes one such rare example of the improvisation of Faustina Bordoni, a famous Italian singer, having been written out from a 1721 performance when the singer would have been 20 years old.[26] The edited score, which contains both the original vocal line and Bordoni's version, shows how she turned eighth notes into sixteenth notes/sixteenth triplets by filling in skips with scalar passages or neighbor tones, added cadential ornaments, and other alterations. Buelow analyzes this in detail to draw attention to good performance practice of the time, praising her faithfulness to the thematic material even while improvising upon it, and noting that additions like the triplet rhythm actually come from the orchestral accompaniment.[27] This indicates the level of mastery required of singers of the time not just to improvise, but to do so intelligently and musically in a way that makes them a part of the compositional process.

This art continued to flourish in opera throughout the eighteenth century. Pier Francesco Tosi's (c. 1650—1730) *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni, o sieno osservazioni sopra il canto figurato* (usually translated in English as "Observations on the Florid Song"), from Bologna in 1723, provided a manual of ornamentation for singers of his time and beyond.[28] Echoing Caccini from more than 100 years before, he also cautioned singers to use restraint in their embellishments, complaining of elaborate and lengthy cadenzas: "on the last cadence the

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[26] George J. Buelow, "A Lesson in Operatic Performance Practice by Madame Faustina Bordoni," in *A Musical Offering: Essays in Honor of Martin Bernstein*. (New York: Pendragon Press, 1977), 81-90.
[27] Ibid., 90-91.
[28] Henry Pleasants, *The Great Singers*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 22-23.

throat is set going like a weather-cock in a whirlwind, and the orchestra yawns."[29] But it was

precisely in the form of the elaborate *cadenza* that operatic improvisation continued, for a time,

into the nineteenth century.

The Use and Decline of Improvised Ornamentation in Nineteenth Century Opera

In the nineteenth century, improvisation in the form of ornaments and cadenzas flourished in

part. The matter is somewhat murky because, unless the singer him/herself claims to have

improvised ornaments or a cadenza, it is difficult to ascertain whether the material was

composed by the singer or their teacher ahead of time, rather than being truly improvised. Some

accounts exist; Martha Elliott notes an event in 1829, in which the sopranos Maria Malibran and

Henriette Sontag were asked to sing a duet at a salon concert, not having rehearsed this together

previously, which turned into a competition of improvised ornaments.[30] Henry Pleasants

mentions in a discussion of soprano Giuditta Pasta that she fashioned her own ornaments and

then never changed them, but notes that this was the exception for singers of her time.[31]

Improvisation continued into the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the *bel canto*

style of Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini. Conductor and musicologist William Crutchfield argues

for the use of improvisation in modern performances of this music, saying that "the music was

written for freedom and improvisation and depends on that for its life," and asserts that

composers like Donizetti expected it.[32] Like previous generations of singers, nineteenth century

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[29] Pier Francesco Tosi, *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni, o sieno osservazioni sopra il canto figurato*, Bologna, 1723, translated as *Observations on the Florid Song, or Sentiments of the Ancient and Modern Singers* by John Ernest Galliard. (London: J. Wilcox, 1743), quoted in Henry Pleasants, *The Great Singers*, 35-36.
[30] Martha Elliott, "Italian Bel Canto," in *Singing in Style*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006),143.
[31] Pleasants, 142.
[32] William Crutchfield, quoted in Judith Malafronte, "Bel Canto at Caramoor," *Early Music America* 15:4 (2009): 38.

opera performers learned and practiced the appropriate ornaments until fluent enough to execute

them spontaneously. It is possible they may have studied the 1832 *Metodo pratico di canto*

(Practical Vocal Method) by composer and voice teacher Nicola Vaccai, or famous singer and

pedagogue Manuel Garcia's 1840 *Traité complet de l'art du chant* (Complete Treatise on the Art

of Singing).

Several factors influenced the decline of nineteenth century vocal improvisation, among

them the expectations of late-Romantic composers, who were increasingly specific about their

musical demands as they shifted away from florid display and towards a more natural,

unembellished style. Not all composers desired free-style embellishments by performers, or

wrote in a style that allowed for them. Paul Henry Lang suggests that the decline of improvised

ornaments was precisely due to the excesses of performers' embellishments: "composers, in self-

defense, began to write out what was formerly left to the performers' discretion."[33] This

highlights the tension between the performer's freedom and the composer's authority, and as the

nineteenth century unfolded, composers such as Wagner notated precisely what was to be sung,

with no expectation that the singer might depart from the written score. Though ornaments

continued to be used in Italy and France, their use, and particularly the elaborate cadenza, were

on the decline. William Crutchfield notes that Verdi "eventually emancipated himself from the

cadenza" and that in his later operas, the cadenza, when present, is a more seamless part of the

aria.[34] Compare also the lack of a cadenza in the soprano aria "Je dis que rien ne m'epouvante"

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[33] Paul Henry Lang, "Ornamentation and Improvisation," in *Musicology and Performance*, ed. Alfred Mann & George J. Buelow. (Yale University Press: 1997), 215.
[34] Will[iam] Crutchfield, "Vocal Ornamentation in Verdi: The Phonograpic Evidence," *19th-Century Music* 7:1 (1983), 5.

from Bizet's *Carmen*,[35] composed in 1873-74, to the *bel canto* style cadenza of "Comme autrefois" from his *Les pêcheurs de perles* ten years earlier.[36] This trend left little room for singers to add their own interpolations.

As singers continued to perform repertoire that called for ornamentation, the likelihood that those ornaments were truly improvised decreased. The embellishments of famous singers of the nineteenth century had become routine, and were passed from teacher to student all the way into present time, when a coloratura soprano might purchase *The Estelle Liebling Book of Coloratura Cadenzas*, published in 1943, a collection of "the most beautiful and singable cadenzas of the past and present," though all the singers Liebling cites by name began their careers before the turn of the century.[37] Crutchfield attributes the decline in improvisation, in part, to the advent of recording, and singers desiring to sing exactly what they hear, saying of Donizetti's aria "Una furtiva lagrima," recorded by Caruso in 1902: "virtually every tenor . . . simply repeats Caruso's cadenza from that old record."[38] The ability to improvise was simply no longer on the resumé of classical singers by the twentieth century.

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The decline of the use of improvisation in opera of the nineteenth century is not so much a cause for lament as it is simply a fact. Composers became more specific about what they wanted, and increasingly composed in distinct national styles and different musical languages. This would make the job of embellishing the music quite difficult even if the composer called for it, without

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[35] Georges Bizet, *Carmen*, ed. Robert Didion (Mainz: Ernst Eulenburg Ltd., 2003), 441-452.
[36] Georges Bizet, *Les pêcheurs de perles,* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2013), 142-150.
[37] Estelle Liebling, *The Estelle Liebling Book of Coloratura Cadenzas* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1943), 3.
[38] Crutchfield, quoted in Malafronte, 39.

some specific guidelines on how to approach the improvisation. Composing and performing, which had been an overlapping skill set in the extemporaneous counterpoint of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were now two fully separate categories.

The late musicologist Paul Henry Lang was a strong critic of ornamentation, claiming that some singers of the nineteenth century "double-crossed the composer" by producing overly florid ornamentation. He complained about Baroque ornaments used by modern singers, saying, "Now that we eagerly want to resurrect Baroque opera, shall we also resurrect the practice that killed it?", thus posing the question of whether a modern singer is capable of improvising ornamentation "in the spirit of those times."[39] While his point of view does a disservice to contemporary singers by suggesting that we are not competent, with study and practice, to properly develop this style of improvised ornamentation on our own, he does have a point that the modern singer simply has not been trained in this art to the extent of his or her predecessors. Singers at the end of the nineteenth century might have been just as capable of improvising as those of the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries, but these earlier skills were no longer required and therefore likely no longer practiced.

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[39] Lang, 222-223.

CHAPTER 2 – Contemporary Classically-Informed Improvisation in Opera and Vocal Music

In the 1950s and 1960s, composers experimented with many different techniques, including integrating non-Western/Classical influences, and generating sounds electronically with new technologies. Joseph Auner, in his book *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, frames this time period primarily in terms of the dichotomy between two opposite trends, integral serialism, as employed by Pierre Boulez, and indeterminacy, as embraced by John Cage (though he points out that these two seemingly opposite approaches could produce "astonishingly similar" pieces).[40] Auner's only mention of improvisation is in the work of composer Pauline Oliveros,[41] and in Karlheinz Stockhausen's 1968 score *Aus den sieben Tagen* (From the Seven Days).[42] Martha Elliott, in discussing the same period with regard to vocal music, compares the precise control desired by Boulez, Babbitt, and others in their vocal scores with an opposing school of thought that "rejected precision by seeking more freedom in improvisation and indeterminacy."[43] Consider, for example, Boulez's 1958 *Improvisation sur Mallarmé: une dentelle s'abolit* (Improvisation on Mallarmé: A Lace Vanishes) from *Pli selon pli* (Fold upon Fold) for soprano and nine instruments,[44] or Babbitt's 1979 *Phonemena* for soprano and piano (or tape),[45] both of which have precisely notated parts for all performers.

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[40] Joseph Auner, "Trajectories of Order and Chance," *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013), 190.

[41] Ibid., 209.

[42] Ibid., 242. The score of *Aus den sieben Tagen* is comprised not of musical notes but of text instructions to the performers, such as "Spiele einen Ton mit der Gewissheit dass Du beliebig viel Zeit und Raum hast" (Play a note with the certainty that you have as much time and space as you desire). Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Aus den sieben Tagen* (Universal Edition: Vienna, 1968), 5.

[43] Martha Elliott, "Working with Living Composers," in *Singing in Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 293.

[44] Pierre Boulez, *Improvisation sur Mallarmé: une dentelle s'abolit* (Universal Edition: Vienna, 1958).

[45] Milton Babbitt, *Phonemena* (C.F. Peters: New York, 1979).

Contrast this with an indeterminate vocal piece such as John Cage's 1958 *Aria*, made up of one

page of instructions for the singer followed by twenty pages of words and syllables. These are

accompanied by curvy and straight lines to represent approximate pitches—black squares

representing "unmusical" noises, and different colors to signify ten different styles of singing.[46]

Indeterminacy can vary greatly in approach, from graphic scores with indeterminate

pitches, to using chance procedures and/or incorporating improvisation. John Cage was

generally antagonistic toward the idea of improvisation, saying, "Improvisation is something that

I want to avoid. Most people who improvise slip back into their likes and dislikes . . . and they

don't arrive at any revelation that they're unaware of."[47] For example, the score of the 1951

Imaginary Landscape No. 4, for twelve radios and conductor, gives each player specific

instructions on what radio frequency to tune to at which point, following the conductor precisely.

Though the work will sound quite different depending on locality, performers' choices are

completely absent.[48] However, both in a score determined by chance procedures and in

improvisation, the composer gives up some authority. In a chance-derived score, the composer

is not so much composing the music as composing a manual for performing a piece of music. In

a score involving improvisation, the composer allows performer preferences and choices to help

determine the result. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive, and a piece may contain

both. For instance, if performers in a group are asked to improvise by starting at the same time

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[46] John Cage, *Aria* (Henmar Press: New York, 1958). This piece was composed for Cathy Berberian, whose work I will discuss later.

[47] John Cage, quoted in Steve Sweeney Turner, "John Cage's Practical Utopias—John Cage in Conversation with Steve Sweeney Turner," *The Musical Times* 131:1771 (1990): 472. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1193658 .

[48] I had the privilege of playing second radio in this work at New England Conservatory in 1991 with the composer in attendance. Cage's description of the *I-Ching* procedures he used to create the score is published in John Cage, *Silence* (Wesleyan University Press: New Hanover, NH, 1973), 57.

on a note of their choice, they cannot possibly plan what chord or cluster of notes might result, thus this aspect is left up to chance.

Improvisation in experimental classical music in the mid-twentieth century did not exist in a vacuum, but alongside similar evolving trends in other artistic disciplines. Joyce Morgenroth details the rise of improvisation in dance in the 1960s alongside improvisation in theatre, such as the 1959 birth of the improvisation-based, Second City company.[49] She notes that improvisation in theatrical comedy was now making a resurgence (as opposed to being something completely new), as it had been part of the *commedia dell'arte* in the Renaissance.[50] Classical musicians have also been influenced by improvisation in jazz. Operatic soprano Jessye Norman said in a 2013 NPR interview, "I love singing jazz,"[51] and believes that improvised music and opera share a common thread in that the performer's own musical thoughts are essential, crediting jazz singers such as Billie Holiday with helping her to add this dimension to her art.[52] Composer and scholar of improvisation George E. Lewis points out that African-American musicians were already improvising at least since the 1940s, and that this influence is often overlooked in favor of a more conservative European-American view.[53]

By the end of the twentieth century, improvisation, though still not a common skill for classical singers, had nevertheless begun to enjoy a small rebirth. The loosening of the

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[49] Joyce Morgenroth, "Recent History," *Dance Improvisations* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), xi.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Tim Wilkins, "Opera Star Jessye Norman Picks Her Favorite Jazz Singers," A Blog Supreme, NPR Jazz, September 20, 2013, http://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2013/09/20/224137071/opera-star-jessye-norman-picks-her-favorite-jazz-singers .
[52] Ibid.
[53] George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2007), 273.

composer's authority that happened with experimental music from the 1950s on now blurred the line between composer and performer. While a contemporary trend, it also looked back to the Renaissance (extemporaneous polyphony) and Baroque (improvised embellishments) eras, when musical roles were less distinct and performers were frequent collaborators in the creation of new music.

Vocal Improvisation of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

In studying improvisation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, one encounters the same difficulty as in previous centuries. It is not always possible to tell from listening to a piece whether it involves improvisation, and one must rely on the word of a composer or performer as to whether and/or to what extent improvisation was involved. Mezzo-soprano Sharon Mabry, writing in *Exploring Twentieth-Century Vocal Music*, discusses this issue, and includes a section of advice on improvisation for singers. She says, "These improvisational possibilities should be thought of as opportunities for honing interpretive skills,"[54] and includes an extensive appendix of suggested repertoire with notes about each piece. Mabry notes works which include improvisatory elements, such as *Stripsody* by Cathy Berberian—whom we will discuss later—as well as works by Barney Childs, George Crumb, Jacqueline Fontyn, Christina Kuzmych, and others.[55]

Pauline Oliveros has composed several scores that involve (or may involve) voices, and can be performed by a combination of trained and non-trained musicians. Oliveros's works for voices focus on use of the breath and on listening. In *On Sonic Meditation*, from 1973, she

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[54] Sharon Mabry, *Exploring Twentieth-Century Vocal Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 33.
[55] Ibid., 154-180.

includes several vocal meditations with written instructions. For example, the beginning of XVI

reads, "Begin simultaneously with the others. Sing any pitch. The maximum length of the pitch

is determined by the breath."[56] Oliveros says about her *Anthology of Text Scores*, which includes

some scores specifically for voices, "The pieces in this collection . . . could be considered

algorithmic improvisation or composition," defining "acoustic algorithms" as "recipes that allow

musicians to create music without reading notes."[57] One example from this collection is "Old

Sound New Sound Borrowed Sound Blue" (1994), in which singers each find four different

vocal sounds, and then use them in conjunction with listening to the sounds of the others.[58] In

her choral work *Sound Patterns* (which won the Gaudeamus International Composers Award in

1962), she notates the piece with phonetic sounds and precise rhythms, but the pitches are

improvised; there is also a single measure that calls for improvised rhythm.[59]

Another category of improviser is the composer-performer, who develops and performs

his or her own improvisations, either as a basis for their compositions, or as independent entities

in themselves. Singer-composers such as Cathy Berberian, Meredith Monk, Pamela Z and

Bobby McFerrin have all discussed the use of improvisation in their compositional and

performance work. Berberian's graphic score *Stripsody* (1966)*,* using a model similar to Cage's

Aria that had been composed for her eight years earlier, instructs the singer to use a variety of

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[56] Pauline Oliveros, "Sonic Meditations XII-XXV," in *On Sonic Meditation* (La Jolla, University of California at San Diego, 1973), 4.
[57] Pauline Oliveros, Preface to *Anthology of Text Scores* (Kingston, NY: Deep Listening Publications, 2013), v.
[58] Ibid., 105.
[59] Pauline Oliveros, *Sound Patterns: Mixed Chorus* (Darmstadt : Edition Tonos, 1964). For a recording, see Pauline Oliveros, "Pauline Oliveros—Sound Patterns," *YouTube* video posted by "pelodelperro," August 25, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSf7jvO6soM .

sound effects to illustrate several comic book-inspired scenes, with notation that leaves much room for improvisation.[60]
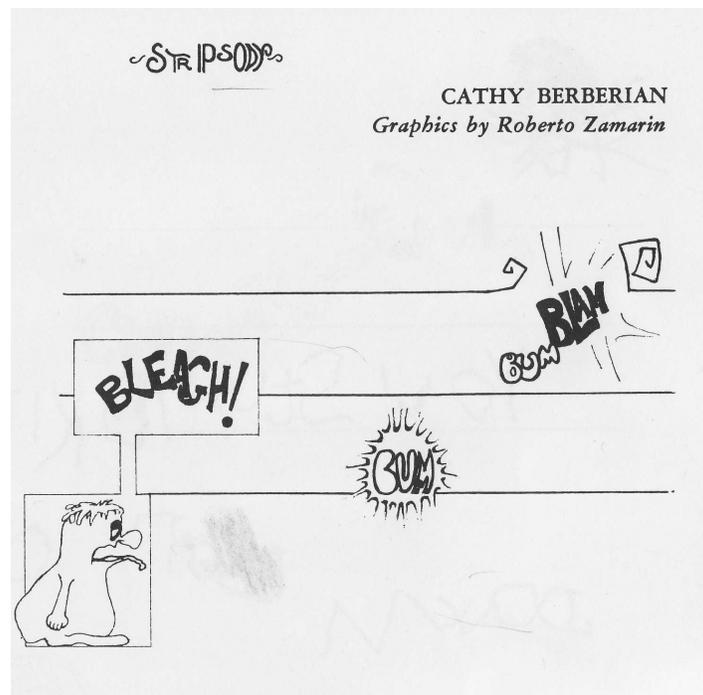
Excerpt from first page of *Stripsody*.
Copyright © 1966 by C.F. Peters Corporation.
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Berberian herself, an active performer from 1957 until her death in 1983, was a master improviser who inspired a subsequent generation of singer-composers. Kristin Norderval, in introducing interviews with several of these singer-composers, says that Berberian's "experiments with theatre, vocal improvisation, composition and performance changed the way people thought about—and composed—vocal music."[61] Norderval notes that the composers she

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[60] Cathy Berberian, *Stripsody* (New York: C.F. Peters, 1966). For a recording of Berberian performing this piece which also shows parts of the score, see Cathy Berberian, "Stripsody," *YouTube* video posted by "John Knap," June 14, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dNLAhL46xM .

[61] Kristin Norderval, "What We Owe to Cathy: Reflections from Meredith Monk, Joan La Barbara, Rinde Eckert, Susan Botti, Theo Bleckmann and Pamela Z," in *Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 185.

interviewed, including Meredith Monk and Pamela Z, have different approaches to improvisation: "either as an end in itself, as part of a score that calls for aleatoric elements, or as a method for empirical research and generating material that is later set."[62]

Meredith Monk, active as a composer and performer since 1966, exemplifies the trend of artists working in multiple categories. In the chapter on Monk in his book *Talking Music*, William Duckworth puts her in the category of "performance artist" due to her work in singing, composing, dancing, and theatre, though he notes that she calls herself first and foremost a composer.[63] Monk says that though her compositions are not what we would typically call improvisation, "The generating [of] material is all improvisation for me."[64] In her notes for *Possible Sky*, a 2003 work for voices and orchestra commissioned by the New World Symphony, Monk describes her work in collaborating with musicians of the orchestra; for example, by asking them about any extended techniques on their instruments, by singing phrases and having them play them, and by experimenting with sketches she had composed.[65] She says about her process, "In the 'finished' work . . . , there are usually sections with room to play within very strict and precise parameters. Just as in folk music a melody might be passed down through the oral/aural tradition with each individual embroidering, ornamenting, transforming it in his or her own way, this piece allows for the idiosyncratic qualities of orchestra members as individuals."[66] Martha Elliott, paraphrasing the composer's words in a 2003 Composers Colloquium at

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[62] Ibid., 188.
[63] William Duckworth, *Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Five Generations of American Experimental Composers* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 345.
[64] Norderval, 201.
[65] Meredith Monk, Composer's notes for *Possible Sky* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 2003). Notes available online at "Meredith Monk – Possible Sky," accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.boosey.com/cr/music/Meredith-Monk-Possible-Sky/45164 .
[66] Ibid.

Princeton, says that in composing *Possible Sky* Monk "grappled for the first time with the task of notating her work," as opposed to her usual process of creating works directly on performers, like a choreographer, and teaching the piece orally instead of from a musical score.[67]

Pamela Z trained as a classical singer at the University of Colorado in the 1970s but branched out into experimental music and composition, winning multiple awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship (2004), and composing works for such groups as the Bang on a Can All Stars and the Kronos Quartet. Like Monk, Z is known for her multidisciplinary work, collaborating across boundaries of genre and artistic disciplines. She says her own relationship with improvisation sprang from a desire to collaborate: "Sometimes the easiest way to collaborate with other people is to improvise . . . if people are good listeners and good improvisers you can get great improvised duets and trios."[68] George E. Lewis says about Z that her "use of extended vocal technique and live, body-controlled electronic processing takes place in events ranging in scale from solo events in galleries to large-scale works that combine video, audio, and live musicians, singers, and actors."[69] As an African-American performer working and experimenting with technology, she is sometimes considered as part of the movement of

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[67] Meredith Monk, remarks made at a Composers Colloquium at Princeton University, March 13, 2003, quoted in Martha Elliott, *Singing in Style: A Guide to Vocal Performance Practices* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 292. Though a recording of *Possible Sky* is not available, the composer's web site provides video excerpts from several of her multidisciplinary works. These include *On Behalf of Nature*, from the January 2013 premiere at UCLA, featuring an ensemble of singer-dancers and instrumentalists. See "Meredith Monk – Media," http://www.meredithmonk.org/media/opera.html . For a discography of Monk's work, see "Meredith Monk," ECM Records, accessed April 10, 2016, https://www.ecmrecords.com/artists/1435045990/meredith-monk .

[68] Jennifer Kelly, "Pamela Z," in *In Her Own Words: Conversations with Composers in the United States* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 217.

[69] George E. Lewis, "The Virtual Discourses of Pamela Z," *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 1:1 (2007), 57.

Afrofuturism—a term used first in the 1990s to describe a trend of African-Americans combining science and technology with an Afrocentric perspective in literature and the arts.[70]

Z's improvisational work using her voice and electronics includes collaborations such as her performance in Katharina Rosenberger's 2012 *Viva Voce* installation at the San Diego Media Center.[71] Z uses a laptop, gesture-controlled electronics and voice, sometimes sampling her own voice, and layering speech-like sounds, gasps, and singing. Her other vocal works include an opera, *Wunderkabinet*, developed as a collaboration with cellist/composer Matthew Brubeck and media artist Christina McPhee. This piece, based on exhibits in the Los Angeles Museum of Jurassic Technology, was premiered at the LAB Gallery in San Francisco in 2005, and includes "Same Knowledge Aria," for voice, cello, and electronics.[72] In the aria, Z sings mostly using a clear, classically-trained soprano sound, though samples of her voice are heard in the background, with an ostinato repeating a single note in a low register, and one passage of text spoken at a breathless, panicked pace. A *Los Angeles Times* review of a 2006 performance calls the work "an hourlong multimedia opera chock full of lovely melodies over looping, minimalist textures and a crazed caldron of trivial factoids and fictions," and "an ambitious project for which Z is uniquely suited, given her expertise in blending new technologies and the ancient, organic qualities of voice (and she's got a strong, flexible one)."[73]

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[70] Ibid., 62. Lewis mentions Afrofutuism in a footnote. See also Herman S. Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 153, in which Gray discusses Z alongside George Lewis as part of "The Afrofuturist encounter with twenty-first century digital technology."

[71] Pamela Z, "Pamela Z (voice and electronics) 'Viva Voce' Improvisation," *Vimeo* video posted by "Pamela Z" from UC San Media Center, 2012, accessed April 10, 2016, https://vimeo.com/84168508 .

[72] Pamela Z, "Wunderkabinet," accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.pamelaz.com/wunderkabinet.html .

[73] Josef Woodard, "'Wunderkabinet' plays with the facts," *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 2006. http://articles.latimes.com/2006/oct/14/entertainment/et-wunderkabinet14 .

Unlike Berberian, Monk, and Z, who all had classical vocal training, Bobby McFerrin grew up listening to opera, but did not take up singing himself until age 27. His father, Robert Keith McFerrin, Sr., was the first African-American male singer at the Metropolitan Opera, but when Bobby started singing, he began with jazz.[74] McFerrin prefers on-the spot improvisation to traditional composition—as he told an NPR interviewer in 2010—whether as a soloist or on tour with his ensemble *Voicestra* performing concerts of improvised music.[75] Though many of McFerrin's Grammy-winning recordings may be categorized as jazz, he includes classical and classically-inspired music in his recordings and concerts. With his album *Paper*, released in 1995, he conducted and sang mostly instrumental lines of classical works with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. He specifically linked classical music and improvisation in the 1996 recording *The Mozart Sessions*, in which he and jazz pianist Chick Corea perform an improvisation based on the second movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 2 in F major*, K. 280*. In a talk recorded at the Aarhaus Vocal Festival in 2011, McFerrin explains how he came to vocal improvisation by spending two years purposefully not listening to other singers and practicing every day to develop his own style.[76] His vocal improvisation is less idiomatic of vocal music, more often imitating instruments, with rapid switching in and out of falsetto and non-traditional singing techniques like singing while inhaling. I had the good fortune to hear McFerrin perform at Butler University in 2008, where he improvised, had the audience sing along with him, and even performed a spontaneous improvisation with a student dancer to the

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[74] "Extended Bio—Bobby McFerrin," Bobby McFerrin, accessed April 10, 2016, http://bobbymcferrin.com/whos-bobby/press-kit/extended-bio/ .

[75] "Bobby McFerrin's Improv-Inspired 'Vocabularies,'" NPR Music, April 9, 2010, http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=125725036 .

[76] Bobby McFerrin, "Bobby McFerrin about Improvisation—AAVF 2011," *YouTube* video posted by "PlanetBjar," May 13, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIIVoVRx1tA .

theme of "bad hair day," using the full four-octave range of his voice to accompany her frenetic

movements.

Contemporary Operatic Improvisation

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw the formation of several groups of

performers engaging improvisational techniques to create operas. A 2013 *Classical Singer*

article notes this trend as part of the educational outreach component of the U.S. Opera

companies Wolf Trap and Opera Columbus, and also as part of the Los Angeles-based training

program, OperaWorks.[77] Improvisation happened not so much as a reaction against composed

opera, but as an addition to it—a way to incorporate influences from the theatre, and in some

cases a way to market operatic singing to different audiences. For the most part, participating

singers have been trained in traditional opera singing. The performers and companies I will

mention here are selected examples and are not meant to be an exhaustive list. As improvised

opera is a relatively new development, it is difficult to gauge the extent of the trend, and there

may be others working in this field today. With diverse influences including experimental

music, devised theatre, improv comedy, and educational theory, the new operatic improvisations

I will discuss fall into two basic categories which overlap: improv comedy opera and devised

opera.

Improvised comedy has grown from experimentation in the mid-twentieth century to a

thriving genre in the early twenty-first. Influences on modern improv comedy include the

Second City company in Chicago, born out of the improv games of Viola Spolin,[78] and the work

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[77] Julie Lyn Barber, "Improv Goes to the Opera," *Classical Singer,* Summer 2013, 42-43.
[78] For more information on Second City, see Anne Libera, *The Second City Almanac of Improvisation* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004).

of Keith Johnstone, who founded the Theatre Machine improvisation group in England in the 1960s, and later the International Theatresports Institute.[79] Comedysportz is a Milwaukee-based improv comedy company that, since the mid-1980s, has opened franchises in more than 20 cities, using a competitive sports-team approach.[80] The U.S. television series *Whose Line is it Anyway*, running from 1998-2007, incorporated music into improv comedy by having cast members sing improvised lyrics to a celebrity guest in different popular musical styles, for example, a 1950s teenage love song, or a boy band.[81] Opera influenced by this comic, audience participation model is generally less focused on creating new musical material than on humorous, impromptu storytelling with operatic voices.

The ComedySportz model influenced the "Instant Opera" program of Wolf Trap, developed by Wolf Trap director Kim Witman, in conjunction with ComedySportz improv teacher Jim Doyle.[82] In this program, and in a similar "Improv Opera!" educational program of Opera Columbus, the singers are not improvising music but use arias they have prepared and incorporate lyrics improvised on the spot to suit the audience-determined story line.[83] The improv comedy model can also be seen in the work of groups outside of traditional opera companies such as Impropera in England and La Donna Improvvisata in the United States.

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[79] For more information on Johnstone's work, see Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1979).

[80] Amy E. Seham, "Comedysportz: Play's the Thing," in *Whose Improv Is It Anyway? Beyond Second City*. University Press of Mississippi, 2001, 79-112.

[81] Examples of these can be found on *YouTube*, such as this duet about Kathie Lee Gifford in the style of a boy band: "Whose Line – Duet: Kathie Lee Gifford," *YouTube* video posted by "StilesSays," July 18, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBGy1jflseg .

[82] Barber, 42.

[83] Ibid., 42-43.

Impropera, based in London, bills itself as "the world's only improvising opera company."[84] Artistic Director David Pearl and a cast of singers and instrumentalists with extensive professional experience follow a model similar to that of *Whose Line is it Anyway*, but with operatic and classical music, using audience members' suggestions for story elements and compositional styles. This includes instrumental music, as can be heard in a recording of "Good King Wenceslas" performed by a pianist and a violinist in three very different styles at a December 2015 performance.[85] A December 2008 review in *The Guardian* notes a similar instrumental improvisation on "Deck the Halls" in the style of composers including Schütz and Stockhausen.[86] The reviewer found the sung improvisation less successful, saying, "The music enforces long pauses between one improvised lyric and the next, which raises (often in vain) the expectation of a witty rhyme, while removing the speak-before-you-think spontaneity that makes impro[visation] work."[87]

In a full-length Impropera performance during the 2009 Tête à Tête Opera Festival, the first musical number is a Handelian chorus set to an audience-suggested motto, "tidy as you go."[88] This culminates in a chorus of imitative pig grunts to illustrate the consequences of not following this advice. The second act consists of an improvised opera, *The Preposterous Market Gardener of Belfast*, based on audience-suggested choices of a profession, a location, and an

[84] "IMPROPERA," IMPROPERA, accessed April 9, 2016, http://www.impropera.co.uk .

[85] Anthony Ingle and Fiona Finsbury, "Good King Wenceslas," *SoundCloud* audio recording posted by "Impropera," accessed April 9, 2016, https://soundcloud.com/user-56242015/good-king-wenceslas-antony-ingle-and-fiona-finsbury .

[86] Brian Logan, "Impropera," *The Guardian*, December 23, 2008, http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/dec/23/comedy-impropera .

[87] Ibid.

[88] "Impropera Act I," and "Impropera Act II," *Vimeo* videos posted by "Tête à Tête Account 1," accessed April 9, 2016, https://vimeo.com/album/3653875/video/11262565 and https://vimeo.com/album/3653875/video/11266018 .

adjective, and the styles of audience-selected composers Beethoven, Poulenc, Dvorak, Handel,

Elgar, Wagner, and Puccini. Accompanied by piano and cello, the four singers improvise an

opening scene in which a gardener laments that no one wants his exotic fruit, with the music

falling into the recognizable styles of the suggested composers, sometimes with direct musical

quotes. Though the *Guardian* reviewer is critical of some of the comedic storytelling (referring

to a similar work, *The Ferocious Dentist of Lesbos* in 2008), he suggests that both lovers of

opera and of comedy can find something to enjoy in this hybrid of the two forms.[89]

La Donna Improvvisata is a New York-based duo consisting of soprano Lisa Flanagan

and pianist Frank Spitznagel. Flanagan's resumé includes traditional operatic roles such as

Tosca, and performing in New York musical theatre productions.[90] Spitznagel, musical director

of the Magnet Theatre, is a frequent accompanist for improvised performances in New York.[91]

Like Impropera, they base their performances around parameters suggested by the audience. The

audience may choose from a list of archetypal characters and select adjectives to describe them.

For example, in a Magnet Theatre performance in January 2014, the audience suggested the

character "trickster," and the adjective "hollow." Flanagan plays all the characters, using her

extensive range to sometimes sing "duets" between male and female characters, while inventing

lyrics—sometimes rhyming—on the spot. In contrast to Impropera, the music does not quote

classical composers or fall into a recognizable historical style, but sounds more contemporary

and sparse, with rhythmic, syncopated piano chords that evoke current trends in musical theatre.

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[89] Logan, "Impropera."
[90] "Lisa Flanagan, soprano," accessed April 9, 2016, http://www.lisaflanagan.net/#!info/c161y .
[91] "Frank Spitznagel," Magnet Theatre, accessed April 9, 2016, http://www.magnettheater.com/instructors/Frank-Spitznagel&instructor=1 .

Flanagan uses her full dynamic soprano range, but also quite a bit of musical theatre-style belting, particularly for the male characters. It is possible to hear the pianist imitate the singer and vice versa as they story is told entirely through songs sung by Flanagan, playing the various characters.

In an online interview, Flanagan discusses the debut of the project at the 2013 New York Improvised Music Festival as a 20-minute performance, then later developed the show into a 60-minute performance for the New York International Fringe Festival.[92] Though this performance style owes much to the improv comedy model, and there are moments for audience laughter, the overall tone of the narratives is not necessarily comic. For example, *The Hollow Trickster* ends with the trickster singing a sad ballad after having alienated the woman he loved. An online review describes a New York International Fringe Festival performance as "long form improv at its best from a performer with a wonderfully trained voice, keen sense of story structure, and seemingly instinctual ability to create compelling characters out of nothing."[93]

La Donna Improvvisata and Impropera are not the only companies combining opera with improv comedy. Forte Chicago, a company which debuted in Chicago in 2015, is "an all female ensemble that combines classically trained musicians, directors, puppeteers and designers to enrich the live performance landscape in Chicago by fusing classical music and improvised comedy."[94] The Washington, D. C.-based Urban Arias, which since 2010 has focused on short

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[92] Lisa Flanagan, interviewed by James Tison, "On Improvising an Opera: Lisa Flanagan of 'La Donna Improvvisata,'" *StageBuddy,* http://stagebuddy.com/theater/theater-articles/improvising-opera-lisa-flanagan-la-donna-improvvisata .

[93] James Tilson, "FringeNYC Review: La Donna Improvvisata," *StageBuddy,* http://stagebuddy.com/reviews/fringenyc-review-la-donna-improvvisata .

[94] "Forte Chicago," Forte Chicago, accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.fortechicago.com .

operas by living American composers, also has included improvised opera based on audience input.[95]

Another type of improvised opera relies not on audience choices, but on collaboration between artists including playwrights, directors, singers, and instrumentalists. I call this devised opera because is more closely linked to devised theatre. The term devised theatre refers to productions in which the text or narrative is developed collaboratively with the performers rather than by a single playwright. In a roundtable discussion in *The Dramatist*, Rinne Groff suggests a definition that begins: "Companies and individuals who devise work, embark upon rehearsal processes that are collaborative, eclectic, and inevitably experimental, often combining different methods and genres, such as dance, theater, video, live music, et cetera."[96] In the case of the operas I will discuss, I include performances in which the text was developed by a single playwright, but the content of the music has been devised through improvisation by the performers. Ann Baltz, Artistic and Executive Director of OperaWorks, and Ellen Lindquist, a composer who frequently collaborates across artistic disciplines, both develop music for sung theatrical works through improvisation, but with different approaches.

Since 1987, pianist and vocal coach Ann Baltz has been using improvisation as an educational tool to get singers in touch with their own instincts as performers.[97] It is a central part of the curriculum of OperaWorks training programs for both emerging and advanced professional opera singers. Baltz says, "What people create here . . . to me, those are just as

[95] "The Whole Truth at INTERSECTIONS," Urban Arias, accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.urbanarias.org/about/our-past-work/intersections-2015/ .
[96] Rinne Groff, in roundtable discussion with John Collins and others, "What is Devised Theatre?," *Dramatist* 17, no. 4 (March 2015): 16.
[97] Barber, 43.

good if not better than stuff you hear that's already been recorded. And if you'd seen that written on a piece of paper . . . it would take you months to learn some of that."[98] When I interviewed Baltz for a 2011 article in *Classical Singer*, she pointed out that classical music is far behind other art forms in the use and teaching of improvisation, and suggested that if musicians practice improvisation, or even engage in creative "messing around" with composed music, they "would probably feel less stressed and more creative and enjoy the process of making music more."[99]

Later in 2011, I had the opportunity to work with Baltz at a workshop for voice teachers that included the use of improvisation. Judging from this experience, Baltz's approach is not to talk about music, but to make it. All of us had the opportunity to get up and sing an improvised aria using gibberish instead of actual text, with Baltz at the piano to both lead and follow. There was no planning in advance, no discussion of pitch material, mood, or style, but each aria simply evolved from the performers' musical backgrounds, instincts, and choices. We also performed short scenes of improvised music and dialogue, inspired by artwork that Baltz had provided, or by random objects in the room (I recall a duet revolving around a lost shoe and a tube of toothpaste). These exercises were focused on making us better performers and voice teachers, not necessarily on creating something to perform in front of an audience.

Baltz and her collaborators, however, also create works for performance with improvised material. The opera *The Discord Altar*, performed at the Secret Rose Theatre in Hollywood in

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[98] Ann Baltz, transcribed from "OperaWorks Improvisation - Part #3," *YouTube* video posted by "AnnBaltzOperaWorks," February 27, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2wmOLQCOVw .

[99] Ellen Denham, "When There Are No Wrong Notes: Freeing the Voice Through Improvisation," *Classical Singer,* May 2011, 48.

the spring of 2015, was a collaboration between Ann Baltz, playwright Meghan Brown, and

director Amanda McRaven. In a promotional video for the opera, the three of them discuss how

the project began from Baltz being "blown away" by a production of the play *The Pliant Girls*,

for which Brown and McRaven each won Ovation Awards for best script and best director,

respectively.[100] They discussed a possible collaboration and the desire to use art for awareness

of the problem of homelessness. Director McRaven describes Brown's script as "written by a

playwright who gathered stories from local [military] veterans and the homeless community,"

and Brown says about Baltz, "Ann's accompaniment is…shocking to me that that can…erupt

from someone just looking at words on a page."[101]

The opera concerns a group of homeless people gathered to memorialize a man who has

recently died, and over the course of the opera, they share stories about their past and current

situations. The tone for the improvisations are most often set by Baltz at the piano, providing a

clear harmonic and melodic structure, though different each time. She sets a mood and stylistic

sense with which the singer may easily improvise. A specific style is difficult to pinpoint, as

sometimes the accompaniment is sparse, almost minimalist, the singing declamatory; at other

times, such as in the character Bryce's aria, there is a driving, syncopated rhythm, aided by Ray

Salas on percussion, evoking a Latin jazz flavor. The character Lena's aria, sung by soprano

Annie Sherman (in an undated performance available on YouTube), begins with her speaking the

line "This is my story of David," after which Baltz begins to play a slow ostinato, outlining an e-

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[100] Video available at "The Discord Altar," Meghan Brown, accessed April 10, 2016,
http://www.meghanbrown.net/thediscordaltar/ .
[101] Ibid.

minor chord in second inversion.[102] However, on an audio recording from a May 3 2015

performance, Sherman speaks her opening line, and Baltz begins with a major second, pulsing on

beats 1, 2, and 4, giving the feel of more rhythmic drive but less of a clear tonal center.[103]

Sherman says about the performance, "Every night the score of the show was completely

different, while the text stayed the same. Sometimes I would speak some lines instead of singing,

sometimes it would sound harmonious, sometimes atonal, but always motivated by the text and

by what Lena was feeling at that moment!"[104]

  This text-centric method of improvisation gives maximum musical control to the

individual performer, with the potential benefit that outstanding music may happen in the

moment, and, that with the proper training, musicians can learn to trust their creative instincts, in

contrast to a score that is composed and memorized. The potential risks include that the music

could be uninspired, or tend to lack form and structure. A review of the production in *LA Weekly*

calls the opera "surprisingly good," with the main criticism aimed not at the performance, but the

script, and noting that the cast "rises to the challenge" of improvising an opera by providing

"harmonious on-the-spot-vocals."[105]

  Composer Ellen Lindquist takes a more controlled approach to devised opera in *dream*

seminar, or *drömseminarium*, a bi-lingual English and Swedish piece of what she calls "music-

theatre," developed in collaboration with director David Diamond and an international group of

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[102] "Lena's Aria - The Discord Altar, an improvised opera," *YouTube* video posted by "Annie Sherman," accessed
April 10, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtlSFYIFY5E .
[103] My thanks to Ann Baltz for making this recording available.
[104] Annie Sherman, in a comment on the *YouTube* video referenced above.
[105] Deborah Klugman, "This Improvised Opera About the Homeless is Surprisingly Good," *LA Weekly*, April 24,
2015, http://www.laweekly.com/arts/this-improvised-opera-about-the-homeless-is-surprisingly-good-5506218 .

singers and instrumentalists.[106] Lindquist says about the work, "it's really equal balance between

music and theatre. It . . . incorporates the voice of many different players, and by players we

mean instrumentalists who are also the movers and actors."[107] Later in the interview she

discusses how the performers—both singers and instrumentalists—would discuss the poetry of

Tomas Tranströmer as a group and improvise with it to create both allegorical characters and

musical content. Then she would choose moments from their improvisation to set as part of the

piece; a promotional video shows this method in action. The participants variously describe the

work as "collaborative opera," "a music performance piece," "chamber opera," and "music

theatre."[108] Bass and soprano singers and a group of instrumentalists all participate in the

movement and become part of the staging. One instrumentalist says of Lindquist, "Much like a

choreographer might develop a dance, Ellen is taking what we as artists have created and she

weaves it together."[109] Lindquist and the performers create the music this way in stages, then she

combines the various elements into a written score. This approach is not unlike that of

performer-composers mentioned earlier in this chapter, such as Meredith Monk. In contrast to

the work of Ann Baltz, the method Lindquist uses requires more time for the ensemble to work

together to create the piece. As described in the video, work on the piece began in 2009, and the

composer's web site lists a premiere date of 2014.[110]

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[106] "Music Theatre - Chamber Opera Archive - Ellen Lindquist," Ellen Lindquist, accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.ellenlindquist.com/ellen/?cat=104 .
[107] Recorded interview posted to web site referenced above.
[108] "dream seminar full promo," *Vimeo* video posted by "Brian Hedden," accessed April 10, 2016, https://vimeo.com/14124522 .
[109] Ibid. Sound clips from *dream seminar* can be heard at the composer's web site, and images from a 2009 work-in-progress performance can be found on the web site of the set designer, Henny Linn: "Dream Seminar / Drömseminarium 2009-11," Henny Linn, accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.hennylinn.se/?p=524 .
[110] "Music Theatre - Chamber Opera Archive - Ellen Lindquist."

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In tracing vocal improvisation from experiments in the 1950s and 1960s through singer-composers active today such as Monk, Z, and McFerrin, to contemporary improvised opera, I hope to demonstrate that this trend has far-reaching roots, and the potential for much future development. It is likely that American classical singers being trained today will have more experience with improvisation than their recent predecessors. In 2006, The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) approved new standards for all Bachelor of Music degrees to include composition/improvisation:

> Students must acquire a rudimentary capacity to create original or derivative music. It is the prerogative of each institution to develop specific requirements regarding written, electronic, or improvisatory forms and methods. These may include but are not limited to the creation of original compositions or improvisations, variations or improvisations on existing materials, experimentation with various sound sources, the imitation of musical styles, and manipulating the common elements in non-traditional ways.[111]

Additionally, The College Music Society's 2014 *Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors* recommends study of improvisation and composition as one of its three "core pillars" for curriculum reform.[112] Ann Baltz's OperaWorks is yet another way that opera singers may be exposed to improvisation. OperaWorks offers two, two-week summer intensive workshops for opera singers, one for emerging artists and one for advanced artists. The example schedule posted on the OperaWorks web site lists an improv class twice a week.[113] If only a fraction of the singers exposed to improvisation in these curricula go

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[111] "Notes for Music Faculty and Administrators: Standards for Composition/Improvisation and History/Repertory in Undergraduate Professional Degrees in Music," National Association of Schools of Music, revised December 2010, http://nasm.arts-accredit.org/index.jsp?page=Advisories: NASM Curricular Standards .

[112] David Myers and others, "Transforming Music Study from its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors," Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major, November 2014, 9.

[113] "2016 Summer Programs," OperaWorks, accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.operaworks.org/Summer2016 .

on to use it in performance, we might still see significant growth in the number of performers

and companies using improvisation as a tool to generate new operatic material.

CHAPTER 3 – Improvisation Parameters and Methods Studied

This chapter deals with my own personal exploration of the subject of improvisation, with methods and parameters I have studied and used. My journey with improvisation began not with music, but with acting as a child and teenager. During my undergraduate studies at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, I had an opportunity to improvise singing in an acting-for-singers class taught by Martin Rader. Rader thought we didn't sound as natural as we could in delivering our lines in assigned play scenes, so he suggested we sing them; I had never been asked to make up music on the spot before. It came out sounding much like Mozart recitative, which made perfect sense, as we were all singing Mozart. This exercise was an entertaining diversion; then we went back to practicing our assigned music. We dutifully copied down the cadenzas and ornaments our professors gave us, and made sure to practice any difficult spots until they were note-perfect. This was—and for the most part still is—the path to becoming a classical singer. It was not until I held a Master of Music degree and had more than a decade of experience as a professional singer and voice teacher behind me that I was again asked to improvise singing. At the same time, I was exposed to contact improvisation in dance. A latent spark of interest had been kindled, leading me on an eight-year journey to the writing of this paper and the preparation of the associated recital. The study and practice of this subject is timely, I believe, not only because of the aforementioned opera projects using improvisation, but also because of the NASM and College Music Society curriculum reforms involving more training in improvisation.

Initial Projects

In 2009, I was accepted as a participant in the yearly Indy Convergence, an arts residency in

Indianapolis. The Indy Convergence, a non-profit arts organization, is the brainchild of dancer

Caitlin Negron and actor Robert Negron, who met while performing at the Oregon Shakespeare

Festival. The annual residency allows artists from different disciplines to come together to learn

from each other and collaborate on new works. Each artist has the opportunity to work on a

personal side-project and everyone participates in one central "Umbrella Project." Cross-

disciplinary training is the key—and dancers may be asked to sing, poets to act, and musicians to

puppeteer. The residency culminates in a free Open Lab Performance, in which the audience

acts as one more tool to help the artists refine and develop their pieces. Emphasis is on using

limited resources and limited rehearsal time to create works that may lack polish but will help

each artist learn and grow professionally.[114]

For my own project, a short opera, I wrote the libretto and collaborated on the music with

composer Meredith Gilna.[115] Teaching the music was difficult given the short time frame we

had for learning it, and the fact that not all cast members read music. However, we were able to

get a 20-minute opera staged and memorized with less than 10 hours of rehearsal. The dark

comedy *Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater* was well-received at our Open Lab Performance.

During the residency, I also participated in a project by writer and director Cindy Marie

Jenkins, in which she workshopped material for her play *Voices from Chornobyl*,[116] using

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[114] See "Indy Convergence – Artists at Work," Indy Convergence, accessed April 10, 2016,
http://www.indyconvergence.org .
[115] See "Meredith Gilna," accessed April 10, 2016, https://meredithgilna.wordpress.com .
[116] See "Cindy Marie Jenkins," accessed April 10, 2016, http://cindymariejenkins.com/ , and "Voices from
Chornobyl," accessed April 10, 2016, https://voicesfromchornobyl.wordpress.com . "Chornobyl" is the Ukrainian
spelling as opposed to the more commonly seen Russian spelling "Chernobyl."

interviews with survivors to raise awareness of the continued effects of the 1986 nuclear disaster. In one scene, I was to play a woman who sings a short, a cappella song. Jenkins suggested I improvise something. I recall thinking that this was how actors worked, but not musicians, and I asked her if there was an actual song to go with the text. She sang it for me and I notated it on staff paper, learned it, and sang what I had notated, since improvisation had not (yet) been part of my training.

During the residency, dancers Caitlin Negron and Ashley Benninghoff taught a workshop in contact improvisation, which made dance accessible to those of us who were not dancers without learning choreography, allowing us to move in ways that felt natural to our bodies. When I taught a very basic singing workshop, I was initially surprised at how nervous some of the dancers seemed to be, especially since I had gone outside of my area of expertise by doing contact improvisation with them. Why couldn't they do the same? Then I realized that their fear was the same as mine when asked to quickly learn and be able to perform choreography. I was asking them to learn and sing something specific, and they were afraid of getting it wrong. My experiences at this first Indy Convergence inspired me to begin adapting the idea of contact improvisation to vocal improvisation.

At the 2010 Indy Convergence I collaborated with percussionist Ryan Taylor to teach a workshop on improvised singing and drumming.[117] I had everyone do some basic vocal warm-up exercises as a group, then taught them a few very simple songs, including the round "Why Shouldn't My Goose Sing as Well as Thy Goose." Then I invited them to walk around the room, singing any phrase from this song or any other song they chose, but also to listen to those they

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[117] See "Ryan Taylor," Sacred Rhythms, accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.sacredrhythm.webs.com .

passed by, and to consider letting their song become "corrupted" by something they heard someone else singing. This seemed to be more comfortable for everyone than in the previous year's workshop. (For example, I recalled technical director Ian Garrett, who had once told me, "I don't sing," repetitively singing the text "my moose," presumably as a corruption of "my goose.") The participants were using their voices creatively and having fun rather than being nervous. At the time, I was not yet familiar with the work of Ann Baltz, and also didn't know any improvising singers. But I had discovered through my experiments that improvisation games in dance and theatre could be adapted to singing.

The Influence of Ann Baltz

In 2011, I was first exposed to the work of Ann Baltz when I interviewed her for *Classical Singer* magazine. My correspondence with Baltz and alumni of her OperaWorks program helped me in the development of a short, musically improvised opera for the 2011 Indy Convergence that March. I took a short story of mine, "Homo Homarus,"[118] and adapted it into an opera libretto for a female singer, a non-speaking male actor, and a chorus of singers who provide both the accompaniment and commentary upon the action. In the story, a gender-bending retelling of the fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*, a woman falls in love with a man who begins life as a lobster from the waist down. Soprano Danielle Steele, with whom I had worked at Indianapolis Opera, performed the role of the Woman, with actor Gabriel Pallo as the Man. The chorus consisted of myself, actor/puppeteer Christina Aimerito Feinberg, actor/singer/songwriter Zach Laliberte, and

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[118] The original story was later published in *Daily Science Fiction* and can be read at "Homo Homarus," *Daily Science Fiction*, November 22, 2012, http://dailysciencefiction.com/fantasy/fairy-tales/ellen-denham/homo-homarus . "Homarus" is a genus of lobster. The title is a made-up genus and species for a fictitious creature that is half human, half lobster.

composer/bassist Joshua Morris. I should note that Zach Laliberte had studied acting

improvisation with Keith Johnstone, and also taught an improvisation workshop during the

Convergence. Laliberte's workshop was a great help to my project, because he stressed learning

to say "yes" to our impulses and to be willing to fail, throw up our hands, say "again," and start

over.

We began with improvisation exercises based on Baltz's a cappella trios, something she

had discussed with me via email and made examples available via video footage. In the videos,

three singers in an OperaWorks class sit on chairs in a circle, eyes closed, and improvise together

using only vowel sounds.[119] At my first rehearsal, I had my cast do this exercise first with no

parameters except to listen to each other and vocalize whatever they wanted. Then, I began to

add parameters such as long versus short notes, legato versus staccato, or high versus low. When

we sang through the libretto, we first improvised freely, and then made some collaborative

decisions. As the soloist, Steele had the most freedom to use her own instincts to sing the text as

she chose, but the four members of the chorus needed to function more as a chamber ensemble

since we not only sang text when indicated, but provided wordless, ambient singing throughout.

We divided the libretto into sections, giving each a distinct mood, then discussed what attributes

each section would have and who would be in charge of leading that section. We decided, for

instance, that a "comforting" section might sound like a lullaby, and "angry" would be

represented by a descending scale ostinato punctuated by short, jagged rhythmic motives. We

also determined which of the chorus texts would be sung homophonically by the group in a

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[119] See "OperaWorks Improvisation - Part #1," *YouTube* video posted by "AnnBaltzOperaWorks," February 27, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0f86Ir1HVY .

speech-like rhythm, and which would be polyphonic, with words or phrases sung at different moments by different singers. Aside from the notes we each made on our scripts, there was no score. This was much easier than *Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater* for those in the group who were not trained singers or musicians, because they did not have to read music or learn exact pitches or rhythms, but had an understanding of the general outline of musical material, and could participate as co-creators rather than simply interpreters of the music. In about eight total hours of rehearsal time, we turned this text into a staged, musically improvised opera of about ten minutes duration, and presented it before a small audience in the Open Lab Performance. Also at that year's Convergence, Cindy Jenkins again asked me to improvise singing in a piece she was directing. This time I rose to the challenge, because I now understood that improvisation could be important for me as a singer, and not just something that dancers and actors did.

In May of 2011, I worked with Ann Baltz in person at an improvisation workshop for voice teachers at Anderson University. Baltz stresses becoming a better improviser by listening, and in being a true collaborator by making choices 'in the moment' based on what is presented by others. She had previously described her approach to me via email, saying, "Fewer instructions are better and make it easier for the singers' imaginations to fill in the blanks. The purpose of these exercises is to strengthen listening skills, trust, courage, and to expand each person's musical vocabulary."[120] In her improvisation exercises we did not discuss specific musical choices, but let motivation, mood, and instinct dictate the music. This can work well for trained singers, because we already know and understand the musical characteristics of, for example, a lament, or a rage aria. The improvisation exercises we performed fit into three basic

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[120] Ann Baltz, email message to author, February 10, 2011.

categories: purely musical, using written texts, and improvised music *and* text.   In the first category were the a cappella trios, and also "gibberish arias," in which Baltz begins with a piano introduction and the singer improvises made-up words as well as music to create an aria on the spot.[121] The second category consisted of using *haiku* poetry. A small group of singers would sing the text of the *haiku* with Baltz at the piano. The third category was to construct small scenes with improvised dialogue, prompted by either characters suggested by pictures that Baltz had brought, or by random objects in the room, and accompanied by Baltz at the piano.

All three of these exercises had their own challenges. To be a good improviser requires practice, and I resolved to keep practicing and experimenting and allowing my previous experiences to become part of my overall technique-bank. Ann Baltz's exercises work so well in large part due to her impeccable skills as a piano improviser and her many years of practice. I found the a cappella trio exercise a very good first step in teaching vocal improvisation, and have used and adapted it for a variety of groups, including actors, dancers, instrumentalists, and singers of all levels, from middle school to college to professional. There is no wrong way to do the exercise, which liberates performers from the fear of making mistakes, and allows them to begin to trust their own creative impulses. Working with Baltz gave me both a deeper understanding of the importance of improvisation and practical tools for my continued improvisation work.

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[121] For examples of Baltz's gibberish arias, see "OperaWorks Improvisation - Part #2," *YouTube* video posted by "AnnBaltzOperaWorks," February 27, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfuBWZmvGjY

Harmonic Methods

The study of harmonic methods of improvisation has informed my work as well. Christopher Azzara, a Professor of Music Education at Eastman, takes a harmonic approach to improvisation by teaching patterns and progressions. For example, in an improvisation workshop I attended at Bowling Green State, Azzara had the group sing the melody to "Simple Gifts" with piano accompaniment, then instructed us to sing "anything but the melody" over the accompaniment, instructing us to "understand where the tune needs to arrive and figure out a different way to get there."[122] This harmonic approach is not unlike that of jazz, in which performers understand the harmonic progression well enough to be able to improvise on top of it. Azzara stresses improvisation as a teaching tool, and the book he co-authored with Richard F. Grunow in 2006, *Developing Music Through Improvisation*, lays out a comprehensive lesson plan to do this, using folk songs as material.[123]

Other music educators have also emphasized improvisation as a means for developing musicianship. Edward Sarath, Professor of Music in the Department in Jazz and Contemporary Improvisation at the University of Michigan, has written extensively on the subject. He describes his book, *Music Theory Through Improvisation: A New Approach to Musicianship Training* (2010), as "a hands-on, creativity-based approach to music theory and improvisation training designed for classical musicians with little or no background in improvisation."[124]

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[122] Christopher D. Azzara, remarks from Improvisation Workshop, Bowling Green State University, October 2011.
[123] Christopher D. Azzara and Richard F. Grunow, *Developing Music Through Improvisation* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2006).
[124] Edward Sarath, *Music Theory Through Improvisation: A New Approach to Musicianship Training* (New York: Routledge, 2010), ix. For more information on Sarath's approach, see also, Edward Sarath, *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness: Jazz as Integral Template for Music, Education, and Society* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013).

Jeffrey Agrell's book, *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians* (2008), is intended for a

variety of uses, including for a semester-long course in improvisation for non-jazz music majors.

Agrell, who is Associate Professor of Horn at the University of Iowa, says in the preface, "I

didn't improvise on the French horn for forty-one years."[125] He goes on to describe the journey

that led him to teaching introductory improvisation classes. In Chapter 3 of the book, he details

the many ways the exercises in the book may be used. He notes that singers can use most of

these games, and additionally includes twenty-nine games which particularly highlight voices,

with categories including Text Games, Rhythm Games, Timbre Games, and Harmony Games.[126]

One example, from the instructions for the Pentatonic Chant game (one of the Harmony Games),

reads as follows:

> Five to six players. Players One and Two sing a vocal ostinato on nonsense syllables
> (e.g., coma sala picky packy ama nana bala—or make up your own). The chant is two
> measures long. All syllables are an eighth note in duration. Sing odd-numbered words
> on F, even-numbered words a step higher on G. Any low instrument plays a pentatonic
> ostinato based on F (F-G-A-C-D). Other players may add additional sparse ostinati.
> Percussion may be added. Remaining players play soli in F major, with or without
> inflections (adding sharps or flats).[127]

Though the aforementioned method books are aimed at classical musicians, I include one

jazz-based method that I have found useful. *How to Play Jazz and Improvise* by Jamey

Aebersold contains exercises and a CD with jazz trio accompaniment. I had have used this in

teaching a vocal jazz class at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp. First I had the students learn a Dorian

scale pattern using whole notes, then half notes, then 'swung' eighth notes, then adding a 'blue'

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[125] Jeffrey Agrell, *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2008), xv.
[126] Ibid., 19-20.
[127] Ibid., 150.

note, then outlining a ninth chord, all based on exercises in Aebersold's book.[128] This allowed

them to improvise their own scat singing solos in performance with a jazz version of Gershwin's

"Summertime." As the students became familiar with using the scale in various ways, they

developed the aural skills needed to improvise upon it. I also appreciated Aebersold's helpful

comments, such as, "There is no such thing as a wrong note. Just poor choices. When you hit a

wrong note (poor choice), just move it up or down a half-step. You're always just a half-step

away from a right note."[129]

Another harmonic method involves the use of a system for conducted improvisation, in

which a conductor uses gesture to guide the improvisation of a large ensemble.   Jazz composer

and percussionist Adam Rudolph employs conducted improvisation for his Go: Organic

Orchestra. He says about his approach, "The Organic Orchestra for me is a . . . twenty-first

century vision of an orchestra. What I'm hoping to accomplish is to allow each musician to be

able to express themselves, let their inner voice come through . . . but at the same time serve the

overall moment and the collective expression of what we're doing."[130] Using a variety of

matrices—pitch patterns that can be played or sung backwards, forwards, vertically, or

horizontally—and other melodic and rhythmic patterns, Rudolph conducts an orchestra using

twenty-one hand signals to indicate various parameters.[131] Within this, there is often room for

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[128] Jamey Aebersold, *How to Play Jazz and Improvise*, Volume 1 (New Albany, IN: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 1992), 10-15.

[129] Ibid., 6.

[130] Adam Rudolph, in "GO: Organic Orchestra at University of Illinois," *YouTube* video posted by "Illinois Music," April 13, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfAkqOyXPS0 .

[131] For a more in-depth interview with in Rudolph in which he explains these parameters, see Sean Sonderegger, "'It's more personal than we think': Conducted Improvisation Systems and Community in NYC," (MA Thesis, Wesleyan University, May 2014), 185-206, http://wesscholar.wesleyan.edu/etd_mas_theses/73 .
In this thesis, Sonderegger also discuses others using conducted improvisation for large ensembles, including Anthony Braxton and Butch Morris.

improvisation, such as choice of which pitch in the left-hand column of a matrix to begin on; he may also ask one or more players to improvise freely over other material.

V				PENTATONIC	
D	F	G	A	C	D
B	Db	Eb	Gb	Ab	B
A	B	D	E	G	A
Gb	A	B	D	E	Gb
E	Gb	A	B	Db	E
D	F	G	A	C	D

Excerpt from 2015 Go: Organic Orchestra Pitch Matrices.
Copyright © 2015 by Adam Rudolph.
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I had the opportunity to work with Rudolph during a Go: Organic Orchestra residency at the University of Illinois. While I learned the various matrices along with the instrumentalists, I do not have perfect pitch, and always needed to first hear a pitch of an instrument nearby before I could sing the correct pattern. Rudolph also furnished me with twelve short passages of a text by Nietzsche that was adapted for his work for singer and orchestra, *The Dreamer* (1995).[132] When he signaled to me and gave a number, I would sing one of these passages, improvising in a recitative-like manner. In two instances he wrote out specific pitches for me because these sections were associated with particular written- out ostinati played by the orchestra, and I had a pitch center to work from. Participating in this eclectic ensemble helped me appreciate the

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[132] See "The Dreamer," Meta Records, accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.metarecords.com/dreamer.html .

amount of practice it takes to learn unusual harmonic patterns in order to use them in an improvised work.[133]

Graphic Scores, Soundscapes, and COLAB

My study of improvisation has included other methods and influences as well, such as graphic scores. Inspired by Cathy Berberian's *Stripsody*, I conceived and directed my own *Websody* at the 2012 Indy Convergence, something I called a "comic soundscape." I first had the group look at Berberian's score, then draw their own scores based on popular internet memes. Next we developed these into a staged piece of devised theatre involving spoken text, singing, and a variety of sound effects. That same year, Ashley Benninghoff, Zach Laliberte, and I led a joint workshop at the Convergence for improvisation in dance, acting, and singing. In one exercise, half of the group would improvise a vocal score while the other half did improvised movement. These two types of improvisation worked well together, as each group could feed off of the material of the other.

I continued with the idea of the soundscape during the 2013 Indy Convergence, for which I directed the Umbrella Project—the central workshop project involving all participants. For this, I designed and directed a collaborative project on the subject of Otherness.[134] The participants (with a variety of levels of musical training and experience) and I collaborated to create a piece of devised theatre with extemporaneous dialogue, accompanied by an "orchestra" of voices and instruments. Using a violin, several hand drums and small percussion instruments,

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[133] For video excerpts of this January 31, 2015 performance, see "GO: Organic Orchestra at University of Illinois," *YouTube* video posted by "Illinois Music," April 13, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfAkqOyXPS0 .
[134] This was an independent study project for my doctoral cognate in Theatre, with Professor Lisa Dixon from the University of Illinois Theatre Department as my advisor.

some recorders, and our own voices, we developed several different musical textures and ideas to be used for different moments. For example, in a scene where explorers visit a planet with sentient mineral blobs (performed by dancers in metallic fabric bags), we had one sound- idea to represent the ambient environment of the planet, another to represent the dance of the mineral blobs, and a third for the chaos that comes at the end of the scene.

Directing these two soundscapes helped me refine my approaches to improvisation for groups whose members have varying levels of musical experience. Participants were able to develop distinct textures, understand the difference between them (for instance, polyphonic versus homophonic), and know when to shift from one to the other based on visual cues from me or from the actors, or sound cues from other participants. While I wanted to make the experience as collaborative as possible, I recognized that this process-based collaboration could become a free-for-all with no clear outcome. I learned that setting goals ahead of time and staying on top of the rehearsal time was crucial, and that even though I wanted to incorporate input from everyone, it was up to me to provide a sense of order.

As part of my doctoral studies at the University of Illinois, I took a class called "COLAB" in fall 2012. Music Professor Erik Lund and Dance Professor Kirstie Simson teach this class as a collaborative workshop for the development of improvisation scores. We would sometimes split into separate groups of musicians and dancers, in which musicians would improvise in large or smaller groups around different musical ideas, such as a particular interval or key. We often improvised all together, or in small groups consisting of both musicians and dancers, and developed our own scores for improvised performances. For example, at a December concert at the Krannert Art Museum, I participated in a small group improvisation

with violinist Dorothy Martirano and dancers Rhea Speights and Kristin McCoy. Martirano and I used *haiku* texts we had selected, with her speaking, then me echoing in song, then trading imitative phrases back and forth between voice and violin. Meanwhile, the dancers moved in fabric bags supplied by Kirstie Simson.[135] In our improvisation projects, Lund stressed the importance of agreeing upon some basic parameters and being a good listener, but also being willing to lead and to take risks, lest each improvisation become what he called "polite gray soup."[136] Taking this class helped inform and refine my ideas about what could constitute a score for an improvised work, and how to collaborate effectively in a small group.

Improvised Opera, Three Ways

At the 2015 Indy Convergence, I workshopped some of the ideas for my doctoral project by directing a short project titled *Improvised Opera, Three Ways*. My ensemble consisted of mezzo-soprano Caitlin Powell, who had recently received her MM in vocal performance from the University of Illinois, Barry Morse, a doctoral candidate in Composition at the University of Illinois who plays trumpet and theremin, and Joshua Morris, a MM graduate of Butler University in Composition who is also a classical bassist, plus myself.

During the first part of the rehearsal process, I led the participants in various improvisation techniques. These included interpreting texts in various ways, drawing and performing short graphic scores, improvising over a repeated bass pattern, and improvising comic scenes with audience-suggested parameters. Since we were only allotted 8 1/2 total hours

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[135] Incidentally, this is what had given me the idea to use dancers in bags for my aforementioned Convergence project.

[136] Remarks by Professor Erik Lund during COLAB class, Fall 2012, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

of workshop/rehearsal time prior to our tech rehearsal, we needed to make decisions fairly quickly about which approaches were going to be the most effective preparation to culminate in a final, public presentation. We narrowed our focus to develop three short scenes with three distinct parameters: improvisation driven by a bass line, improvisation driven by a text, and improvised comedy.

The first scene we presented used as text the poem "Let Me Handle My Business, Damn" by Morgan Parker.[137] This was presented as a trio for singer, trumpet, and bass by Powell, Morse, and Morris. I envisioned it as an excerpt from a jazzy opera, in which the title of the poem represents the last words the singer says to someone before going on stage for a gig for which she is not well prepared, and what she had planned to sing turns into a stream-of-consciousness monologue. Improvisation techniques used included letting the bass line be the guiding force, allowing the text and natural rhythm of speech to dictate the sung music, and allowing the trumpeter to improvise freely, including back and forth imitation with the singer. The results were very different each time it was rehearsed or performed. Audience comments included, "Felt like nightclub meets opera." and "Great jazzy feeling, great text, good singing, musicians were listening to each other."[138]

In the second scene, we presented "Luxinda's aria" from *Siren Song*,"[139] in which a siren sings to a sleeping man that she can control with her voice, but she wishes he might really love her. Caitlin Powell sang the role of Luxinda, accompanied by Joshua Morris on bass, Barry

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[137] See Ellen Denham, "Improvised Opera, Three Ways (1 of 3)," *Vimeo* video posted by "AnC Movies," accessed April 10, 2016, https://vimeo.com/131166360 .

[138] Anonymous comment from audience survey.

[139] This was from an opera libretto I wrote as an independent study project for my doctoral cognate in Theatre with Professor Thom Miller as my advisor. See Ellen Denham, "Improvised Opera, Three Ways (2 of 3)," *Vimeo* video posted by "AnC Movies," accessed April 10, 2016, https://vimeo.com/131166361 .

Morse on trumpet and theremin, and myself, vocalizing wordlessly. We determined that solo

singers and the accompanying ensemble members could use different sets of rules, similar to the

rules used in *Homo Homarus* four years before. Not all singers have perfect pitch or are

comfortable being told to sing in a particular mode or scale without sufficient time to practice.

Powell's improvisations were more instinctive and freer, while those of the ensemble were

sometimes dictated by an agreed-upon musical idea. I divided the text into sections based on the

intent of the character, and the ensemble and I devised some basic guidelines for textures or

harmonic material to suit each of them; Powell was free to improvise according to the nature of

the text, within certain constraints, such as waiting for the bass or theremin to begin a section.

The scores from which we played did not include musical notes, just the sung text with our own

handwritten instructions. These included parameters such as holding notes underneath certain

sung pitches in the manner of recitative, playing/singing ascending or descending pentatonic

fragments, chaotic rhythm patterns, rising melodic fragments that never resolve, and homophonic

textures between theremin and voice. Chance elements were involved, such as when the

ensemble would accompany a recitative with "chords," each of us selecting our own note; the

outcome was indeterminate. This second section was probably the most musically complex of

the three sections. Audience comments included "The combination of instruments was

fascinating and very supportive of the text and the great singing."[140]

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[140] Anonymous comment from audience survey.

The third scene was called "Krystal and Mabel's Birthday Adventure in

_____,"[141] in which the audience was to select a location and two possible birthday gifts,

around which we would improvise a scene. Powell and I played two friends who share a

birthday and are taking a vacation together. The musical improvisation was more free here by

necessity—we could not know in advance what might be called for based on the location and

items chosen. However, we had a basic plan, that involved the two instrumentalists setting the

mood of the location, then Powell and I would improvise sung dialogue about the location and

reveal our gifts to each other. The gifts would need to create some sort of conflict, after which

we would each march off to face a different part of the audience and repeat a complaint or two in

an improvised duet. Then we would find some way to resolve the situation, which could mean

making up, exchanging the gifts, or coming up with some other solution, which was likely to

include the murder of one of us by the other. At the very end, we would sing the words "The

end" based on a phrase from Rossini's comic "Cat Duet" (*duetto buffo di due gatti*). Listening

and not drowning each other out in the duet phase was challenging. If we had had more time, I

would have wanted to be more specific as to how to handle singing different texts

simultaneously, but leaving some space, and repetition, as in a classic ensemble by Mozart or

Rossini. In the performance, we were on vacation in Mauritius, and the scene ended with

"Mabel" getting eaten by an alligator that was a gift from "Krystal." Audience comments on this

scene included "Full of surprises," and "Sometimes it was hard to hear both of you when singing

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[141] For this scene, I sought the advice of another Convergence participant, Justine Garrett, who was a graduate of the Second City Training Centre Conservatory. See Ellen Denham, "Improvised Opera, Three Ways (3 of 3)," *Vimeo* video posted by "AnC Movies," accessed April 10, 2016, https://vimeo.com/131166363 .

against each other; some back & forth would have been better than singing loudly at the same time."[142]

Directing this project was the first time I had done something on this scale with a group of exclusively professional musicians, which I believe resulted in some more musically sophisticated results than in my previous Convergence projects, and allowed me to use more music-specific parameters. I was to continue in this vein with a larger group for my upcoming doctoral project recital.

Homo Homarus Performance on Doctoral Project Recital

On March 11, 2016, I presented a lecture on the contents of this paper, followed by a performance of my opera, *Homo Homarus*. The work was a collaboration between myself and some excellent musicians and actors: Whitney Ashe, piano; Kevin Blair, actor; Tania Arazi Coambs, soprano; Claire Happel, harp; Jamie Hutchinson, trombone; Dorothy Martirano, violin; Barry Morse, trumpet; Scott Schwartz, tenor; and Allen Wu; electronics. The orchestration was determined simply by the interest of those who chose to participate, most of whom I had worked with in at least one improvisation project before. In an approach similar to that of the OperaWorks production of Ann Baltz's *The Discord Altar*, the text was written ahead of time by one person (myself), and the music was devised by the singers and instrumentalists. Thus, I would put this in the category of devised opera.

During the rehearsal process, I first had the ensemble members improvise in small groups around an idea, such as a particular mood, and sometimes gave them musical parameters to

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[142] Anonymous comment from audience survey.

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explore. When we began working with texts, we stared with *haiku*, then gradually worked more with the opera text itself, first reading through, and improvising freely. Then we would discuss where the musical texture or idea needed to change based on the text; for example, when a character's mood changes from angry to regretful. We also identified moments in the text where there needed to be a musical "event" to mirror an event in the staging; for instance when a character stumbles, we wanted to represent this musically. The ensemble rehearsed with me for about 14 hours total.   During rehearsals and the performance they utilized a copy of the script with their own notes, or read from a simpler version of a cue sheet I had assembled, listing cues for changes in mood or texture. By the date of the performance, they were intimately familiar with the text and dramatic action.

In both staging the opera and outlining the score, I drew upon the work of director Katie Mitchell, whose book *The Director's Craft* I utilized to divide the script up into "events" determined by a change in characters' intentions.[143] Each event was to signal some musical change; thus the improvisation was to a great extent dictated by the text and dramatic action. We marked cues in the scripts for when these musical changes should come and what would trigger them, such as the mood changing from "frustration" to "tender" when the man begins to cry. There are also musical cues within sections, as when a musical gesture is required to represent an angry, slashing motion by a character. In this way, the instruments also became actors in the drama. My method as a musical director was similar to how I work as a stage director, meaning that my instructions to the musicians resembled blocking directions one might give an actor, providing a structure but not controlling every detail. For example, I gave directions to the

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[143] Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 55.

ensemble such as "the storm can go on longer," or "make sure there is an instrumental response after this line of text," but seldom indicated specific musical parameters. In this style of direction, I am personally less interested in tonality or pitch class set than in a nuanced interpretation of a text, interesting musical textures, and a satisfying communication between instruments and voices.

In a nod toward Adam Rudolph, the opera overture opens with a moment of conducted improvisation, in which I asked the musicians to improvise pitches within a particular pitch collection while I conducted some rhythmic events. Once I stopped conducting, the musicians were free to develop the material in whatever ways they wished, under the general idea of "foreboding." From then on, there was no pre-selection of particular pitches, rhythms, or musical material. We may have worked with a particular musical idea at one point, such as "angular rhythms in this section," but even that evolved as the ensemble worked together, and in each rehearsal, the musical texture and material varied greatly. Some readings became more whimsical, with jaunty, rhythmic interplay between the instruments. Others sounded jazzy, with chromatic inflections. At the performance, the musical material was at times very lush and lyrical, and more tonal than in some previous rehearsals, and darker in tone, playing up the tragic elements of the story. This state of constant invention and reinvention, I believe, makes the material exciting and fresh for the performers. I have learned through this process that if one is privileged to work with excellent musicians who are skilled at listening to each other, and at watching and taking inspiration from the action on stage, *and* are fearless improvisers, sometimes less direction is preferable. The ensemble judged the musical reading of the drama during the performance as our most successful, which one might attribute in part to the

following: the performers 1) connecting to the drama at a deeper level, 2) communicating with and being inspired by each other, and 3) feeding off of audience energy.

The beauty of this approach, to me, is that highly talented musicians, composers (both Morse and Wu are composers), and improvisers can be free to express themselves not only in interpreting music, but also in letting their impulses and training guide them to create it spontaneously. While I heard "exceptional" things happen in each rehearsal, in this approach one cannot necessarily plan for "exceptional" things to happen, or necessarily try to recreate a single, past brilliant moment. My experience is that the more an ensemble works together and the stronger they become in improvising, "exceptional" things will happen each time, and they will be different each time.[144] I was fortunate enough to work with some truly outstanding improvisers, and our performance was received enthusiastically by the audience.

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I have heard it said that one cannot create great art by committee. However, to a certain extent, all art is collaborative, as the influence of the works and ideas of other artists is a type of collaboration. Opera has always been a collaborative art form between librettists, composers, conductors, singers, instrumentalists, and designers. Collaborating on an improvised score is yet another category of artistic collaboration, and one that I feel is worthy of further exploration. Having studied, created, and participated in collaboratively-improvised works over the past several years, I have come to believe that improvisation is not just a helpful exercise to develop

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[144] This raises the question of how one determines whether an improvisation is successful, who gets to decide this, and how to define what is truly "exceptional." This is a subject I continue to explore.

musical skills, but a practice with the potential to delight performers and audiences alike, and I

look forward to continued study and participation in the genre of improvised opera.

CONCLUSION

Improvisation in classical vocal music has evolved from being a regular part of a singer's training—from the extemporaneous counterpoint of the Renaissance and the *bel canto* improvisation of ornaments—to more of a specialized skill for those who wish to perform this historical repertoire in the manner the composer would have expected.[145] However, as I have demonstrated, contemporary improvisation in opera is a vibrant trend today. I believe the time has come not only to commence improvisation training at an early stage, as recommended by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) and The College Music Society, but also to use it as a way to create innovative performances in genres normally unaccustomed to the practice. In the realm of opera, improvised performances can be developed with less time and preparation than a composed work, and I believe can still be a satisfying musical and dramatic experience for performers and audiences.

A musician who has been trained in music theory, history, informed listening, and the literature of his or her instrument also has all the tools to create music, but is not always sufficiently exposed to the art of improvisation, or lacks an environment in which to practice it. Opera, as a collaborative art that uses music to tell a dramatic story, is uniquely positioned to support improvisation. I dream of a future in which well-trained singers and instrumentalists still perform the masterworks of the operatic canon, but also develop, in smaller groups, improvised operas that are musically and dramatically fresh and rewarding.

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[145] See Crutchfield's argument in "Bel Canto at Caramoor," mentioned in Chapter 1; also see, Kailan R. Rubinoff, "(Re)creating the Past: Baroque Improvisation in the Early Music Revival," *New Sound: International Magazine for Music* no. 32 (December 2008): 79-93.

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