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introduction and orientation-points for the project

For my master project, I have explored relationships between music and death through the composition of two bodies of musical work, as well as through this written component. In particular, I have been investigating *forms* which tolerate death in itself instead of hiding it, marginalizing it, or exploiting it for a “greater good”. As a composer, I have been mostly interested in musical forms, but as my written component will show, I do not believe that any of these forms are exclusively musical. Rather, they are ways of organizing a relationships between sound and meaning, voice and language. The forms that I am investigating fall loosely under the two categories: allegory and lament. The music that I am submitting includes selections from the opera/oratorio that I am writing for the Norwegian National Opera (*Det ryker fortsatt*), as well as pieces that were written as part of an ongoing collaboration with the Dominican artist manuel arturo abreu (their name is intentionally not capitalized). The libretto for the opera was written by Finn Iunker, and that work is a collaboration with composer Bernhard Bornstein. I can say with honesty that I have been the “primary” composer for the majority of this project, although we have worked hard to retain Bernhard’s voice throughout the opera¹. The collaboration with manuel arturo abreu includes a work for piano trio, a “theatrical work” for two performers and amplified objects, and a work for symphony orchestra. In this introduction, I will briefly describe the scope of the two “bodies” represented in my masters project before presenting the written, theoretical, component of this project and discussing the scope and aims of this component.

The written component will focus upon the work of philosophers Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin and their concepts of lament and allegory. It might be unusual for a composition masters student to use so much of their written component on philosophical texts, but, as I have said, I do not see my musical “forms” as exclusively musical, and nor do I see these textual forms as “textual” or even “linguistic” in essence. Rather, they express a fundamental musicality. As scholar Ilit Ferber says, the language of lament even reveals “the musical foundations

¹ Throughout much of the work’s composition period, Bernhard was occupied with his education to become an air-traffic controller.

of *every* linguistic utterance”.² After expounding upon both forms in a general sense, I will offer musical examples of these forms.

I hope that these discussions will inspire thought and questions about my music, but I do not want this to be mistaken for an analysis of my own work. These texts, ideas, and other sources of inspiration that I mention are not things that are directly adapted into or cited within my own work, and I would never expect the audience to have a pre-existing knowledge of Walter Benjamin, for example, or think that my work in any way is a commentary upon Walter Benjamin or Luigi Nono. Rather, I believe that the forms of lament and allegory are phenomena that exist across categories and can effect readers and listeners regardless of their critical awareness of the phenomena themselves.

It is worth noting that these two forms are not only informative to my work in a “philosophical sense”, but they also reveal traces of the “origins” of my compositional work. As I will note later, there are paths leading from Scholem and Benjamin to Luigi Nono to contemporary composers, which reveal something of the origin by which my work was conceived, but I do not wish to claim genealogies for my musical material. Musical material is just that — material — and as we will see throughout this paper, any talk of “bloodlines” would be ironical and contradictory.

² Ferber, Ilit. “Language Failing: The Reach of Lament”. Lecture at ICI Berlin. May 11, 2015.

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the opera

This opera is the result of a commission from Den Norske Operaen that Bernhard Bornstein and I received in 2018. The commission was requested after the Director at the time, Annilese Miskimmon, and dramaturge Hedda Høgåsen-Hallesby saw a performance of our operetta, *Walter Benjamins død i Portbou*, which was written after a libretto by Finn Iunker, who agreed to write the libretto for this new opera as well. A commission of two composers is somewhat unusual, but Bernhard and I come at music from totally different angles, and our individual definitions of “composition” are miles apart from each-other. Our difference in viewpoints is not something that weakens the collaboration. I view composition as a semiotic and philosophical practice. It is a “relational” practice in that it (mostly) involves a playing with relations that listeners and performers have to meaning and non-meaning, as well as playing with their location inside of different times, including but not limited to historical time. Bernhard on the other hand does not feel the need to question his aesthetic situation or taste, and for him, composition is a craft which culminates in the creation of “good” melodies. I do not wish in any way to belittle Bernhard or his compositional practice. Bernhard is an extremely skilled craftsman and enjoys being this. For me, especially in our current historical situation, a composer’s responsibility is not to create “original material”, or to generate “novelty” in any way (this relates to Kurt Weill’s critique of ‘Verbrauchsmusik’, “music to be ‘used up’”, which I will later discuss at length). And so, I am not bothered about using someone else’s material in this case Bernhard’s to compose, and working with Bernhard doesn’t make me feel as if I am “compromising” my work, even if the end result is something very different than it would be if I was writing the melodic material myself. (I should note that I did write a lot of the melodic material myself, although I adapted it to fit with Bernhard’s material). Working with Bernhard’s material is in someways similar to how I am also working with diverse historical material, and recordings from the Norwegian Opera’s archives (to which I was given access for this project).

Originally, the premier for this work was supposed to be in March 2021 (150 years after the start of the Paris Commune), but the date for the premier was delayed for a number of reasons. The first reason was Finn Iunker’s dissatisfaction with his original libretto. In June 2019, just

before the beginning of this program, Finn delivered a draft of the libretto for the work. But at the end of the summer, and after we held a workshop with the material we had written during the first three months, Finn ultimately decided that the libretto needed to be rewritten instead of edited. We, and the Opera, agreed that this was OK, and Finn wrote a new libretto over the next months, which was delivered to us in January 2020.

In March 2021, we were contacted by the Opera and asked if we could be interested in setting the Opera up as a digital version. Given that the majority of the opera is performed by the choir, and there is no dramatic “plot” or literal scenes, we agreed that the opera could work well in digital form. This would also potentially shrink the involvement of a third-party director, depending on how the work is filmed or presented. However, this suggestion came as quite a surprise, since we believed we had been postponed to the 2022 season because of the corona virus. After a moment of consideration, we agreed. As well as specific movements, I am sending the complete vocal score with this document. The vocal score was edited specifically for the Norwegian Opera’s vocal ensemble, consisting of 10 members of their chorus. A brief note about the score: instead of meter changes in many of the movements, we were asked to change the notation and use more fermatas and ritardandos. The danger of this is that the music will be less exact, but this will be avoided by a close collaboration with the conductor, in this case Cesar Cañon, whereby the conductor knows the exact duration of each fermata and ritardando. We will record the opera in June 2021. We have already been fortunate enough to have three movements from the middle of the opera performed (digitally) at Brecht-Tage 2021 hosted by Literaturforum im Brecht-Haus, Berlin. These movements were performed by soloists from the Norwegian Opera. The video recording of the broadcast is submitted with this exam portfolio.

This subject of this work is the Paris Commune of 1871. To briefly summarize the events of the Commune for those unfamiliar: the Commune came about after an unpopular peace treaty ended the Franco-Prussian war. Paris was under siege by the Prussians from September 1870 to late January 1871, when the French Government at Versailles signed an extremely unfavorable treaty which ceded the industrial region Alsace-Lorraine, and which demanded that Paris pay large sums to the cities of Germany and dismantle its own defenses. When the French authorities expressed concern to the Germans that the treaty would anger

the working classes, the Prussian Chancellor Bismarck's response was "provoke an uprising, then, while you still have an army with which to suppress it".³ This is exactly what happened. The government provoked an uprising, and then the Germans assisted them with their massacre. As a result there was *never another serious revolution or serious challenge to power in the city of Paris*, which is astonishing, considering that there had been a major uprising about every 20 years since the French Revolution.⁴

The conflict started when the French (Versailles) authorities tried to disarm the civilian National Guard in Paris in March 1871. This resulted in a street brawl in which two officers of the Versailles army were killed. Because of this, or rather, using this as an excuse, the entire French Government fled the city, claiming that they feared for their lives, and leaving the civilian population to manage the city by themselves. The people of Paris did not plan this uprising and did not view themselves as breaking the law when they formed their own government. Because they believed their power to be legitimate, the Communards did not even requisition the money from the Banque de France, and legally *loaned* the money from the Banque, while this same bank funded the Versailles forces that came and slaughtered them. Nor did the civilian National Guard immediately march on Versailles⁵. Instead they administered Paris and formed a new idealistic society which lasted all of two months. This society included concerts open to all members of society modeled after the free concerts of 1793.⁶

The name "Commune de Paris" has radical connotations now, but the term had several meanings in its day, meaning among other things Paris Municipality, like Oslo Kommune. Seen as a signpost in Communist history, only about 20% of the Communards organizing body was communist, and this designation was in large part post-dated by Marx. Although there was cer-

³ Horne, Alistair. *The Fall of Paris: The Siege and the Commune 1870–71* (repr. Pan ed.). London: Macmillan, 2002. p.240.

⁴ I am open to the including of May 1968, but the workers declined to join the students in that uprising, and there is a real question to whether they could have really challenged the government.

⁵ They would unsuccessfully do this several weeks later after Versailles had regrouped and it was clear that there would be civil war.

⁶ Mordey, Delphine. "Moments musicaux- High Culture in the Paris Commune". in *Cambridge Opera Journal*; Cambridge Vol. 22, Iss. 1, (Mar 2010): p.3.

tainly an overall sympathy to socialism and self-representation of the working class, the Communards were a diverse bunch, ideologically and biographically.⁷

The Versailles government, headed by Adolf Thiers, sent their army to assault Paris and massacre the Communards. After putting up a gallant effort and resisting the assault for nearly two months, the people of Paris were defeated, and tens of thousands of people were executed. Indeed, Yale historian John Merriman cites that this is the first example that a government has organized the eradication of an entire populace based on identity (in this case, working class identity) – noting that it foreshadowed the horrors of 20th century purges and genocide.⁸ Record keeping was very poor, and no one knows how many were executed. Thousands more were deported; 4500 alone to New Caledonia in the Pacific Ocean.⁹ Instead of focusing on the “action,” our libretto, constructed out of documents published by the Communards, focuses on their response to loss in the last days of the Commune.

The selection of this subject was based, among other things on its position in theater and opera history, and also specifically its position in Norwegian theater history. Finn Iunker was initially interested in this subject, because it is a point of relation between Nordahl Grieg and Bertolt Brecht. Brecht originally wanted to direct Grieg’s *Nederlaget*, but decided that the work was of poor quality, and decided to write a new work: *Die Tage der Commune* (1948-49). The “Brecht” connection (and one degree further, the Kurt Weill connection) to our work continues a thread that began in *Walter Benjamins død i Portbou*. Furthermore, I was interested in this subject because of its connection to the composer Luigi Nono. In 1975, Nono wrote the work *Al gran sole carico d’amore*, whose first half is based on the Paris Commune, with *Die Tage der Commune* as a principal source text.

⁷ For a detailed description of who the communards were, see: “Masters of their Own Lives” in Merriman, John. *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune*. New York: Basic Books, 2014.

⁸ Merriman, John. “John Merriman: Paris Commune of 1871” Interview on *MacMillan Report*. April 23, 2014.

⁹ Bullard, Alice. *Exile to Paradise: Savagery and Civilization in Paris and the South Pacific 1790-1900*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000. p.93.

Originally, traces of *Die Tage* were visible in our libretto. However, the final draft, found in the “appendix” of this document ended up being quite different. This libretto, which became the work *Det Ryker fortsatt*, contains no characters. In fact, there is only one movement which centers around a single voice who expresses something from the point of view “I”. However, this libretto is similar to some of Brecht’s other works, notably those used in Kurt Weill’s *Das Berliner Requiem*. The new libretto focuses on “archetypes”, which are extremely Brechtian: instead of a specific soldier, we have “a soldier”, or instead of a specific woman we have “mothers”. A character who was in an earlier draft Louise Michel, is now simply a female soldier.

I am very pleased with this libretto. From the outset I have been concerned about the “cult of personalities” and melodramatic glorification of the communards. My anxieties have come from the Commune’s place in capital C “Communist” (read Soviet) history. Luigi Nono was also very preoccupied in responding to this “abuse” as he saw it, and I learned a lot from looking at his treatment of figures from history.

To briefly orient this train of thought with the theoretical investigations of the project, I can say that this work is a product of my investigations of how to represent the dead in art while avoiding the problematic act of commemoration. As manuel arturo abreu notes, commemoration incurs a debt to the dead¹⁰: one is capitalizing on the dead when commemorating, regardless of how respectful one tries to be. Use of the dead is extremely problematic. In “making sense” of their deaths and showing how their death contributed to a greater good, we are ignoring what death is in its self: loss. We commemorate lives – not death or dying. But the Communards themselves saw death, freedom, and singing as being closely related, and in the *Journal Officiel*, cited in the libretto, they compare their own violent deaths to birds flying away and a song leaving the lips of nameless masses.

In connection with my opera, or in lieu of an analysis thereof, the latter section of my written component will focus on *allegory* as a form that reflects death in itself instead of using it or concealing it for another purpose. I will begin my discussion of allegory by presenting Walter Benjamin’s use of the term, which is intentionally elusive and escapes definition. For Benjamin, allegory is a form or a process, and not a concept. Most people assume that allegory is

¹⁰ abreu, manuel arturo, *Incalculable Loss*, (Seattle: INCA press, 2018), 50.

when an artwork represents aspects of society at large. However, for Benjamin and his friend Bertolt Brecht, the *function* of allegory is in some ways the total opposite of this supposition. Allegory has nothing to do with “real life”, and instead of portraying reality, the language of allegory shatters its connections to reality, or reveals the falsehood of this portrayal — allegory draws attention to the abyss between the sign and any kind of signified in a perpetual receding and fragmenting motion. For Brecht, this process of distancing [*verfremdungseffekt*] between external reality and art was crucial to inducing the audience to thought. The audience has no illusions that what they are viewing is “real”, and this, for Brecht and those that followed him, was liberating.

The relationship between allegory and opera is of the utmost importance. The writer Walter Benjamin proposed allegory as the category that offered an alternative to tragedy. Walter Benjamin’s *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* is essentially a critique of Richard Wagner’s music and its interpretation in Nietzsche’s *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Wagner wished to use the force of death in tragedy as a foundational power, which can be used to establish the Nation through mass co-identification and anamnesis (the feeling that a presented story comes from one’s own memory). As I will discuss in the second chapter, my compositional work is informed by Benjamin’s critique of Wagner, the works of Brecht/Weill, and Luigi Nono’s relationship to both Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht.

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the collaboration with manuel arturo abreu

I became familiar with the work of manuel arturo abreu (mani) in 2015 after they published their first collection of writing, *List of Consonants*. mani and I went to the same university and were friends, but their emergence as an artist and writer happened after we were finished at school, and we met again during their book tour. The work *List of Consonants* is a collection of writings, mostly poems, dealing with the suicide of their friend from childhood. When I began to formulate this project in the fall of 2019 and searched for a countersubject to the Paris Commune, I thought of this book. The subject matter, as well as the forms through which this material was handled, seemed to match well with the ideas I was working through. I had begun to investigate artistic forms which could offer alternatives to “the commemorative”, the form through which Western art usually deals with death and the dead. As I mentioned earlier, the norm for Western art is an assertion of life over death, be it through honoring the past or sacrificed lives of “important” people (i.e. through monuments, memorial concerts, or tributes), or through asserting eternal life and absolute meaning after death (for example through requiem).

In my research on alternatives to commemoration, I stumbled upon the early work of German Jewish philosopher and historian Gershom Scholem, particularly his work on the *language of lament*. Putting it very crudely, lament expresses the *border* between meaning and non-meaning, (I should note that these are not Scholem’s exact terms). The paradox here is the paradox of death within life – how can we signify something which is the absence of existence? How can we refer to or attribute meaning to something that doesn’t exist? Scholem brings up the language of lament in the context of the biblical book of Lamentations. The book of Lamentations is written mainly in alphabetical acrostics. An acrostic is a poem where by the first letters of each line combine to spell something, or form a pattern. I will discuss these acrostics at length later, but I will briefly say now that this hyper-formalization without purpose – that traces the border between total significance and the failure of meaning or understanding reminded me again of mani’s lists from *List of Consonants*.

I took contact with manuel very early in the process and asked if I could use some of these texts for musical pieces which would explore lament, and saying yes, they also sent me two more texts which have since become central to both my artistic work and my theoretical research. Discussions of these works and our ideas regarding them have become the basis for a rich and fruitful collaboration between the two of us, and just before the pandemic struck, I was even able to visit mani in Portland, Oregon. The two works sent to me were the collection of poems *Obsequies*, whose texts inspired my orchestral work *3 (n)Obsequies*, and the theoretical work *Incalculable Loss* which focuses, among other things, on Western language's inability to express meaning without implying an incalculable loss — Western language functions by reducing our experience into something “communicable”, and thereby loses an incalculable amount of experience in this process.

manuel is trained as a linguist, and is therefore constantly searching for languages or linguistic modes that can escape this reductive, sacrificial, mode that has become the norm in Western communication. From Aristotle to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (and even after), Western semiotics and linguistics has described language as a “representing” an external world, and thus “reducing”, or distilling, our experience of it through communication. abreu sees this mode of language as one where our experience is sacrificed to meaning. The “language of lament” could be one such language that escapes this sacrificial tendency. manuel's ancestors were slaves and indigenous, and for them, this research into how language is viewed and used as a reductive and sacrificial tool is intrinsically connected to colonialism. The lives and experiences of the indigenous peoples and slaves were the incalculable loss in the reductive process of making Western history. And so for them, the question of lamenting in a way that does not reduce or redact reality, is an important part of honoring their ancestors: lament does not sacrifice the (non)reality of death for the “good” of the living.

mani and I, while able to maintain a good intellectual exchange, were frustrated in our plans for a physical artistic collaboration. It was planned that they would visit over the summer and in January of 2021. This wasn't possible. We would have liked to collaborate on a series of theatrical music works. For example, I had the idea of composing a series of works where resonating bodies were filled with different materials, thus changing their resonance — a guitar could be filled with sand as they played laying on their back, or a violin could be filled with water.

The ritualistic movements involved in filling vessels with sand would need to be carried out by another performer or pair of performers.

Instead, our collaboration took a different form, which was markedly less theatrical. The pieces I wrote ended up being directed towards more normal concert presentation. While mani inspired the pieces, they were not directly involved in the compositional process. This is not to say, however, that the artistic quality was compromised, or that the works moved farther from the topic of the project, even if the connection may not be as explicit.

There is still one piece which doesn't use traditional instruments or notation, *Short and Long Piece*. This piece is still fairly traditional in that the two performers on the stage are sitting and making sound, but the visual element of that piece is very important. It is also worth noting that this piece does not use traditional musical notation, and was written in such a way that it could be performed by non-musicians. The documentation provided is a recording of me performing this piece at the Ultima festival 2020, with dancer Maja Wilhite-Hannisdal. This piece explores resonance and its absence and came out of our inquiry into vowels and consonants. At the end of this piece, a text emerges from the sounds. This text is mani's "A HEAD THAT IS ENTIRELY A BODY".

The other two pieces are more traditional in their instrumentation, as I took advantage of the opportunities afforded by the Norwegian Academy in order to have them performed. The orchestra piece was workshopped twice and performed as a run-through by Trondheim Symphony Orchestra. We were pleased to have this opportunity in light of the Covid situation, and I was very happy with the results. The piano trio was recorded in a workshop with Cikada Trio. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, we were not able to have a concert. The recording gives the listener a general idea of the piece, but I should stress that the time we had was extremely limited. I look forward to having the piece premiered when there is a return to "normal" concert settings. These pieces both use text written by mani, although in the case of the orchestra piece, this text is heavily redacted. The text in the orchestra piece, used in the second movement, is from a poem in list form called "MY FRIEND'S FUNERAL", from *List of Consonants*. For the piano trio, I set "Prayers" from *Obsequies*, as well as "WHAT COMES AFTER HOPE" and "HOW TO START BELIEVING" from *List of Consonants*. Text and speech are extremely important in these two works, and both works explore how the border between sound and

meaning can be both traced and threatened. Both pieces can be seen as containing elements of what might be called “anti-narrative”. A ritualistic nature is still alive in these works, and all of the texts can be seen as prayers. Prayer is central to the ideas both Gershom Scholem and Abreu. The texts used in these pieces are included in the preface to their respective scores (with the exception of *Short and Long Piece*, where it is in the score).

As is the case in the with allegory, what may appear at first to be a discussion of literary or linguistic phenomena in the written component is in fact just as much a discussion of a musical phenomenon. We have already established the central role opera plays in Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel*, but music is also central to Scholem’s essay on the Book of Lamentations, “On Lament and Lamentation”. The original German title is already explicitly musical, as lamentation is translated from “*Klagelied*”, revealing the musical and performative orientation of the essay.

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introducing this written component, and its scope.

Music is at the heart of both allegory and lament as conceived by Benjamin and Scholem, but by introducing my work in light of these thinkers and concepts, I would like to demonstrate how I approach music in terms of linguistic, textual, and philosophical problems and questions. These may not always find literal embodiment in “composition techniques”, and indeed, it is possible that lament and allegory *evade literal implementation altogether*.

This written/theoretical component of the masters project is not just background or analysis of the concepts at work in the compositions. This component will reveal connections between these concepts and present a constellation of figures, both musical and literary, which are alive in my work. As I have mentioned in the introduction thus far, I will introduce the opera and the collaboration with abreu in terms of two central “formal” concepts: allegory and lament. I will present these two central concepts in terms of the texts “Über Klage und Klagelied” by Scholem, and *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* by Benjamin. These texts are closely related, and “Über Klage und Klagelied”, written a few years prior to *Ursprung*, was incredibly influential on Benjamin. Scholem’s text, furthermore, can be seen as a reply, or development upon the ideas introduced in Benjamin’s “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen”.¹¹ I will not spend time here discussing which threads come from which thinker, but I do think that it is important to mention this here to mark some origins of my line of thought. This line is important for my orientation within the history of opera, and connects it to my work with lament. Scholem’s and Benjamin’s thought were directly influential upon the composer Luigi Nono, and Benjamin was an interlocutor with both Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, who created several seminal operas and vocal works together. My music responds to many elements of both Weill’s and Nono’s work, and generally the two composers have generally been influential in shaping what has become contemporary opera.

The next sections begin with presentations of the formal concepts of lament and allegory and then orientate these concepts in terms of music, indicating how music might work in these

¹¹ Schwebel, Paula. “The Tradition in Ruins”. In *Lament in Jewish Thought*, ed. Paula Schwebel and Ilit Ferber. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014.

forms and offering examples of musical works which I believe characterize lament and allegory. In the upcoming section section, on lament, I will examine lament as it is realized in two works by Henry Purcell. In the subsequent section, on allegory, I will discuss the work of Luigi Nono and Kurt Weill. Throughout these sections, I will touch on other genres that deal with death but that handle it in what I believe to be an intolerant or ironical way; namely Wagnerian opera, requiem, and commemorative works. Throughout the theoretical section I will reference my own work, and will explicitly discuss some of the formal and philosophical concepts that come up in my work such as *prayer*, *lists*, and *allegorical treatment of characters*, but I will refrain from using explicit musical examples from my own work when discussing these concepts, and I will also refrain from explicitly analyzing my work. I believe it is important that these ideas are read alongside my work, and hopefully this work and my compositions reflect and illuminate each-other. However, it is important that my music is not read as an explicit implementation of the ideas in this text, especially since this text focuses upon ideas that oppose the reductive nature of Western language and linguistics.

Following the advice of Eivind Buene, I organized this theoretical work in two alternative forms. Firstly, I am providing the document in essay form to facilitate a straight forward reading. However, the purpose of this work is not to claim one opinion or another about allegory and lament, and those two categories are by no means exclusive of one another. You could say that this essay, and my master project in general, is not “linear”. Rather, the purpose of this text is to present the aforementioned ideas in such away that allows them to illuminate each-other, as well as my work and the musical examples I have discussed. And so, I have also organized the work as a “constellation” on Research Forum. This constellation allows the reader to compare my writing to the cited musical examples and also my own music, and this allows them to make new connections between the different ideas and between the different musical materials. The idea of the “constellation” is also specifically related to the work of Walter Benjamin to be discussed in section IIB of this essay. The sections in the constellation are still labelled alphabetically to guide readers unfamiliar with the project and the ideas cited.