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Chapter 1

Music, Performance, Theatre: Christopher Fox's Stage Works

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A performer strides through the performance space in a regular and deliberate fashion, emphatically pronouncing syllables from time to time whose meaning and justification remains obscure: 'a – fa – a –fa – fa - ... - fanno'. At this point the performer suddenly pauses, and, with evident satisfaction, utters: 'Acheronte'. After a little while, the walk resumes, but the previously regular gait is now more akin to John Cleese's in Monty Python's 'Ministry of Silly Walks' sketch. The character of the vocal component undergoes change as well, without, however, making any more sense: 'a – ge – a –sch – a –de - ... - nachtwacht'.

This is the beginning of Christopher Fox's 'Patrol', No. 3 in a collection of twelve pieces for solo voice, entitled *Catalogue irraisoné* (1999-2001) – the deliberate misspelling hinting at *son* ('sound') adding another level to the punning title. *Catalogue* is, in turn, a component of a larger 'installation for ensemble' called *Everything You need to Know*. The introduction to the score explains the principal elements of the composition (see also example 1):

'Patrol' is a survey for voice and feet in twelve sections. The voice speaks the text on the upper staff while the feet move in the rhythms notated on the lower staff. It should appear as if the performer is pacing out the performance space with the word(s) spoken at the end of each section a confirmation that that pass through the space has been successfully completed. The directions taken by the feet are at the performer's discretion but each section should pursue a single path, lateral, longitudinal, circling etc.

The score itself clarifies that the vocal elements are meant to represent different languages, and indeed individual words can be recognised. The two sections described above are dedicated to Italian and Dutch respectively; they are followed by English, Romanian, Spanish, Finnish, French, and German (although not all are specified), with some languages being used in more than one section.

The variations between the sections are quite subtle: while there is no indication of relative pitch, the articulation and dynamics of the voice part is subject to a number of modifications: there are two types of vocal production, four different articulations (plus non-specified), and seven dynamic values between pianissimo and forte. Arguably, however, the part for the feet is more expressive, ranging from the regular crotchets, characterised as ‘pacing’, of the first, Italian, section (which returns later on, although in conjunction with French), through various more complex dotted and syncopated rhythms, variously specified as ‘stumbling’, ‘tiptoe’, ‘faltering’ and ‘skipping’ to the ‘haltering’ minims of the fifth, Spanish, section.

Presumably so as not to overcomplicate the performance, there are no dynamics or articulation instructions for the feet part. Almost needless to say, the piece explores the various permutations between these elements. The relation between the parts is crucial: some sections, such as No. 7, are dominated by the feet, with only few vocal interjections; others, such as No. 10, are more balanced, although none is predominantly vocal. The rhythms resulting from the intersections between the two parts are often complex, with the final section, No. 12, probably creating the greatest performance difficulties. Given that we normally perceive words and walking movements on different levels, it is doubtful that this rhythmic complexity will be perceived as such, however.

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW

Catalogue irraisonné

(3) PATROL

Christopher Fox

① $\text{♩} = 100$

(pacing)
R L R L R L R L

FEET

f
a
ITALIAN
fa
a

mp < f
fa fa f-a a fa fa

mf ② $\text{♩} = 92$

mp < f
f-a a fa-nno
Acheronte a ge a sch
DUTCH
(stumbling)

Example 1: Christopher Fox, 'Patrol', beginning

What interests me more, in any case, is how, without any plot or decipherable verbal expression, the performance establishes a number of distinct characters: the self-assurance of Nos. 1 and 9, the flustered shyness of No. 10, the sedate bumbling of No. 2, the lethargy of No. 5 and so forth. These character changes remain subtle, however. At no point does the performer stop and shout, for instance: just like the dynamics (remaining in the narrow band between mezzo piano and forte for most of the piece, before dropping to a pianissimo whisper at the very end), the tempo stays within a restricted spectrum between 92 and 126 crotchet beats per minute. While these parameters don't provide a comprehensive indication

of the range of effects and affects within the piece, they are representative of a preference for slight modifications over drastic contrasts and dramatic gestures.

In eschewing the trappings of a plot, constant dramatic personae, role play (at least in a conventional sense) and the separation between stage and orchestra pit (whereby the plot is enacted by singer-actors to the accompaniment of instrumentalists), the piece follows clearly in the tradition of experimental rather than operatic forms of music theatre. Accordingly, there is no separation between music-making and theatrical action: sound-producing actions become theatrical actions and vice versa. This is most clearly established by the part for the feet. On one level, the performer executes precisely notated musical rhythms, but on another the resulting action – a particular form of walking – can be understood as a theatrical action (cf. Heile 2013). Note, too, that, although there is no pre-existing story that is told through music-theatrical means, the performance is not entirely a-semantic: as outlined above, as audience members, we are likely to attribute characters or personalities to the individual sections, and they may well suggest little stories or scenarios to us.

The vocal part is obviously key in this regard: again, the use of nonsense or vocalise syllables and of isolated words (more often than not in a language we don't understand) may suggest emotional expression, such as tenderness, grief or rage, and lend character to the performance persona. In addition, we may pick up some of the words uttered (or think we do), thus associating certain ideas with the performance. We are semiotic creatures and, consciously or not, we cannot but pick up and interpret clues all the time: from body language and facial expression through manner and tone of voice to the actual sounds or words uttered.

In operatic forms of music theatre, the plot acts as a master trope that lends coherence to these diverse elements: the character and the dramatic situation are expressed musically and enacted accordingly. Despite her considerable complexity as an operatic character, we can empathise or even identify with Donna Elvira (in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*), for instance, since, in a successful performance, all her performative actions can be understood as credible expressions of her character in response to the situations she finds herself in. Although this sort of dramatic coherence is questioned and occasionally undermined in modernist and avant-gardist forms of opera, it is never entirely abandoned. At the other extreme, instrumental musical performance in the western classical tradition is informed by an ideal of neutrality and transparency, whereby we are enjoined to disregard the physical actions and potential idiosyncracies of a performer to concentrate solely on the sound produced (that this ideal conflicts with other tendencies does not altogether negate its importance).

Neither of these performance modes are applicable in the case of 'Patrol', and their associated types of reception seem inappropriate. The performer's pacing and vocal utterances go beyond any neutral execution of musical materials and call for a semantic interpretation, but we are not given a key that would allow us to 'unlock' any hidden meaning and lend coherence to the different elements. The result is a radical openness: both performer and perceiver are given a lot of freedom to make of the elements what they will – or, expressed negatively, they have no choice but to make the most of the few hints they get. As regards the performer, this freedom is already inherent in the instructions given, notably in relation to the direction of the walk. Yet far more significant is what is usually considered interpretation or characterisation. A performer can execute the prescribed actions as neutrally as possible, with the blank expression and dead-pan delivery – the path typically taken by Cage's own as well as, following him, David Tudor's performances of the works of John

Cage and thereafter often and arguably erroneously associated with experimental music theatre *tout court*.¹ By contrast, he or she can draw attention to their own presence (often characterised as ‘charismatic’ performance) or, through body language, facial expressions, tone of voice and other means, enact certain personalities.

Michael Kirby (1972) has very usefully problematized the common perception of a simple opposition between acting (‘being someone else’) and not-acting (‘being oneself’), instead describing a spectrum with five main types and an indefinite number of intermediate positions. Thus, at the not-acting pole, in ‘non-matrixed performance’, the character ‘is merely himself and is not imbedded, as it were, in matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place and time’ (4). This is how Fetterman (1996, p.209) characterises Cage’s own performance of his pieces. It seems to me that this does not fully describe the performance mode of ‘Patrol’, however – or, at the very least, it does not adequately cover the range of options open to a performer (whether it adequately covers Cage performances is a different matter). In ‘non-matrixed representation’, Kirby’s (1972, p.5) next type, performers, like in non-matrixed performance, do not act; however, certain representational elements, such as costumes or the stage décor impose a representational framework on them (e.g. a man wearing a Stetson in a saloon is likely to be viewed as a cowboy, whether they intentionally impersonate one or not). ‘Received acting’ is typical of extras: the performers typically don’t do much we would associate with acting as an art form; they simply perform

¹ In questioning the primacy of Tudor’s performance style in particular, I do not wish to minimise his achievements as a performer and as Cage’s most influential interpreter. I don’t deny that Tudor’s performances are overwhelmingly coherent and convincing and that Cage’s evident approval of them lends them a certain authority. Nevertheless, they represent only *one* way of performing the theatrical works of Cage and other like-minded composers and practitioners. Moreover, Cage’s apparent preference for Tudor may have more to do with the latter’s fastidiousness and discipline than with his style (or lack thereof). There is no reason why Cage would not have been happy with a radically different approach if that had been as thoroughly prepared as Tudor’s – if indeed we wish to grant composers a privileged authority on the performance of their work (which, on the whole, I don’t). For an account that tacitly privileges Tudor, see Fetterman (1996), for an authoritative study of the Cage-Tudor collaboration see Iddon (2013).

certain actions, but the overall situation, the décor and costume and so forth, again frame their actions so they are perceived as representational. 'Simple acting', then, involves elements of make-believe, imitation, impersonation and pretence; Kirby (1972, p.6) uses someone who 'pretends to put on a jacket that does not exist or feigns being ill' as examples. 'Complex acting', finally, involves the creation of a fully-fledged character.

It seems clear that the performance mode of 'Patrol' can, depending on the performer, run the full gamut between non-matrixed performance and simple acting, and it is this undefinable nature of what the performer is doing and what, if anything, this may represent which makes the piece interesting (or, at least, this is one of the reasons).

Likewise, audience members can concentrate either on the vocal part or the feet, the musical elements or its theatrical qualities, try to (re)construct a plot or remain content with a more abstract sequence of actions and events – or, indeed, switch between these strategies (what is typically impossible is to combine them for any length of time).

One result of this openness is a non-hierarchical interplay of the different theatrical means, what Lehmann (2006, pp.86–88) calls 'parataxis'. Whereas, following Aristotle (n. d., p.120), in traditional drama (and opera) the most important element is the plot, with the performers' actions, cloths, stage décor, lighting etc. given successively marginal supporting roles which are only given their function by the text,² in 'Patrol' there is little indication of what is more important, the walking or the singing, and which holds the key to explain the other. Likewise, seemingly incidental elements, such as the direction of the walk and performance gestures,

² In his *Poetics*, Aristotle (n. d., p.120) establishes the following hierarchy, which 'determine the quality' of 'every Tragedy': Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song. Although the exact terms cannot be applied to the present case, the Aristotelian legacy of the hierarchies of traditional drama is beyond doubt.

can take on great significance. Fox's introduction (cited above) is revealing in this regard: in speaking of voice and feet separately, the composer, almost certainly knowingly, downplays the performer's bodily integrity and the habitual coordination between their various body parts. The instructions seem to discourage an emphatically theatrical performance or semantic interpretation. Nevertheless, as outlined above, although the two parts don't necessarily cohere in the kind of overall bodily-verbal expressive language that is instinctive for us (or most of us), their rhythmic correlation makes it seem unlikely that their combination is entirely accidental or arbitrary.

The piece openly announces its chief influence: the work of Mauricio Kagel, notably 'Pas de cinq' (1965) and *Staatstheater* (1970). 'Pas de cinq' provides the model for the part for the feet. Kagel's composition consists entirely of rhythms to be executed by walking, to which walking sticks are added to introduce further complexity. It is for five performers, whose directions of walking are prescribed, outlining a pentagram; different flooring materials provide timbral variety. Fox's reduction to one performer (without walking stick) notwithstanding, the indebtedness to his model, down to such details as notation, is unmistakable. Somewhat paradoxically, even his decision not to prescribe the directions of movement seems informed by the Kagel: the quite detailed discussion of the issue (in relation to the brevity of the text as a whole) can be seen as an acknowledgement and the solution offered as a response to the performance difficulties of 'Pas de cinq' (it is notoriously difficult if not impossible to both execute the rhythms with any precision *and* to create a theatrically convincing, purposefully choreographed performance; normally a choice or compromise has to be made between the two).

This accounts for the part for feet alone, but the combination of vocal part and feet has a Kagelian precedent too. In *Staatstheater*, there are vocal parts (from the components ‘Ensemble’ and ‘Debut’) like Fox’s in ‘Patrol’, consisting largely of vocalises on nonsense syllables, and which can be freely combined with theatrical actions (from ‘Saison’), including walking in specially made sound-producing shoes. Even the way in which a work can consist of various components which can be freely combined, finds its precedent in Kagel’s practice in *Staatstheater* and a number of other works like that. Fox’s instruction: ‘The movements of *Catalogue irraisonné* may be performed individually, as a group, with some or all of *Generic Compositions #1-7*, or as part of *Everything You Need to Know*’ almost uncannily echoes the analogous guidelines provided by Kagel – with the difference that Fox adds another layer. Even the title ‘Patrol’ is strongly and presumably deliberately reminiscent of the names of individual actions and events in *Staatstheater* – although both *Generic Compositions* and *Everything You Need to Know* are Fox through and through.

This influence is not an isolated or incidental phenomenon: as he has outlined himself (Fox 2007, pp.103–104), Fox has studied Kagel’s work intensively; this also involved performances of some of his works, including ‘Pas de cinq’ and *Staatstheater* (specifically ‘Debut’ and ‘Saison’ which are the most relevant in this context), and this influence is perceptible in many of his works. Indeed, two of his earliest acknowledged compositions, *darkly* and *Bewegung* (both from 1981) are music-theatre works inspired by Kagel, and the former is also dedicated to him (Pace 1998, p.33). They remain the only acknowledged music-theatre works in the catalogue on the composer’s own website and, presumably as a consequence, on *Grove Online* (Fox n.d.; Pace & Saunders n.d.). While such immediate impact would cease during the following years, the example of ‘Patrol’ demonstrates that Kagel’s music-theatrical work would remain a crucial influence on Fox – indeed,

interestingly, the models remain largely the same, so that the temporal gap between model and response has grown larger (Fox has acknowledged that he found Kagel's more recent compositions less interesting: Fox 2007, p.104).

None of this is to suggest that Fox lacks originality in following Kagel's model. The actual *écriture* or idiomatic profile of both the voice and feet parts carry Fox's signature, as do the precise nature of their interaction and the dialectics of prescribed and indeterminate elements. The rhythmic coordination between voice and feet or the range of possible performance modes from non-matrixed performance to simple acting (at least within one piece by the same performer), for instance, are difficult to conceive in a work by Kagel.

At the same time, Fox's open acknowledgement of such influences is refreshing in a world of contemporary composition still in thrall to under-reflected notions of originality and individual voice. Pace (1998, p.33) has argued that Fox's open embrace of often at least superficially widely diverse sources and models can be understood as a critique of the continuing hold of late-romantic ideas on contemporary music, and the way Fox not only seeks out and adopts a relevant model but also gleefully acknowledges this practice explicitly, rather than, as is the general practice in the culture Pace describes, disguising such influences by subsuming them under a personal style, certainly chimes with that analysis.

In any case, it would be misleading to conceive of Fox's relation to Kagel as one of compositional dependency: what he found was, at least in part, a kindred spirit. As he described in a personal communication, he 'was fascinated by theatre long before [he] discovered there was something called "music-theatre" and that his 'conception of music performance has always been that it is theatrical anyway – even concert music is innately

theatrical (but maybe not orchestral music?)’ (Fox 2013). Both the fascination with the stage and the recognition that any staged performance is inherently theatrical are aspects that Fox shares with Kagel and which may go some way in explaining why he would be drawn to his work. He did, however, encounter his work, like other classics of music theatre, such as Peter Maxwell Davies’s *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969), ‘back-to-front’, as he describes it himself, from looking at scores or listening to recordings before ever seeing a live performance (Fox 2013). As a part-time teacher at Ikley College from 1979 to ’83, Fox produced many music theatre pieces with his students, including, in addition to Kagel, John Cage’s *Aria* (1958), Dieter Schnebel’s *Nostalgie* (1962), his own *darkly* and an unidentified piece by Roger Marsh (Fox 2013) – his lack of exposure to such pieces in performance may well have encouraged a fresh approach. Pace (1998, p.33) reports that Fox ‘found that most music-theatre he had previously encountered seemed to consist either of performance situations going wrong or of people becoming deranged’; the latter category also applies to such a highly regarded composition as Davies’s *Eight Songs*. To be fair, these categories also cover quite a lot of Kagel’s output, but there is a whole lot besides, notably in *Staatstheater* and ‘Pas de cinq’.

It goes without saying that my earlier observation about the fusion of music-making and theatrical action and of the performative creation of a persona with specific characteristics by way of executing largely standard musical notation hold true not only of ‘Patrol’ individually, but of experimental music theatre as a whole; it is this which connects the piece out with that tradition. Indeed, Fox (2013) has acknowledged that ‘[n]otating the walking rhythm but not saying anything about characterisation came directly from [Kagel’s] “Pas de Cinq” where, of course, one discovers that the walking and stick rhythms more or less determine how one “plays” each character in each section.’ Once again, this does not make ‘Patrol’ a derivative

work, any more than does composing an opera or a work for orchestra or sound installation or any other work which involves generic conventions or traditions. No piece is entirely *sui generis*, and the crucial question is *how* it responds to the conventions or traditions it references.

But Kagel is not the only composer of experimental music theatre whose direct influence can be detected in Fox's work. A similarly seminal role is played by the individual who has the greatest claim to be regarded as the inventor of the genre (if that's what it is): John Cage – whose *Aria* was also among the pieces directed by Fox at Ilkley College.

something to do with belief

The legacy of Cage's theatrical conception comes to the fore in *something to do with belief* (2010). It is a particularly austere and pure form of experimental music theatre, in that the theatrical dimension is entirely and directly derived from instrumental playing. Indeed, consisting as it does solely of instrumental playing and (crucially as will be seen) preparations for playing, it is not necessarily recognized as music theatre at all, recalling Fox's conviction that musical performance is theatrical in any case. Although this belief is certainly shared with Kagel as well, the permeable nature of the boundary between musical and theatrical performance as practiced in *something to do with belief* recalls Cage above anyone else: in such compositions as *Water Music* (1952), *Music Walk* (1958), or *Water Walk* (1959), not to mention such notorious pieces as the 'happening' at Black Mountain College (1952), *4'33"* (1952) or *0'00"* (1962) trying to determine where music ends and theatre begins or vice versa is almost beside the point.

As the introduction to the score states, *something*

involves five musicians playing cello, clarinet, electric guitar, percussion and piano for 24 minutes. Each musician has six actions to perform, each of which can be a single event or a series of events, and each of which involves some preparation. Each set of ACTIONS and PREPARATIONS occurs at two different points during the course of a performance.

Here is a randomly chosen example from the part for the electric guitarist:

Bound over

PREPARATION: laying the instrument flat on your knees, put bubble wrap around the fingerboard, securing it loosely with parcel tape.

ACTION: with the two hands arched, the tips of their fingers as close together as possible, tap on the strings as if touch-typing at speed.

PREPARATION: add more parcel tape to the wrapping, making it a little tighter. bubble wrap around the fingerboard, securing it loosely with parcel tape.

ACTION: carry on touch-typing.

And so on.

As explained, each instrumentalist has got six such actions. These are coordinated on a temporal grid (reproduced in Figure 1), which arranges actions, each lasting between five seconds and one minute, in five-second intervals. The grid does not associate parts with instruments or specify the actions to be executed; the latter are only identified with letters. The performers therefore have to select their part and associate letters with actions, taking care that the chosen actions can be performed in the time and sequence allotted to them (for example, the action cited above is probably better executed *after* actions performed on the instruments without any preparations applied or with preparations that can be quickly undone). They are also asked to make full use of the performance space, with, as the score demands, ‘the musicians as far apart as possible’.

2'00"	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45	50	55	3'00"	
			B								B		
B			B			B			B			B	
			B			C					C		
			A					A			A		
			B					B					B

Figure 1: Time grid for the period between 2'00" and 3'00" from Christopher Fox, *something to do with belief*: the five vertically arranged lines represent parts (assigned to instruments by the performers), the letters the actions (again, the association between letters and actions is undertaken by the performers)

As the composer's programme text explains, the piece explores different means of sound production, involving lots of unconventional materials as in the example given, and, specifically, 'the relationship between sounds produced with intention and those produced incidentally'. Although for the players, the distinction between (preferably silent) preparations and (sounding) actions is clearly significant, this cannot be clear to the audience.

It is easy to see how the piece responds to the traditions and conventions established by the likes of Cage and Kagel. The instructions for actions do not distinguish between those traditionally associated with theatrical performance or musical performance. On one hand, no theatrical performance in a traditional sense and certainly no role-play is required of the performers at all; all they are asked to do is play their instruments (if somewhat unconventionally at times). On the other, however, the often very elaborate preparations are obviously an integral part of the composition and its performance and cannot be solely legitimated by the sound produced as a result – at least not from the audience's point of view. The spatial arrangement of the players, 'as far apart as possible' (see above), will likewise increase the theatrical effect of the piece. In other words, like similar examples of experimental music theatre from the work of Kagel, Cage, Schnebel and others, the piece operates within the conventions of concert performance, but the complicated preparations and

the often minimal sounding result undermine exclusively aesthetic perception, a process aided by the slightly unconventional seating arrangements. Audiences are bound to ask ‘what is going on?’ and direct their *visual* attention to the preparations just as much as they attend *acoustically* to the music produced.

Kirby’s distinction between different modes of performance is once again instructive. Among his examples for non-matrixed performance are the stage attendants of Japanese Noh and Kabuki (Kirby 1972, p.3). Although they are visible and active on stage *during* performance, a knowledgeable audience is aware that they are not considered *part of* the performance (although this is not the only example given by Kirby for what is perhaps the haziest of his categories, it does show why associating experimental music theatre with non-matrixed performance may be simplistic). The preparations in *something* are closely related: they take place within the temporal and spatial framework of performance, but they do not form a part of it – with the difference that there is a peculiar form of reverse dramatic irony at play, whereby, unlike the audience in Noh or Kabuki, audience members cannot reliably distinguish between what is part of the performance and what isn’t. This may be quite clear and conventional in some instances – detuning of strings for instance – but less so in others, and Fox’s stated intention (in the programme text) to ‘blur’ the boundary between intentional and incidental sound indicates that this uncertainty as to the framing of the performance is an integral part of the conception of the piece.

There is another theoretical concept from the realm of performance theory which can help illuminate the mode of performance in *something*. According Richard Schechner (2006, p.22), there are four types of performance: ‘being’, ‘doing’, ‘showing doing’ and ‘explaining showing doing’. The preparations fall into the category of ‘doing’ (everyday actions),

whereas the actions are best understood as ‘showing doing’: ‘pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing’ (performance).

Finally, the piece exhibits a phenomenon I, following the Brazilian theatre-practitioner Augusto Boal, call ‘metaxis’ (Heile 2013). For his part referencing an Ancient Greek term for a state of in-between-ness and a continual process of mediation between two states, Boal defines the term as ‘the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image’ (Boal 1995, p.43). While Boal’s use of the term within the context of his politically and pedagogically motivated ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ is more specific, what I am referring to here is the way our perception of the performers’ activities fluctuates. Thus, we may perceive their actions as part of the performance or not (in the case of the preparations), primarily as theatre (a series of actions or events) or as music (purposefully produced sound), and consequently attend to it primarily semantically or aesthetically. Thus, our perception may be closer to one or the other pole, or, typically, oscillate between them.

As already hinted at, I regard metaxis as one of the fundamental properties of experimental music theatre and Fox’s employment of it is certainly reminiscent of the classics of the genre, but the way the effect is produced is specific to each individual case, and the distinction between preparation and action in *something* is a particularly fascinating example of the fundamental ambiguity produced by metaxis.

The use of a temporal grid and the (relatively limited) elements of indeterminacy clearly point to the Cageian legacy. Indeed, in response to an earlier discussion of the piece (Heile 2013), Fox has pointed out to me that the piece is ‘at least at one level, my version of

[Cage's] *Theatre Piece* – Cage says you have to make a list of activities in which you'd like to be involved and that's what I did.' (Fox 2012b) In actual fact, for all I can see, despite some interventions, mostly designed to reduce practical difficulties, *something* is a perfectly valid performance version of *Theatre Piece*. Cage's work is for 1 to 8 performers (so five is pretty much bang in the middle). It is one of Cage's time-bracket compositions: performers are given rulers with different scales with which to measure the time-brackets indicated spatially in the score (although how they use these and whether they should be coordinated is left to them). In addition, they are asked to create a list of twenty titles – consisting of a verb and/or a noun – which indicate specific actions which are written on numbered cards. These are then assigned to (apparently randomly generated) numbers given in the score.

Seen in this way, what Fox did in *something* was to narrow down the (vast) range of possibilities provided by the Cage to arrive at a quite specific piece. The most far-reaching decision taken was to carry out only sound-producing actions on instruments and their preparation, and in its single-minded concentration on this aspect, the piece is clearly the result of Fox's individual creative agency. Cage's instructions are rather vague in this (like almost any other) regard, but it seems that making music, 'understood as the production of sounds' (Cage 1977), is not the only possible type of action, and the kind of minutely detailed and complex manoeuvres envisaged by Fox are probably unusual as a response to Cage's rather bare instructions. Furthermore, Fox's temporal grid is fully determinate and coordinated, which is something that Cage's notation may allow but certainly does not instigate or facilitate. On the other hand, the distinction between preparations and the actions themselves is envisaged in Cage's instructions: 'Preparations for the action may be made at any time (outside or within the bracket)' (Cage 1977), although this is clearly not the kind of characteristic feature that it would become in Fox's version. Interestingly, this aspect, the

‘on-off dimension of the piece’, as Fox (2012b) has called it, is itself an homage to Martin Creed, whose *Work No. 227, the lights going on and off* controversially won the 2001 Turner Prize, and it preceded the structural framework based on Cage.

In addition, Fox has significantly reduced the number of actions and written them out in a score (replacing a rather baffling system of cards envisaged by Cage), an intervention which simplifies performance while at the same time imposing his own vision on it. Arguably, the most controversial element in his version is the extent of his artistic control: although some decisions are left to the performers, these are relatively marginal, considering that Cage left the creation of actions and their coordination to the performers. Having said that, although it is generally assumed that it is in the spirit of the piece and Cage’s aesthetics in general for the individual performers to act more or less autonomously (although a degree of coordination is necessary, principally to avoid collisions, cf. Iddon 2013, pp.148–59), there are good reasons to opt for a more directorial approach to Cage’s work (this piece and others). In any case, this is something of a thought experiment, since Fox did not openly advertise *something* as a performance version of the Cage but as his own work with an independent title, so it should not be judged according to its faithfulness to Cage’s explicit instructions and implicit precepts – nevertheless, the degree to which the piece can be said to act as a performance version of *Theatre Piece* is certainly instructive.

Widerstehen

With his *Widerstehen*, premiered in November 2012 in Freiburg by ensemble recherche, Fox has also turned to more traditional, operatic conceptions of music theatre. *Widerstehen* reinstates the centrality of a narrative libretto, the constitution of continuous dramatic

characters through the union of singing and acting and the categorical distinction between stage and orchestra pit. Nevertheless, it characteristically studiously eschews the high drama and grand gesture that one may associate with the genre, even in its more intimate form as chamber opera. Fox (2012a) has described the ideas behind and part of the composition of the work in detail in an easily accessible form, so I need only relate those aspects that are essential to understanding what follows.³

Over roughly 45 minutes, the work tells the story of Fox's aunt, Elisabeth von Thadden, who was executed during the Third Reich. She had been a school mistress until the Nazis closed her school down for 'failing to provide a suitably National Socialist education' (Fox 2012a). Her downfall finally came when an *agent provocateur* persuaded her to ensign him with a letter to German exiles in Switzerland and subsequently denounced her. In a personal communication, Fox (2013) has likened the work to a 'documentary ... because all the material is the product of "research"; imagining took a secondary role.'

Accordingly, the libretto is compiled from original (and hence German) sources, notably court documents and letters of the two protagonists: Elisabeth herself and a female prison officer (in a speaking role), who, unusually, stayed with her in the execution cell. To this are added lines from Paul Gerhardt's sacred song 'Befiel du deine Wege', a text central to Lutheranism and set in Bach's *Matthew Passion*, and which Elisabeth is known to have sung on her way to the guillotine (although she is primarily quoted singing 'Mach End, o Herr', fittingly the final, twelfth verse, whereas Bach only set the first). As a consequence, not unlike an oratorio, the work avoids direct dramatic presentation in favour of retrospective and

³ There is a certain irony in the fact that the story behind the opera was published in a British newspaper, while the work itself has yet to be seen here. It's as if a human interest story is one thing but a fully-fledged chamber opera quite another. Incidentally, referring to von Thadden as a 'resistance fighter', as *The Guardian* does in its rather lurid headline, is problematic. Her resistance was mostly passive and strictly non-violent, as Fox's rather more sober and nuanced assessment in the piece itself makes clear.

reflective narration. As our witness, as she is called in the libretto ('Zeugin'), the officer provides most of the factual account, whereas Elisabeth's role is more lyrical (both musically and in terms of text).

In the prologue (scene 1, 'Einleitung'), the prison officer dictates von Thadden's personal details, accusation and sentence (typed out accurately by the percussionist). During the next scenes the women relate their encounter in the bus ferrying Elisabeth to her execution cell (scene 2, 'bei ihr zu bleiben'); their bonding, silently holding hands over a sustained chord (scene 3, 'Pause'); reminiscences from Elisabeth's life, such as her upbringing and career (scene 4, 'Erinnern (Trieglaff-Wieblingen)'); and her betrayal (scene 5, 'Verrat (Teegesellschaft)'). Scene 6, then, comes closest to an aria, depicting Elisabeth's farewell. Scene 7 is 'the most operatic', according to Fox (Fox 2012a) himself. It is certainly the most powerfully dramatic. At the same time, it is remarkably abstract, again avoiding theatrical representation and illusion. It consists of a collage of recordings by the notorious President of the *Volksgerichtshof* ('People's Court'), Roland Freisler, who conducted von Thadden's trial, with increasing amounts of white noise mixed in, piped onto the dark stage. While the scene in a sense 'documents' what happened at the trial, it thus refuses to re-enact it. The final scene (No. 8, 'Ende') is a purely instrumental epilogue, a haunting farewell by the oboe d'amore, softly accompanied by the other instruments. Despite its valedictory qualities, it comes as a shock when the oboe's chant finally falls silent.

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of Fox's compositional techniques in *Widerstehen*, but the role of the music in the dramaturgic conception is obviously of some importance. What is perhaps most striking is the avoidance of surface complexity: every number consists of one continuous, characteristic and usually transparent accompanimental

texture. There are no stark contrasts, build-ups or obvious climaxes. Scenes 2 and 6, for instance, are in a simple 4/4, with no smaller rhythmic values than quavers (in a moderate tempo of 72), and there are no triplets or other irrational values in the entire work. The vocal line is of similarly simple, unaffected lyricism, avoiding both the leaden parlando and the constant hysterical hyper-espressivo that are among the most problematic aspects of modernist opera. Although the composition is not minimalist per se, its structural simplicity and textural continuity seem to owe a lot to minimalist influences. Of a piece with the avoidance of theatrical presentation and high drama, the music seems to embody the calmness that the prison officer (both the real one and her re-enactment) found so striking in Elisabeth. Thus, the music's slightly detached quality should not be mistaken for coldness – 'serenity' is probably the best word, certainly for the two final scenes.

One time-honoured technique employed by Fox is to represent Elisabeth herself in the music, through the use of musical letters (English, German and solmisation): E – Li (A sharp in solmisation) – S (E flat in German) – A – B – E – T (B in solmisation) – H (B in German) (Fox 2013). With its packed semitones a fifth apart, it is a peculiar sound, which, in full, or in part, in its original form or in various transformations underlies much of the work. It is sustained throughout the entire first scene and 'crystallised' out of shifting chords at the end of scene 2 to be sustained in its original form throughout scene 3, where, as outlined, it accompanies the two women as they reach out and hold one another's hands – a striking representation of female solidarity across stark divides, reminiscent (despite a rather different context) of the Countess and Susanna in Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro* (both are male representations, obviously, but, for once, arguably benign ones). In scene 4, it reappears right at the beginning, if in different instrumentation and voicing, and all subsequent chords seem transformations of that opening sonority – which itself returns frequently. The same can be

said about scene 5, the betrayal at the tea party, which again opens with the Elisabeth chord in yet another manifestation (both in terms of voicing and instrumentation), which is in turn successively transformed throughout the piece. Scene 6, Elisabeth's farewell aria ('Festen Schrittes') is a little bit more complex in this regard: here the chord is built up successively as a sustained sonority behind other layers, starting with a middle-register B and adding other notes (held only in the piano, which of course cannot sustain the notes without the strings being set in sympathetic vibration by the other instruments). In the epilogue, too, it is present in the background throughout much of the scene, and indeed, makes up the final sonority.

Another crucial feature is quotation, or, rather, intertextual reference. Fox (2012a) has drawn attention to Elisabeth's singing of 'Mach End, o Herr', to the melody also used for 'Oh Haupt voll Blut und Wunden' in Bach's *Matthew Passion*. Fragments from Gerhardt's poem are interspersed with material from her letters throughout Elisabeth's part, but come fully to the surface in Elisabeth's farewell aria in scene 6 (which in some way represents her walk to the guillotine). Here the text is accompanied by a musical reference to the *Matthew Passion*, although not to the chorale (whose melody is never directly quoted), but to the aria 'Ich will dir mein Herze schenken', whose opening ascending major scale with flattened seventh (transposed from G to E) provides much of the motivic and tonal basis of the scene, giving it a Mixolydian colouring (although, in the Bach, the flattened seventh is part of the secondary dominant seventh of IV, thus not strictly an indication of modality, although this harmonic progression recurs conspicuously often) – at least until the B flat and E flat from the Elisabeth chord are sounded (see example 2). A related feature is the use of the type of figuration used by the obbligato oboe in the final aria of the *Matthew Passion*, 'Mache dich, mein Herze' – with different notes and with none of the harmonic implications of the original, but to similarly heart-rending effect (Fox 2013). In this way, most of the musical material is in some

way associated with Elisabeth: the Elisabeth chord providing an outside perspective as it were (it is only we as the audience who can hear it and associate it with her), the Bach references an interior perspective (music she herself sang and could be expected to recognise).

35

af1 *pp*

ob d'a *pp*

bcl *pp*

perc *p* *mf*

pno Place e-bow 3 on B flat string

G
— auf, gib dei-nem Schmer-ze und Sor-gen gu-te Nacht.

35

vn

vla

vc

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score, page 35. It features eight staves. The top staff is for oboe (af1), followed by oboe da caccia (ob d'a), bassoon (bcl), and percussion (perc). The fifth staff is for piano (pno), with a performance instruction 'Place e-bow 3 on B flat string' in a box. The sixth staff is for guitar (G), with the lyrics '— auf, gib dei-nem Schmer-ze und Sor-gen gu-te Nacht.' written below it. The bottom three staves are for violin (vn), viola (vla), and cello (vc). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, dynamics (pp, p, mf), and articulation marks.

Example 2: Christopher Fox, *Widerstehen*, scene 6, bars 34-39. Note the preponderance of scale movement (in Mixolydian on E) as well as the incipient Elisabeth chord in the piano, alto flute and bass clarinet.

A more incidental reference occurs in scene 5, in which the Gestapo agent Dr Reckzeh is belittled through the use of the rocking cross-rhythm of the knight on the hobby-horse from Schumann's *Scenes from Childhood* (Fox 2012a). Given that all that Fox retains from the original is that very cross-rhythm, which is even multiplied by phase-shifting it by one quaver without a clear downbeat being provided, this reference must surely be undetectable without the composer's indication.

Although, due to Fox's evident desire to tell his aunt's story, *Widerstehen* is in some respects a more traditional operatic work, it characteristically avoids direct theatrical enactment on the level of dramaturgy, and high drama and grand rhetorical gestures in its use of music. It is too early to speak of a 'reconciliation' with traditional operatic modes. There is no reason to assume that this new interest has replaced Fox's earlier concern with experimental music theatre. The two can exist side by side, and, indeed, according to his catalogue of works (Fox n.d.), the genesis of *something* and *Widerstehen* overlapped.

In any case, regardless of the genre or sub-genre of the work in question, a sensitivity to the theatrical effects of musical performance is never far from Fox's mind and it characterises many if not all of his works, even those with few if any explicitly theatrical elements. In some respects, experimental music theatre is less a genre of its own but a way of understanding and apprehending musical performance as such.

It is my belief that what distinguishes significant composers after 1945 is an appreciation that the act of composition is about more than notes on paper. After all, musical notation does not simply signify sound, but it encodes physical actions and sets in motion a sequence of events in a given space and time, in the process enacting complex social relations between performers and audiences. His stage works, and indeed more conventional concert works illustrate Fox's profound understanding of these issues.

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