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Sorcha Gibson

Supervisor: Jan Dušek

Opponent: Vlasta Koubská

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Sorcha Gibson

Vedoucí práce: Jan Dušek

Oponent práce: Vlasta Koubská

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Abstract

Uncharted Waters: Olga Neuwirth and Women in Surrealism and Opera analyses Olga Neuwirth's music-theatre piece *Bählamms Fest* within the context of women in Surrealism and Opera, as a basis for understanding the conceptual set and costume design process undertaken by author Sorch Gibson. Female surrealists and their importance in the present, as well as women's historical and contemporary standing within opera is examined in relation to *Bählamms Fest*, which has immense political and historical significance within art, opera, music, and history. *Bählamms Fest* is interpreted as a multifaceted music-theatre composition, which builds on existing artist histories of women, and the composer's own female experiences to form a deeply layered and extensive art work, while recontextualizing the female experience. Through her dissemination of Leonora Carrington's play and body of work, as well as her collaboration with Elfriede Jelinek, a talented author in her own right; *Bählamms Fest* is an important piece of political music-theatre which seeks to elevate women's voices and importance within the arts for the present.

Abstrakt

Neprobádané vody: Olga Neuwirth a ženy v surrealismu a opeře analyzuje hudebně divadelní dílo *Bärlamms Fest* v rámci kontextu žen v surrealismu a opeře. Jde o základ pochopení konceptuálního scénografického a kostýmního procesu autorky Sorchy Gibsonové. Surrealistky a jejich význam v současnosti, stejně jako historické a současné postavení žen v opeře, jsou zkoumány ve vztahu k dílu *Bärlamms Fest*, které má v umění, opeře, hudbě a historii nesmírný politický a historický význam. Dílo *Bärlamms Fest* je interpretováno jako mnohovýrobová skladba hudebního divadla, která staví na existujících uměleckých dějinách žen a na vlastních zážitcích skladatelky. Tvoří tak hluboce vrstvené a rozsáhlé umělecké dílo a zároveň znovu ztělesňuje ženské prožitky. Prostřednictvím šíření hry a těla práce Leonory Carringtonové, a také díky spolupráci s Elfriedou Jelínkovou, která je sama o sobě talentovanou autorkou, je dílo *Bärlamms Fest* důležitým dílem politického hudebního divadla, které má za cíl vyzdvihnout hlasy a význam žen v rámci umění pro současnost.

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1 Introduction

Uncharted Waters: Olga Neuwirth and women in surrealism and opera will analyse Olga Neuwirth's music-theatre piece *Bählamms Fest* within the context of women in Surrealism and Opera, in conjunction with my set and costume design process. This will begin with an overview and analysis of the opera, its themes and motifs, followed by a summary of the 1999 production, ensuing reception, and followed by a short biography and summary of works of the composer of the opera, Olga Neuwirth. The next section will be an overview of women in Surrealist opera, beginning with an examination of the history of Surrealism in the twentieth century. This will give historical context to the analysis of surreal stage design for opera, and allows for an exploration of the relevance of Surrealism in the present day. Following this the work of women will be discussed in the Surrealist genre and women and opera will also be examined; this section is concluded with other Surrealist operas which bear similarities to *Bählamms Fest*. Lastly, this thesis discusses my own work and process, beginning with the process of finding a composer, followed by a discussion of my design process and inspirations which have been shaped by my research.

I can credit a large part of my inspiration to the composer of the opera herself, Olga Neuwirth. Although it was the score of *Bählamms Fest* which originally intrigued me and prompted me to begin researching her work and the history behind the piece itself - which extends back to the late nineteenth century, with Freud's theories on psychoanalysis - I found many parallels in our working methods and personal experiences which were motivations for this project. Her work journal, in which she documented her experiences while writing the opera -

is the source of so much information and inspiration for anyone who creates their own work and struggles with that process - and one which I found relatable, especially within the last few years.

From the beginning of her composition process, Olga Neuwirth was faced with many challenges in writing the score for *Bählamms Fest*; including difficulties with the Italian bureaucratic systems, her involvement in a legal dispute between her father and mother, the death of close friends, and health problems. In fact, making time to allow herself to compose seems to have been one of the main hurdles in her process. Her work journal which she kept during this period of her life, between 1997 and 1999 - methodically detailed her thoughts and experiences almost every day. She described her commutes between Venice and Vienna, a neverending multitude of errands, as well as her bouts of depression and psychological stress, as she tried to take care of herself, her family members and compose her first full length opera. Moments of serenity in Venice temporarily distracted from her internal conflict, in which she questioned the validity of her choice to become a composer; under no illusion of the adversity she faced as a woman, nor the added debilitation of her constant reliance on others to play her compositions. It was during this period of time, from 1990 - 2003, that Neuwirth was rejected again and again - with *Bählamms Fest* marking the beginning of the composer's most criticised musical period. In media reviews of her work, by her colleagues within the classical music world, and by commissioners who requested and then cancelled commissions of her work, it was a period in which she faced ongoing rejection by her contemporaries. The completion of her first full-length music-theatre composition

showcased her unusual musical and visual ideas resulting in a new style which was received as a shocking political statement, one that went against everything classical music stood for - positioning Neuwirth as an artist to be disproven.

The biographic nature of her documentation at this point in her life was important to me as a young woman working in the industry - and through researching I was able to fully comprehend the full breadth of the unconscious bias against women and subsequent challenges in the arts. These challenges are universal across the arts even today, making it even more important to research an Opera like this which can give us so much insight into both the present and past of women's work in the Arts.

Her innovative work as a woman which intersects with the disciplines of both music and art is what prevents her from breaking through the metaphorical glass ceiling. It is her transversal into a new genre, namely: contemporary surrealist music - which is perceived as a demonstration of her contempt for both the tradition of classical music and contemporary art. Historically both of these fields have not shown courtesy or recognition to women's contribution in either art form.

2 Bählamms Fest

2.1 Production Overview & Analysis

Bählamms Fest is an opera composed by Olga Neuwirth, with a libretto by Elfriede Jelinek. The opera is based on Leonora Carrington's surreal war-time play *Baa Lambs Holiday* which was written in 1940. *Baa Lambs Holiday* was largely influenced by Carrington's traumatic experience while still residing in war-torn Europe. This experience has been translated into a non-linear tale coloured by terror, isolation, and bloodlust - epitomizing the horrors of war.¹

Bählamms Fest is filled with analogies and representations of surrealist ideals and Freudian tropes, which merge with likenesses from Carrington's own childhood. It is also permeated with the themes typical of Neuwirth's work: a re-contextualization of the female protagonist; time and space (represented most literally in the opera through the use of juxtapositions of the living and the dead) and existentialism.

All of these elements make the opera difficult to follow, both in terms of its plot as well as its complex characters whose tangled lives extend beyond the confines of the opera. The summary is convoluted only because the story itself is not easy to understand at first read, and not easily summarized even by professional critics of the opera.² For a comprehensive understanding of the story, a few readings are necessary, as various elements can be grasped and

¹ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald. An Essav on Olga Neuwirth and
² CLEMENTS, Andrew. CD of the Week: Neuwirth, Bählamms Fest, Raffeiner. *The Guardian* [online]. 21 November 2003.

understood on different levels with each reading of the libretto. It must also be analysed through these different layers: taking into account the Surreal and Freudian influences of the time, the wartime context in which it was written, and lastly, the story's parallels to that of Leonora Carrington's life.



Fig. 1: Theodora (Christine Whittlese), Mrs. Carnis (Ute Trekel-Burkhardt) and Philip (Walter Raffeeiner) in the Salon on the Heath (1999 Production).

The opera centres around the Carnis family - individuals with a long history of trauma and violence which has manifested in their sadism, and twisted entertainment in the form of killing. The culture of obsessive lying within the Carnis household further perpetuates a hostile environment which feels unsafe, even though characters clearly feel this is protecting them from further emotional damage. Their actions suffer no repercussions from the rule of law, nor feelings of guilt or conventional morality imposed from the outside. Grizzly deaths and

bloodshed are normalized, increasing steadily as the opera progresses; and incest and bestiality are insinuated but never completely disclosed.

Theodora, the opera's protagonist, seeks to find her own escape within a family in which she is an outsider, falling in love with the wolf-man Jeremy. The opera "begins like a [traditional] play" with the establishment of the Carnis family - Mrs. Carnis, the ancient matriarch and mother to Philip, a "puny and pale man with a long thin nose which hangs dripping over his scarf"³ - he's an alcoholic much more devoted to wine than to the young and "wild beauty" Theodora. Their house is located within a remote and "wild heath" landscape, far removed from society at large. Although only recently married, Theodora and Philip are extremely resentful towards one another, using hateful language and physical force which verges on abuse. Their age gap, lovelessness, and toxic dynamic suggests more of a difficult father-daughter relationship - and explains why Theodora is unable to leave the house. Tension within the family is only worsened by Theodora and Mrs. Carnis' mutual dislike of one another, and Mrs. Carnis' clear favour for her son regardless of his actions.

Henry, the talking family dog - who is also alluded to be the father of Jeremy, the wolf-man - acts as a commentator for the audience, providing some context to the disturbing and incestual events in the house. Although we perceive Henry as a mere animal at the beginning, his empathic nature towards Theodora is the most aligned with ours, the audience. This in spite of the fact that he is not completely uninvolved in the grim events which take place - Henry brings the first sign of blood and death into the house in the form of a bloody prey in his mouth.

³ NEUWIRTH, Olga, et al. *Bählamms Fest: Musiktheater in 13 Bildern Nach Leonora Carrington*, CD and Liner Notes. Kairos. 2003.

Soon afterwards, the Shepherd complains about the twelfth lamb being killed in the fields outside - bringing the headless carcass of the lamb into the house, and foreshadowing the horrific goings-on of the story. More annoyed than concerned, it's clear from whisperings about the being outside that everyone in the family knows who the culprit is, except for Theodora. Obviously curious, Theodora is also strangely excited by the dead lamb and the seemingly unpredictable night outside, a metaphor for her desire to escape - and goes outside to try and find the killer. Suddenly, the static daily rhythm of the family is shaken. Philip's first wife Elizabeth (whom Theodora has been told is dead) arrives, who is the polar opposite in image and character to Theodora. It is clear that Elizabeth is against the disruption and change that Theodora clearly represents within the family. Almost immediately following Elizabeth's arrival, horror strikes when the door is opened to the grisly discovery of the beheaded Shepherd, cradling the body of a lamb.



Fig. 2, Left: The Shepherd (Roman Sadnik) and Theodora (Christine Whittlese) who holds a beheaded lamb (1999 Production). Fig. 3, Right: Philip (Walter Raffeiner) and Mrs. Carnis (Ute Trekel-Burkhardt) (1999 Production).



Fig. 4: Jeremy (Andrew Watts) appears in the Nursery, surprising Theodora (Christine Whittlese). (1999 Production)

Theodora, as she does every day, retreats to the abandoned nursery where she takes out her anger on the old toys in the room. The nursery is her safe haven, an escape from her miserable life, representative of her lost childhood and desire to recreate childhood memories.⁴ Here in the nursery she declares that she's "madly in love" with the unknown killer. Jeremy the wolf-man appears, with the bloody head of the shepherd dangling from his belt, evidently the unnamed killer. He explains that he is Philip's half-brother and Mrs. Carnis' son. Jeremy is an outsider too, the promise of happiness and escape for which Theodora is searching, loving him despite his ego and his demand for her to remain eternally beautiful.⁵ Theodora declares her devotion to him - a stranger - and Jeremy promises to return for her the same night. After his departure, ghosts

⁴ NEUWIRTH, Olga. Translator: Alexander Rappoport. *Bärlamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal*. Graz: Droschl, 2003.

⁵ NEUWIRTH, Olga. *Bärlamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal*. Graz: Droschl, 2003.

begin to appear - first the ghosts of dead animals, and then of little Margret Carnis as a girl, who also finds her entertainment in killing. The event of the little girl's appearance and its repercussions are disturbing; explaining the sadistic culture of the Carnis household and the normalization of killing through the generations.



Fig. 6: The flock of sheep and Ram at the Feast of the Lambs (1999 Production).

At the seasonal celebration of the Feast of the Lambs, the animals gather and sheep dance and feast on the heath. This scene is the accumulation of the main motifs within the opera - a celebration and chaotic collision of festive dancing, singing, blood and snow. The lead dancer at the feast and black sheep, Mary, has a premonition of the murder about to take place - contributing to the feeling that this may be a recurring ritual, and that events leading up to this have

also happened before. Theodora and Jeremy, embracing their “artic-vampiric”⁶ tendencies disguise themselves as saints and disrupt the celebration, causing pandemonium and killing the lead sheep-dancer, Mary.

Oblivious to the Feast of the Lambs and the events therein, the rest of the family is occupied by a police hunt for Jeremy led by Elizabeth, who seeks revenge, presumably for Jeremy using Elizabeth in the same way he has used Theodora, signifying the cyclical nature of the story and that this, or something similar has happened before and may happen again. Mrs. Carnis, proud of what she sees as her son’s accomplishments - and fearing for his life - vehemently opposes the police hunt, but is unable to stop them. Philip, who has joined forces with Elizabeth, appears triumphantly when Jeremy is killed, their hatred for his monstrosity and their gleeful success in destroying him evident. Jeremy soon re-appears to Theodora as a ghost, urging her not to follow him, never to “become ugly” and bidding her farewell. The final scene shows Theodora growing old, a symbol of her own autonomy, and disregard for Jeremy’s wishes for her to remain forever youthful for his sake.

2.2 Summary of themes & motifs

In analysing *Bärlamms Fest* we can see the pervasive themes of Resiliency, Life and Death contained in a cyclical perception of time, existentialism represented through the setting and characters, and Freudian psychology.

⁶ NEUWIRTH. *Bärlamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal*. Graz: Droschl, 2003.

Like much of Olga Neuwirth's work, and much of Carrington's, *Bählamms Fest* revolves around a female protagonist and her resilience in the face of tragedy and trauma. Contrary to the way in which many other operatic narratives unfold, Theodora is not a victim of death or incarceration at the end of the opera: "Theodora has been deserted, but she may still be able to learn from the pain that she has experienced".⁷ Unlike the women in the same position before her who have passed through the Carnis family's lives, she lives a full life - and may be a political commentary on the extreme dispensability and vulnerability of women within operatic narratives. "She does not go mad, for madness is the non-place conceded to women", but defiantly resists Jeremy's wishes for her to "never grow old" or "become ugly" - another act of disobedience, in that death seems to be an idealised state for many characters in the opera. She takes her destiny into her own hands, regardless of the wishes of others. Neuwirth's "opening ending" in *Bählamms Fest* is a commentary on "the only place left open for [women], a place of illusory hopes."⁸

This theme of life and death or past and present can be encapsulated in another central theme to Neuwirth's compositions, Jelinek's writing, and Carrington's work - which is the idea of time itself. The representation of ghosts, repetitive ritualistic events and the remote setting, all contribute to the feeling that time within the opera is not linear, but cyclical. The setting is removed from civilization; nonetheless it remains a preserved representation of the bourgeoisie and their hypocrisy, not affected by the passage of time or sensitive to the

⁷ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

⁸ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

horrors they commit, the desolate landscape surrounding them is inherently existentialist. The bleak, empty and cold landscape reflects the characters' innermost selves and embodies their inner turmoil.⁹ The ghosts of Elizabeth, the dead animals and Jeremy all recall moments from the past, which can simultaneously be experienced in the present. The repetitive nature of events - Jeremy's love affairs with his brother's wives, Henrys' allusion to countless women disappearing from the same house over the years, and the murder of Mary which the dancer foresees, and which seems so calculated - all contribute to the theme of time within the opera.

With regard to Freud, we can see his theory on the Oedipus complex pertaining to Philip and Theodora, and complex social and family relationships play out clearly within the Carnis family. Philip and Theodora's spousal relationship is felt to be something more like an incestuous marital arrangement, owing to their large difference in age and Theodora's childlike behaviour. Knowing something of Leonora Carrington's mixed experiences with the first men she encountered in her life - her father who disowned her, and then Max Ernst, a much older man who came to be a replacement paternal figure to her - it's no leap to say the character of Philip is a combination of these two men. Freud's Oedipus complex theory that children repress sexual desire towards their parents, directly fits this attraction to Max Ernst/Philip as the replacement father figure.

Freud also believed that traumatic experiences in childhood greatly affected mental-health and development in adulthood, causing neuroses, self-

⁹ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

deception, and lying to others as a form of self-protection as an adult.¹⁰ We can see this through the generations within *Bärlamms Fest*, starting with Mrs. Carnis, who is the first known family member to experience a traumatic event in childhood when her father locks her in a closet. She displaces her trauma in her disturbing actions, torturing and killing her pets. In turn, she models this behaviour to her children as the norm, forcing them to find an outlet for their own trauma, using murder and lying as outlets and a form of protection - and she is proud when they do so. The family's deception towards Theodora - with Philip consciously denying the existence of his first wife Elizabeth, and around Jeremy, the lamb-killing culprit - can also ultimately be read as a form of self-protection, disguising the wounds of old trauma and poor mental-health.

The character of Jeremy, the wolf man, is another example of a Freudian-inspired element of the story. Dr. Sergeï Pankejeff was a patient of Freud's who was unable to function in the outside world without assistance, feeling as if he was separated from the world by a veil. He had vivid dreams about white wolves - giving him his pseudonym - in which packs of wolves, with the tails of other animals would appear outside his window. Freud believed this was linked to a troubled relationship with his father.¹¹ We can see some parallels here with the character of Jeremy, who is separated from the rest of the Carnis family by his otherness - being neither human nor animal - he is unable to live beside his human relatives or with animals. Jeremy's life in limbo directly opposes that of the Carnis family's and their bourgeois life, but also offers insight into the family's

¹⁰ MCLEOD, Saul. What are the most interesting ideas of Sigmund Freud? *Study Guides for Psychology Students - Simply Psychology*[online]. 5 April 2018.

¹¹ WAUDE, Adam. Freud: The Case Of Wolf Man. *Psychologist World*[online]. 11 April 2016.

disturbing past; in particular with his father, Henry the dog, who is said to be “afraid of his own son”.¹² Jeremy’s monstrous hybridity is therefore the product of bestiality. Or were they all animals to begin with? Is the family in fact descended from the dogs and wolves that roam the landscape, now attempting to take on the appearance of conventionality, regardless of what truly hides beneath this at first deceptive surface?

2.3 Production History

Originally conceived in 1992, *Bählamms Fest* was set to premiere at the Munich Biennale two years later, but was cancelled after the Festival’s director became dissatisfied upon hearing Neuwirth’s unorthodox vision for the score and reading Jelinek’s libretto.¹³ Olga Neuwirth began work on the piece again in 1997, taking up residency in the centre of Venice so she could focus on composing. Between October 1997 and February 1999 the composer diligently worked on the opera, finally completing it in time for its staging followed by the premiere just a few months later at the Wiener Festwochen, in Vienna. The Sophiensäle premiere concert venue was outfitted so that it would resonate as the audience entered. Then, exactly as is dictated in the libretto, “a single actor appeared on stage and opened the piece in a kind of slapstick skit to exaggerated noises, such as the chewing and loud gulping of a prawn or the swatting of a fly”. In keeping with Neuwirth’s original vision for her “Animation Opera”, live singers performed in front of a multi-screen backdrop with

¹² NEUWIRTH, Olga. *Bählamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal*. Graz: Droschl, 2003.

¹³ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

projections, now a technique which is often used, but at the time it was unusual as well as technologically innovative.¹⁴ Using projections allowed the setting to shift and change as fluidly as the music throughout the piece.



Fig. 7: Set design of the original production, which blended painterly projections with real objects on stage (1999 Production).

The Set Design by the Brother's Quay makes use of "blank canvases" for projection - a large backdrop onto which images were projected implied the setting and time of day, so too did the open-faced Carnis house on stage left, implying in two levels "the balcony of a mansion" and the "cavern of the nursery with a huge hobbyhorse".¹⁵ Large painted trees suggested a forest on stage right, while the Carnis living room also had a hand-painted feel. The hand-painted style and simple use of flats to create depth on the stage may be a reference to the

¹⁴ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

¹⁵ Magistrat der Stadt Wien. "KUNST - UND KULTURBERICHT DER STADT WIEN 1999." DER GESCHÄFTSGRUPPE KULTUR, DES MAGISTRATS DER STADT WIEN, 2000.

first scenography done by surrealists - which was in turn inspired by Baroque scenic conventions. The projection and set design were both painterly, making it difficult to differentiate between the real and fake images - which provided a fitting parallel with the music, a blend of live instrumentation and pre-recorded “slapstick” sounds which become gradually indistinguishable from one another.



Fig. 8: Set design of the original production, which blended painterly projections with real objects on stage (1999 Production).

The scenography complemented Tania Spooner’s costume design too, which stood out in stark contrast, mostly white silhouettes against the dark settings. Her animal costumes found a perfect balance between alien, animal and human - with the sheep wearing astronaut like helmets which surreally distorted their faces and matching white uniforms. Mrs. Carnis, the old woman and Philip were exaggerated versions of the familial roles they represented in the home - appearing exceedingly old, worn out and jaded; this was achieved

through the use of makeup as well as distressed clothing, which contributed to the feeling of stagnation, that the characters themselves haven't changed emotionally or left the house for a very long time. Theodora's costume stands in stark contrast to the others in its use of simple lines and texture, she is clearly the nonconformist in the family.



Fig. 9: Theodora (Christine Whittlese) in the nursery, wearing stark white against the dark backdrop (1999 Production).

Bärlamms Fest marked Olga Neuwirth's first full-length stage work, a major collaboration with longtime friend and artist Elfriede Jelinek, director Nicholas Broadhurst, the American duo The Brothers Quay designing the set, costume designer Tania Spooner, and conductor Johannes Kalitzke.

2.4 Musical and technical elements

The original production used video projection, sound and video morphing, both traditional, electric, and unconventional instruments: including a viola d'amore, an electric guitar, a glass harmonica, toy instruments, synthesizers, a Theremin Vox, and samples for slapstick sound effects, such as a shrimp being swallowed. This interweaving of media is analysed by Catherine Saxon-Kerkhoff as, "deliberately bringing the classical and electronic music worlds together", the effect is a multilayered soundscape in which it becomes hard to distinguish "between natural and synthetic sounds", a style which she calls "camouflage, pastiche and masquerade".¹⁶ These were elements Neuwirth struggled with constantly throughout her process, trying to get them to work properly with the limited technology available to her at the time.

The perception of time within the opera as non-linear is central and represented in the music by Neuwirth's "*haunting stream of sounds*"¹⁷ which she intentionally interrupts to create "static images" within the opera.¹⁸ Characters are also paired with specific sounds and instruments, which personify their intentions and characters, echo earlier melodies or become synchronized as the opera progresses. During the hunt for Jeremy, Elizabeth and Philip sing in the "same dull tone" while aligning with the music of the hunt - representing their numbness to the happiness of others, while brass instruments mimic the sounds of the hunt.¹⁹ The wolves' and dogs' voices are all electronically distorted in the opera,

¹⁶ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

¹⁷ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

¹⁸ NEUWIRTH, Olga. *Bärlamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal* p. 114

¹⁹ NEUWIRTH, Olga. *Bärlamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal* p. 189, 194

with Henry's meek and pitiful cries a defining repetition within the composition. Henry's (Andrew Watts) voice is electronically distorted into a disturbing howl-moan throughout,²⁰ making his fear and excruciating pain - born of the hatred and sadism within the house - palpable. Jeremy's insincerity to Theodora is demonstrated through the distortion of his disembodied voice, emitted from a boombox, and at times mimicked by that of the basset horn when he is singing live on stage, while Theodora's (Christine Whittlese) part is meant to sound like a "glass surface" which is on the verge of shattering, and in certain moments fed through delay loops which allow her phrases to linger with Jeremy's.²¹ In contrast, Elizabeth's vindictive nature is represented through "metallic, nervous, and high-pitched sound".²² In the nursery, Neuwirth uses the sounds of toy instruments, Yiddish war-time children's songs, and electronic distortion to conjure a space in which "freedom, play, and hope...but also senseless childlike violence" are tangible.²³

There are twenty-one parts for live musicians, including the Theremin Vox, "a spooky-sounding electronic instrument invented by Leon Theremin in the 1920's" which is one of the dominant instrumental sounds in the opera.²⁴ Played by Lydia Kavina at the premiere, the resulting visual and aural sound was just as surreal as the opera itself. The instrument, which produces sound using just two antennas and tuning knobs, gives the impression that the musician is playing an

²⁰ NEUWIRTH, Olga. *Bärlamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal*. p. 127

²¹ NEUWIRTH, Olga. *Bärlamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal* p. 66, 219-221

²² NEUWIRTH, Olga. *Bärlamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal* p. 143

²³ NEUWIRTH, Olga. *Bärlamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal* p. 153

²⁴ KOZINN, Allan. Eerie Sounds, Less Played Than Captured in Midair. *The New York Times* [online]. 21 July 2000.

invisible instrument in mid-air.²⁵ Both synthesizers and effects are used on three of the instruments, as well as Christine Whittlese (Theodora's) voice, and Andrew Watts (Jeremy) making him sound wolf-like.

2.5 Reception

The opera received mixed reviews at its 1999 premiere, followed by the same at the Lucerne Festival in 2002 during the Swiss premiere and following the 2003 CD release. As in most early reviews, critics are unable to find fault in her technical innovations onstage, but usually condemn her musical approach and subject matter, enabling the disqualification of her body of work as a whole. As this work was the first of its kind, created during the years in which Neuwirth was seen to have “violated”²⁶ acceptable composition within classical music, the music-theatre project still bears the weight of early criticisms of her work.

At the premiere at the Wiener Festwochen the reviewers were split. Peter Hagmann, from *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, reviewed the opera the most positively, saying it was “conceived with sparkling imagination” and provided an exciting and entertaining evening for audiences. Reviewers Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich (*Frankfurter Rundschau*) and Gerhard R. Koch (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) on the other hand are immensely more skeptical and critical of the production, by which they seem unconvinced. Although calling it an “unmistakable sound sphere,” Jungheinrich finds fault and fear in the post-modernist style of the piece

²⁵ KOZINN, Allan.

²⁶ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

- calling it “nothing but eclecticism...[and] traditional fragmentation...”. And Koch, while finding the score has “considerable qualities in the evocation of spirit worlds,” also finds Neuwirth’s composition “selfishly decorative” and dominated by “oblique pitches”.²⁷

Olga Neuwirth’s 2002 residency at the Lucerne Festival in Switzerland culminated in a second showing of *Bählamms Fest* and other pieces, which only further polarized and confused critics. Reviewer Peter Grahame Woolf went as far to say that Neuwirth’s music-theatre piece at the Lucerne Festival was “not quite an opera,” as well as an experience he found “bewildering,” “difficult,” and exhausting, with an “un-relatable aesthetic”. He recommended her music only for listeners who were “intrepid explorers” of the musical genre. Begrudgingly, Grahame-Woolf does acknowledge her as “a force to be reckoned with,” with an impressive musical output, and finds solace in the opera’s “sophisticated use of sound projection and computerized visual effects”.²⁸

After the CD release, the Guardian critic Andrew Clements gave the opera a 4-star review, saying the music suggested “Neuwirth [was] already a highly distinctive and, in many ways, [a] disconcerting dramatic composer”. Going on to say that the opera embodied: “...a typically surrealist dream world, whose sheer strangeness and compelling dramatic pacing are vividly evoked in Neuwirth’s music...” evidence of an “exceptional” aural imagination.²⁹ Another standout for

²⁷ Magistrat der Stadt Wien.

²⁸ WOOLF, Peter Grahame. S & H Festival Report: LUCERNE FESTIVAL 2002. *LUCERNE FESTIVAL 2002* [online].

²⁹ CLEMENTS, Andrew. “CD of the Week: Neuwirth, Bählamms Fest, Raffeiner.

Clements is the Theremin with its “unearthly timbres [which] lend yet more sense of dislocation to many of the textures in the opera”.³⁰

Arnold Whittall gives another review of the CD, this time in a much less favourable light. He questions the motivations behind even producing an opera of such a passe surrealist genre, which to him seems “...more an act of excavation than of reinterpretation”. Even the mere title, he says “should put you on guard from the start”.³¹ His critique in fact, seeks to find fault mostly beyond the music - asking whether the criteria which led Neuwirth to the opera “material in which one oscillates continually between laughter and crying” is even valid. Neuwirth’s comic-tragic style doesn’t leave him convinced, as he concludes by calling the moods and motivations in the music-theatre “persistently incompatible”, with an imperfect “open end”.³²

Although these reviews were receptive to some of the opera’s innovative qualities, reviewers’ praise was mainly for the technical elements achieved at the time. Their distaste lay mainly in Neuwirth’s musical style and choice to work within the surrealist genre. There was a lack of willingness to go further to understand her eclecticism, or find deeper meaning and significance in *Bählamms Fest* at the time. *Bählamms Fest* premiered over twenty years ago, and to this day has only been performed twice. It is still suffering from the confusion and misunderstanding which the production encountered at the beginning of the millennium, even as Carrington and Neuwirth have finally found recognition for their work elsewhere.

³⁰ CLEMENTS, Andrew. “CD of the Week: Neuwirth, Bählamms Fest, Raffeiner.

³¹ WHITALL, Arnold. NEUWIRTH: Bahlamms Fest. Klangforum Wien, c. Johannes Kalitske. Kairos 00 123 42KAI (2-Disk Set). *Tempo*, Oxford University Press. p. 41–66.

³² WHITALL, Arnold. p. 41-66

2.6 Olga Neuwirth & her work

Olga Neuwirth, born in Graz, Austria 1968, is a composer known for her innovative and interdisciplinary compositions that are highly collaborative and groundbreaking; not only in music, but also in the audio-visual world.³³



Fig. 10: Portrait of Olga Neuwirth taken by Betty Freeman.

Since childhood Neuwirth has been surrounded by many kinds of art – thanks to her parents: a jazz musician and history teacher respectively who appreciated the milieu.³⁴ The trumpet was her introduction into music, as well as a large part of her identity before a car accident left her bedridden. Unable to communicate she began composing as a means of expression and self-

³³ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

³⁴ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

empowerment.³⁵ Her studies at the Hochschule für Musik und darstellende Kunst and then later in San Francisco, where she studied film, painting, and composition at the Art College and Conservatory of Music, provided her with the foundation for work to come.³⁶ The impact of her mixed discipline study and her tutors (Adriana Holszky, Tristan Murail and Luigi Nono) and their musical resilience in the industry can be seen from the very beginning of her career in the eighties as a teenager, when she began composing. Since the beginning, her work has involved the integration of musicians, videos, sound, and electronics. She envisioned these elements coming together to create an immersive three-dimensional atmosphere with film and video (however she actually rejects the idea of wanting to create a total work of art or *Gesamtkunstwerk*) – but it wasn't until video surround technology (in which screens surround the audience for an immersive experience) caught up that her ambitions could be properly executed, or even acknowledged as a contribution to contemporary music.³⁷ Neuwirth's body of work today includes installations, film scores, screenplays, radio plays, short films, and her compositions for live performances. Neuwirth believes her "musical resiliency" comes from this interdisciplinary approach, as well as her many skills and wide-ranging knowledge which provide her with inspiration, a belief and work ethic which has served her well (albeit with much criticism) throughout her career. Time and space are major themes in her work, which is evident through her combined use of sound loops, pre-recorded audio, and live-streamed video which often alters or distorts the audiences' perception of these

³⁵ VARGA, Bálint András. *The courage of composers and the tyranny of taste: reflections on new music*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2017. p. 142 – 152. ISBN 978-1580465939.

³⁶ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

³⁷ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

dimensions within the performance. Resiliency, existentialism, identity, the dynamics of power and politics are other major themes which continue to inform her work and life.

Neuwirth's work, the overarching theme of which is our perception of reality, can be further defined as *Contemporary Surrealist music*. As Catherine Saxon-Kerkhoff argues, Neuwirth "...has created a seminal oeuvre of unique dimensions that has expanded the conception of music itself".³⁸ Her expansion of musical possibilities originates from her use of time and space - dimensions which are distorted and create a "liminal" space³⁹ in which "the stability of reality" can be questioned.⁴⁰ The structure of performance, which encompasses both time and space, is crucial for Surrealist ideas and imagery to be developed and expanded over the duration of a theatrical work of art. Through the mechanism of time and space, which Neuwirth uses heavily in her music - by using repeating phrases and creating a soundscape which imitates sounds from the real world, creates phrases which represent the personality of each character, and conveys emotion which cannot be communicated through words or visual elements.

This provocation of unstable reality within art is something which allows the medium to be used as a lens and a vessel through which the spectrum of human experience, unconscious thought, and emotion can be projected.⁴¹ Neuwirth has re-appropriated this belief from Luis Buñuel to apply to music-theatre as a powerful space which "redesigns"⁴² reality in order for it to act as a

³⁸ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

³⁹ ALBERTH, Susan. p. 33

⁴⁰ NEUWIRTH, Olga. *Bählamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal* p. 78 - 80

⁴¹ NEUWIRTH, Olga. *Bählamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal* p. 254

⁴² NEUWIRTH, Olga. *Bählamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal* p. 78 - 80

“mirror for human searching”⁴³ wishing to illuminate the unknown and promote a deeper understanding and empathy of the world. She believes through this method “art can point to things that have become petrified, and make visible the desolate state of society and politics.”⁴⁴ Nicholas Till, author of “A new glimmer of light: Opera, metaphysics and mimesis” argues that the blurred distinctions in her music, between sound and noise, acoustic and electronic and the animate and inanimate are evidence of her music’s Surrealism.⁴⁵ Till argues that through this blurring her music evokes a “slippery materiality” which is able to conjure images and sensations which “bend and slither underfoot, shapes [which] drift in and out of focus, [and] structures [that] turn dropsical and flaccid”⁴⁶, much like the distortions which occur in surrealist painting. Through her distortion of time and space, and blurring of mediums which Neuwirth implements, we can understand her work to be a new form of Contemporary Surreal music which is “capable of conveying different ways of being and of being in the world”.⁴⁷

Her eclectic use of sound and instrumentation has been groundbreaking within the classical music genre. Her inspirations are far reaching and borrow from a wide range of musical genres (including Jazz, Pop, and Rap); musical sounds (live, pre-recorded, electronic, using both traditional and highly unconventional instruments); Cinema, Art, Literature (Gothic, Fantasy, Surrealism, Grotesque, Dada), and Science; from which she is artfully able to

⁴³ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

⁴⁴ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

⁴⁵ TILL, Nicholas. *The legacy of opera: reading music theatre as experience and performance*. Edited by Pamela Karantonis and Dominic Symonds. Amsterdam : Rodopi, 2013. P. 60

⁴⁶ TILL, Nicholas. P. 59

⁴⁷ TILL, Nicholas. P. 64

select and integrate to form a cohesive whole.⁴⁸ Often self-described as “trashy” sounds, the use of synthetic and pop music appeals to her search for a “rawness of sound”.⁴⁹ The juxtaposition of these sounds, which some would distinguish as originating from “low” and “high” art only assist in creating irony, humour and depth within her compositions. Regardless of the source, Neuwirth is interested in making use of all the materials at her disposal to realise her compositions in the way she envisions them.⁵⁰

Her first foray into the music-theatre genre was in the late eighties, when Neuwirth composed her *“Hand Telleroper”* or “operas small enough to fit into the palm of your hand” (Schlierhofer). The satirical and “acoustic-comic” operas, *Körperliche Veränderungen (Physical Changes)* and *Der Wald (The Forest)* are early examples of her multi-disciplined approach in which she uses an eclectic group of singers and instruments) “*contrasting singers and an “odd” combination of instruments*”. The stories themselves also seem like a perfect prelude to her 1999 opera, portraying characters “who in a Kafkaesque way become entangled in an ever more bizarre and nightmarish sequence of unexpected twists and turns”. They were performed at the Wiener Festwochen in 1991, directly preceding her composition for the opera *Bählamms Fest*, which used the ideas developed in her *“Hand Telleroper”* on a much larger scale.⁵¹ The music-theatre piece *Bählamms Fest* was the composer’s first full-length composition, and marked a major milestone in her career. Exemplifying the promise of Neuwirth’s

⁴⁸ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

⁴⁹ VARGA, Bálint András. p. 148

⁵⁰ ALLENBY, David. Olga Neuwirth: composer interview *Boosey & Hawkes* [online]. August 2002.

⁵¹ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

musical and technological creativity, the opera was innovative and ahead of its time, but lacked the support and understanding from the classical music world.

During this period, from 1990 to 2003 - Neuwirth faced constant rejection and criticism for her work. The rigid classifications of the Austrian/German new music scenes at the time, and her position as a young female innovator were not readily accepted by an industry which Neuwirth attests to as being “dominated by men”.⁵² Schlierhofer, in his essay on her work and oeuvre summarizes her dismissal:

‘It is a great pity that Neuwirth’s ground-breaking works were admired on some levels but not taken seriously on many others. Pushing limits to the extreme, their extraordinary, radical and innovative nature was disqualified or, at best, relativized. Neuwirth had apparently overstepped the “boundaries of what was considered acceptable” in the “classical music world.”⁵³

A large part of the early rejection of the composer’s work in the first decade of her career seems to be grounded in her “otherness” - as a young woman and composer whose music was difficult to define or group into a single category; let alone fit within the confines of what was thought of as “classical” music. Critics of her work in the nineties often found fault with her work, not only for drawing inspiration from so many diverse musical styles, but also her deliberate fusion of art forms which they found “too playful and eclectic,” for their liking.⁵⁴ Even so, she persevered - motivated by her “courage and rage” which

⁵² SCHMID, Rebecca. Olga Neuwirth Maintains Eclectic Path in Her Music. *The New York Times* [online]. 23 August 2016.

⁵³ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

⁵⁴ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

continued to give her the energy and necessity to continue working into the new millennium.⁵⁵

Her first groundbreaking work *!dialogues suffisant?! in 1989* was dubbed a “media transfer” as she live streamed audio and video of a drummer (from another space) into a second space where a cellist played live. *Lonicera caprifolium* (1992-3) is another significant piece which integrates electronic and Baroque instrumentals, which “interact” electronically on audio channels.⁵⁶ *Transparent Variation* (2001) was composed for bassoon and ensemble, and included the recorded echoes and embodied empty spaces in the architecture and space of Libeskind’s unfinished Jewish Museum in Berlin, making use of “voids” in the soundscape, which function as a metaphor for lost expression, and contrasting with the energy of the musical flow”.⁵⁷ Similar to *Transparent Variation*, *Le Encantadas* (2015) uses acoustic ‘field recordings’ of the permanently closed San Lorenzo church in Venice, and the city’s streets which are meant to evoke real and imagined locations in time and space, simultaneously conjuring images of the unoccupied spaces⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ VARGA, Bálint András. P. 143

⁵⁶ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

⁵⁷ ALLENBY, David.

⁵⁸ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

A hugely prolific and dynamic composer, her work has stretched across the boundaries of “new music” with her sound installations and career in music-theatre. She has completed many full length music theatre pieces since the completion of *Bärlamms Fest* and continues to do so today. One of her most well-known full-length stage works includes an adaptation of *Lost Highway* (2002-03) a “video opera” based on the David Lynch film (one of her favourite filmmakers), with a libretto by Elfriede Jelinek.⁵⁹

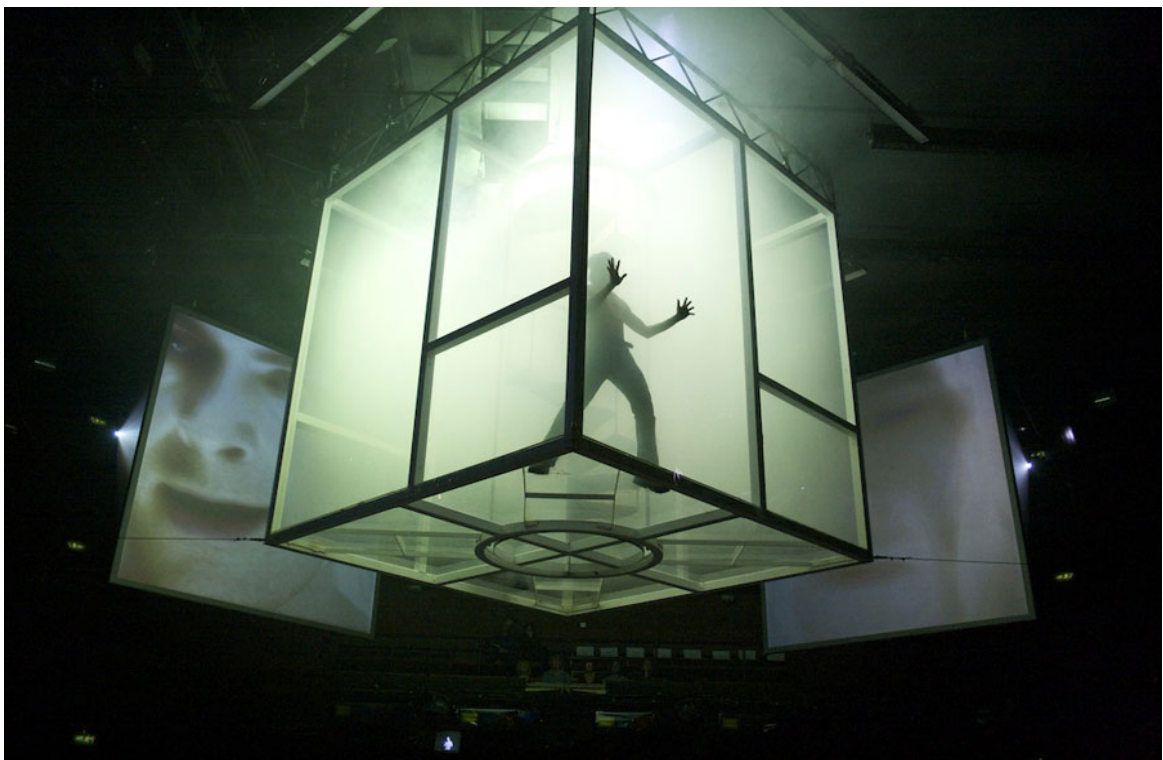


Fig. 11: *Lost Highway*. English National Opera and the Young Vic, 2008.

Thematically, *Lost Highway* bears a resemblance to that of *Bärlamms Fest*, both in its exploration of non-linear time, and its existentialist themes.

⁵⁹ ALLENBY, David.

Moreover, Lynch's films and Neuwirth's work share many similarities, including what Neuwirth calls the feeling of a "vortex with no psychological escape".⁶⁰ Many critics, including Tom Service, also compare the music in *Lost Highway* to labyrinths with "references to things you think you know, but where nothing is quite as you remember it."⁶¹ The term "labyrinth" in relation to her work is of her own definition. She strives to challenge herself and the listener through the creation of her own labyrinth with every composition,⁶² while also believing the term is a metaphor for the inner-workings of the human mind; Neuwirth says neither our processes, lives, or minds are "straight highways" but more "labyrinth like...neither chaotic nor obvious nor symmetrical."⁶³

American Lulu (2006 – 2011), was her next music-theatre work - which was adapted and re-orchestrated from Alan Berg's 1935 opera *Lulu*. Her adaptation of the opera centres around the American civil rights movement and the racism faced by African Americans. Her version's main inspiration is from that of Billie Holiday, who embodies the independence and resilience of the movement, and of women - which is typical of Neuwirth's work. (much like the character of Theodora).⁶⁴

⁶⁰ ALLENBY, David.

⁶¹ SERVICE, Tom. A guide to Olga Neuwirth's music. *The Guardian* [online]. 7 August 2012.

⁶² ALLENBY, David.

⁶³ NEUWIRTH, Olga. *Bärlamms Fest: Ein Venezianisches Arbeitsjournal* p. 18 – 20.

⁶⁴ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.



Fig. 12: A scene from *American Lulu*, Komische Oper production 2012.

An operatic adaptation of the novel *Orlando*, by Virginia Woolf is also set to premiere December 2019 at the Wiener Staatsoper. *Orlando* is a biography and investigation of “the shapeshifting nature of gender, identity, and sexuality through time”.⁶⁵ Suitably, *Orlando* is part of a larger project “Transformation and Liberation through time,” a collaboration with fashion designer Rei Kawakubo (designer behind the brand *Comme des Garçons*) who is designing the costumes and showcasing her designs in two acts on the runway before the final act and premiere in December. Similarly to *Bärlamms Fest*, the production builds on the legacies of three prolific women - Neuwirth herself, Kawakubo and Woolf.

⁶⁵ SALTER, Steve. Comme erases the gender binary with a tribute to virginia woolf's 'orlando'. *i-D* [online]. 22 June 2019.



Fig. 13: Kawabuko's *Homme Plus* spring/summer '20 collection inspired by Orlando.

With the commission of *Orlando*, Neuwirth has become the first female composer to be commissioned by the Wiener Staatsoper in 150 years.⁶⁶ These recent commissions, which highlight the absence of women composers within operatic institutions today are a clear indication that larger change is necessary. This is a great achievement for the composer, who since the recognition of her work through the *Austrian National Award* in 2010, has only begun to receive artistic recognition in the last decade. Creating a precedent for the number of female composers who receive commissions and public performances will only encourage others - institutions and aspiring artists - to follow suit, thereby increasing the diversity and therefore standard and quality within classical music and opera today.

⁶⁶ SALTER, Steve.

The difficulty Neuwirth faced in her early career is still a reality for female composers, which Neuwirth speaks to, acknowledging that the world of classical music today is no less biased against women - being “white, male, and patriarchal”- than it was at the beginning of her career.⁶⁷ Neuwirth believes that “structures have to change so that women can really make their way [as composers].”⁶⁸

Throughout her career, Olga Neuwirth has made a point of taking a political stance through her work. Neuwirth believes that “...art can point to things that have become petrified, and make visible the desolate state of society and politics.”⁶⁹ These political and social beliefs take on the themes of resiliency, existentialism, identity and the dynamics of power in her work; they speak to her career as a female composer, in which she’s faced constant criticism for her new and experimental compositions. Her innovation and musical resilience throughout her career has allowed her to continue working in a variety of disciplines, wherein a new genre of music - outside the traditional conventions of classical composition - has been created. This Surrealist genre of music seeks to “act as a mirror of human searching” in which she wishes the audience to engage and be thought provoked by the work.⁷⁰

This political stance is shared by Elfriede Jelinek who has served as a friend and collaborator to Neuwirth throughout her career. Jelinek’s work also tackles the position of women within contemporary society, often using metaphors for existing systems of oppression which go unquestioned in our

⁶⁷ SCHMID, Rebecca

⁶⁸ SCHMID, Rebecca

⁶⁹ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

⁷⁰ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

everyday life. It is through these united interests that “the rare team of a female composer and a female librettist”⁷¹ were brought together in collaboration, and for the majority of their early projects, also in their dismissal - by the Salzburg Festival and others even after their commissions had been completed because of perceived “incompetence”.⁷² To the team, this exemplified “the existing male hegemonic system.”⁷³

⁷¹ SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

⁷² SAXON-KERKHOFF, Catherine and SCHLIERHOFER, Harald.

⁷³ VARGA, Bálint András. p. 144

3 Women in Surrealist Art and Opera

3.1 History of the Surrealist Movement

The History of the Surrealist movement in the twentieth century gives important context to how the movement itself, the role of female Surrealist artist, its use in opera and its relevance to contemporary culture. Surrealism in the 20th century was a movement heavily influenced by Freudian theories on psychoanalysis, and Marxism which were brought together in André Breton's 1924 Surrealist Manifesto. Surrealists sought to explore their unconscious thoughts through the use of reactionary and spontaneous expression such as the *Exquisite Corpse*.

Twentieth century Avant-garde Surrealism can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century, with Sigmund Freud's development of psychoanalysis and the study of the unconscious mind. Freud believed that repressed thoughts from the unconscious mind were brought to the forefront during dreams, in particular worries or wishes from the dreamer's life, which were then translated into "manifest content," often disguising true wishes and worries so the dreamer could continue sleeping. Freud claimed condensation and displacement helped these worries or wishes become unrecognizable. The theory of condensation was the process of joining two or more ideas in a dream and displacement was his idea that an object, idea, or person could be manifested as something else in a dream - revealing the dreamer's true worries or wishes. Freud also investigated symbols in dreams, which he argued were specific to the individual,

and not something which could be systematized for a broader application to the general public.⁷⁴

In 1917, the term surrealism was used for the first time in a theatrical context by French poet and playwright Guillaume Apollinaire, in the program notes describing his play *Les mamelles de Tirésias*, irrevocably linking live performance and surrealism from its birth. This little known piece of history is significant in that it makes the live aspect of performance - not explored in totality by the original Surrealist movement - much more important than we might think.

French poet and writer André Breton harnessed the power of Freud's ideas in his (First) *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924, aligning them with the political views of Karl Marx, and giving Apollinaire's term "surrealism" a new meaning which would gain traction and followers in the decade to come. Breton saw surrealism as a mechanism to liberate the mind through art, which would provide an outlet for repressed emotions and unconscious thought, including those manifested in dreams. Many of the unconscious thoughts within surrealist work had to do with censored feelings of desire, obsession and madness. It was believed that convention and rational thought in the real world too, could be turned on its head and subverted by the surrealists leading to the liberation of human desire, what they also called "the liberation of the mind", akin to the liberation envisaged by Marx from the fascism and turmoil of Europe at the time.⁷⁵ Breton's 1924 Manifesto demanded a re-examination of the "the realistic attitude" and "the materialistic attitude" of the time, spurring creators on to produce work that was an expression of the "actual functioning of thought....in the

⁷⁴ MCLEOD, Saul.

⁷⁵ GALE, Matthew. Surrealism and Beyond. *Tate* [online].

absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern”.⁷⁶ Breton envisioned a radical and political anti-fascist movement that would undermine the apathy of the time and free the imagination, allowing it to “unfurl,” and therefore giving life meaning again.⁷⁷

Artists were inspired to create using mechanisms which allowed repressed and unconscious thoughts to be unleashed. Many of the artists’ favoured techniques were “automatic”. These “automatic” techniques created unpredictable, spontaneous impressions, by means of free and abstract association, experimentation, and collaboration. The second and underlying aim of using automatic processes was to ensure the surrealist style couldn’t be copied easily and therefore wouldn’t catch on or become mainstream in any way.⁷⁸ Using a mixture paint, pencil, collage, the written word, and later objects, surrealists created work that was unique from one artist to the next. The result of this automatic approach and philosophy behind it is perhaps best exemplified by the Surrealist invention of the collaborative games *Exquisite Corpse* and *Consequences*. With no themes or prompts to begin with, the games collaboratively created an absurd new whole by combining individuals unconnected drawings and phrases. *Exquisite Corpse* was a much loved game, as it was able to create something through collaboration that would have otherwise been impossible, therefore underlining the importance of collaboration in the movement and unifying the surrealists and their worldviews.⁷⁹ To this day,

⁷⁶ BRETON, Andre. Manifesto of Surrealism BY ANDRÉ BRETON (1924). *The University of Alabama*[online]. 1999.

⁷⁷ BRETON, Andre.

⁷⁸ GALE, Matthew.

⁷⁹ GOTTHARDT, Alexxa. Explaining Exquisite Corpse, the Surrealist Drawing Game That Just Won’t Die. *Artsy*[online]. 4 August 2018.

the game is still popular. Hans Ulrich Obrich - perhaps the most prominent curator working in the United Kingdom today as the Artistic Director of Serpentine Galleries, uses *Exquisite Corpse* in an ongoing series and exercise with his collaborators - similarly allowing well-known artists to exercise their imaginations, while unifying the artists despite their varied disciplines.

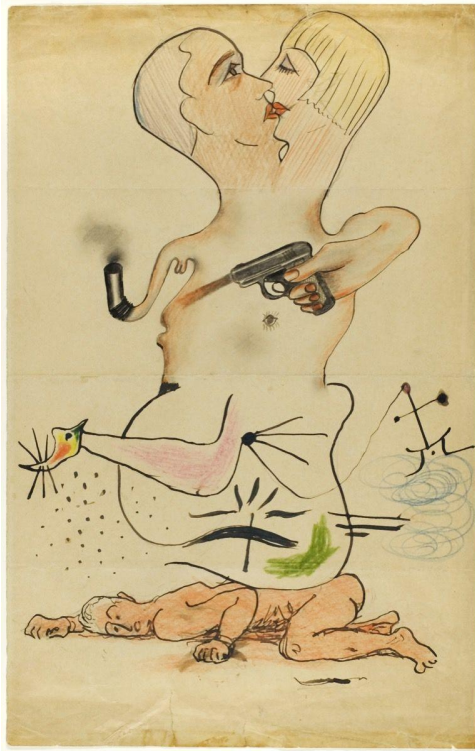


Fig. 14, Left: Man Ray, Joan Miró, Yves Tanguy, and Max Morise, *Exquisite Corpse*, 1928. Right: André Masson, Max Ernst, and Max Morise, *Exquisite Corpse*, 1927.

As with *Exquisite Corpse*, a large part of Surrealist artwork explored the body, and bodies' relationships to one another. The female body in particular, which Breton called "the most marvellous and disturbing problem in the world" was a common theme which male surrealists such as Max Ernst, Man Ray and Salvador Dali, and used to explore their newly liberated desires. This manifested

in a sexualization and dissection of the female form which was often dehumanizing, with women being portrayed as mutilated, faceless and anonymous.⁸⁰



Fig. 15: Hans Bellmer, photographic plate from La Poupée, 1936.

3.2 Surreal Stage Design for Opera

Surreal stage design, although not strictly defined, has the same intent of Surrealism in any medium, which is to unveil thoughts below the surface of consciousness so that hidden desires might be realised, with the aim of provoking change within society and disrupting how we perceive reality.

⁸⁰ Victoria and Albert Museum. "Surrealism and Design." *Victoria and Albert Museum*.

Unlike Surrealist artwork, however - which solely reveals the individual artist's hidden desires - Surreal Stage Design has the potential to be used in a much more powerful way - unveiling the unspoken thoughts of multiple creators, without whose collaboration the theatrical work of art would not exist in the same way. This unique experience of collaboration, through which a performance is brought to life, unifies artists through the process of creation. In the theatrical context this can sometimes pose challenges, ideas are forced to be altered after disagreement or artistic differences, unforeseen circumstances, and technical limitations - changing the imagined outcome of each individual to one that becomes an unpredictable new work of art. This is unlike what might have been imagined or achieved with a singular vision. The collective realisation of a theatrical work of art, leading to an unpredictable final realisation, is more powerfully surreal than a single artist's work. Its success lies in its mere existence and completion, which maintains traditional Surrealist ideology.

Surreal stage design is the perfect methodology for use in the theatre because it builds on the tools that are already at theatres' disposal to distort reality. Design has the power of suggestion, symbolism, metaphor, and irony - which can be used in the juxtaposition of extremes, in exaggeration, or in association to convey meaning. If these tools are implemented correctly, they can result in the design itself taking on the surreal quality which is already omnipresent within performance and the stage. František Tröster's scenography perfectly illustrates these qualities that we interpret as Surreal. The influence that French Surrealism and Russian Constructivism has had on his work can be seen in the inspiration the designer has taken from the avant-garde movements; his

combination of techniques (projection and objects on the stage) contribute to a dream-like effect.⁸¹ Tröster believed that “new synthetic theatre, enriched by the cubist discovery of structure and the Surrealist discovery, not in any way of new ornaments but of new worlds, strives not only for the dream, but for its confrontation with reality.”⁸² His desire to confront reality using surrealism can be seen clearly in both *The Government Inspector* (1936) and in *Romeo and Juliet* (1938).

In his design for *The Government Inspector* (1936) Tröster created a hallway of distorted doors hanging at crooked angles. The set existentially imitated the character’s inner state of drunkenness, which was embodied and conveyed through the space to the audience, and additionally was physically connected to the actor who was able to touch and move the doors within the kinetic space.⁸³ In *Romeo and Juliet* (1938) an opening was cut into layers of fabric hung at different depths within the space, creating a dream-like quality which the audience could look into within this open yet contained space. His designs reveal the “unknown spaces of the unconscious” which provide a “new dimension of meaning” to the performance, an idea which is inherently Surrealist.⁸⁴

This combined use of objects on stage and of projection is something we can see clearly in Olga Neuwirth’s work. Her concept for *Báhlamms Fest*, and

⁸¹ BRANDESKY, Joe. *Czech theatre design in the twentieth-century: metaphor and irony revisited*. Iowa city: University of Iowa Press, 2007. p. 57 – 58.

⁸² BRANDESKY, Joe. P. 57

⁸³ KOUBSKÁ, Vlasta. Theatre History Lectures. *Theatre History Lectures*. Prague. 2016-2017

⁸⁴ KOUBSKÁ, Vlasta.

much of her work hinges on the combined use of projection and other elements that stem from the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century.

“From actual elements we composed a new reality which could exist only on stage and only on stage could be truthful...Illusion is in essence a slice of chaos without concentration and composition... the conscious choice of things, how they are put together, and linked, is the basis of art.” - Tröster.⁸⁵



Fig. 16, Left: Tröster's rendering for The Government Inspector, 1936. Fig. 17, Right: Tröster's rendering for Romeo and Juliet, 1938.

Although the combination of ideas as a whole within theatre is seen as unique, and unquestionably surreal, it's not possible to say that any artistic creation in the world is completely original or manufactured by our minds alone. Our imagination, however vivid and inventive - borrows elements of places,

⁸⁵ BRANDESKY, Joe. P. 58

people, and objects we've seen in everyday existence. We are unable to imagine outside the confines of what is already in our known world. Much like Freud's "dream-work" which takes place, even during our waking lives our minds are able to combine elements to form something that we perceive as entirely our own invention. In the process of design, it's acknowledged that set and costume designers are inspired by materials, objects, reference images or other designs, which are then combined to form a specific aesthetic. Material objects must be in existence for the immaterial idea to occur, which is then translated back from their imagination to the materialized idea on stage. Inspiration taken from fabric or wood, for example, might be altered within our own imagination to suit a performance space, or molded to a specific body shape. This changes the form, but not the original content or original source of inspiration. The process of our own imaginations, which seems to be ungraspable, is really the reality which lies at our fingertips. Although designers would like to believe their creations are completely original and outside the realm of what has previously been possible, this is yet another illusion of our own reality. This Surrealist notion challenges the perception of our own reality and furthermore the "realism" shown on stage.

It is in fact, the perception of reality and imagination that are difficult to ascertain once we begin to question how to differentiate the two. We know we don't dream while we are awake and are usually able to realise after we wake up that we were only dreaming; but sometimes the dreamworld seeps into that of our waking lives, unbeknownst to us. Imagining a dream being exactly replicated and translated into our real waking life seems to be unattainable without the advent of live performance. Theatre is the only medium which is able to imitate

our unconscious experience through a multi-faceted implementation of audio, visual, and performers, give it a name, blurring the lines between our reality and the unconscious. Unlike any other method, through experiencing live performance, which like in a dream, plays out in front of our eyes - we are offered a glimpse into another reality, a surreality - which has become heightened and dream-like through the act of its performance. Theatre's combined use of music, dance, lighting, sets, costumes, and characters on stage all contribute to the spectators often revelatory experience of looking into what feels like a voyeuristic porthole for a moment – and providing a Surreal escape into the unknown.

Theatrical performances and their inherent interdisciplinarity and voyeuristic nature already fall into the realm of the surreal. The challenge in creating a surreal design for opera is to heighten the existing surreality of the performance to one that finds further interplay and meaning through the addition of musical orchestration. Tragic Operas, like *Bärlamms Fest* contain an extremely interesting opportunity - there's the stereotypical narrative, usually a romantic one ending in tragedy - but this darkness is juxtaposed with music that carries these emotions and sensations, delivering them to the audience in a more complex way than words alone could ever do. Liberated by the music, design co-exists on yet another non-literal level, complementing and enhancing every other element on stage while still remaining its own independent entity. Musical contradiction and harmony therefore create new meaning in scenography, giving context and form⁸⁶ to abstracted ideas within the music and design.

⁸⁶ TILL, Nicholas.

Surreal Stage Design provides space for multiple artists' contributions and imaginations to come together for a temporary fleeting time, which will never be exactly the same again. Something onstage can never be shown as "pure reality," because the moment it's put onstage it's elevated to a surreal experience, even if it takes place in a world just like ours. Audiences are able to suspend their disbelief if only for a moment while they are distracted or maybe absorbed into the spectacle before them, which acts as an escape from their own reality.

3.3 Surrealism in the present

Surrealism has always helped and allowed us to see outside conventional boundaries – whether societal, political, religious, or national. Artists are free to express true thoughts and emotions without the confines of a traditional narrative, real world logic, and consequences. Surrealism defies conventional expectations, and forces the viewer to see something in a new light, and out of its usual context of the real world.



Fig. 18: Rose Nestler's Installation: "Another History" at Thierry Goldberg, 2018.

The surrealist genre and movement has made a noticeable and startling comeback in recent years, mainly with the millennial generation (those born between 1980 and 2000), which is evident in the popularity of work by young artists such as Ambera Wellman, Rose Nestler, Genesis Belanger, Rithika Merchant and more. Unlike the avant-garde movement of the twenties, the “millennial surrealist”⁸⁷ and the “Afro-surrealist”⁸⁸ movements have rooted themselves in mainstream and popular culture.⁸⁹ The present-day surrealism has found new incarnations across a wide genre of media, including visual arts, music, and film. This infiltration of media in our lives is in turn being subverted by Surrealism and artists who wish to question the nature of an excess of content in our lives, and its implications to that of our reality. This new Surrealism is “tangibly dark” and absurd.⁹⁰ It “intermixes relief with stress and levity with lunacy” and uses layers of cultural references - often accumulated and changed over time at the hands of many creators - to create depth of meaning.⁹¹

Although today’s socio-political climate is very much different than the one that gave birth to the original Surrealist movement, the reality facing the millennial generation is a difficult one without a doubt, and worth examining. One of the many ways society is being disrupted, and most relevant to surrealism, is the advent of information technology and its blurring of lines between fact and fiction, pushing our world into the post-truth era. The fast access to information and the internet has also warped the millennial perception of reality, creating

⁸⁷ BRUENIG, Elizabeth. Why is millennial humor so weird? *The Washington Post* [online]. 11 August 2017.

⁸⁸ BAKARE, Lanre. From Beyoncé to Sorry to Bother You: the New Age of Afro-Surrealism. *The Guardian* [online]. 6 December 2018.

⁸⁹ BRUENIG, Elizabeth.

⁹⁰ BRUENIG, Elizabeth.

⁹¹ BRUENIG, Elizabeth.

navigates the social sphere. The now commonplace duality in our lives encompasses both our online representation, and our in person embodiment and experiences, which begs the question of what reality really even means today.⁹³ The examination of the self through this lens has also contributed to the renewed interest in surrealism, which provides a channel for this kind of personal introspection. Interestingly, this duality and deception (of technology and of the internet) in the present is a common theme explored in many Surrealist operas through the use of deceptive identities, used as vehicles to question reality.

Surrealism is an inspirational movement for the present day as there is so much turmoil in the real world right now, and so many sources of information. It's important to see something expressed in a new context, and maybe seen in a new light through the distortion and the escapism of surrealism.



Fig. 20: Rithika Merchant's "Genesis", 2015.

⁹³ BRUENIG, Elizabeth.

3.4 Women and Surrealism

The portrayal of women in male surrealist artwork was paralleled in women's treatment by the men within the circle. As Leonora Carrington says "the women Surrealists were considered secondary to the male Surrealists"⁹⁴. Although women were allowed to contribute artistically and participate in exhibitions, they were not treated as equals. Commonly referred to as the *femme enfant*, women "muses" under twenty-five were brought into the group to provide inspiration with their naivety - which was thought to be a route to unconscious desire.⁹⁵ Their social standing among Surrealists as objects of sexual desire and therefore lesser beings, was a great hindrance to the artists' own creativity.⁹⁶ Although their associations with the movement was a double-edged sword, while it provided them with artistic liberation and society on the whole, it also confined them to those same societal roles and expectations of women with the Surrealist group - namely domestic activities.⁹⁷ Carrington, Leonor Fini, and many other women rejected this perception and roles within the Surrealists as *femme-enfant*, consequently not identifying themselves as surrealists.⁹⁸ The misogyny within the group and the culture of degrading women artists to subservient beings was blatantly obvious. Due to this poor treatment they received within surrealist circles, many women who were associated with the members of the movement rejected being directly involved in it, and instead decided to exist on the

⁹⁴ ALBERTH, Susan. p. 37

⁹⁵ ALBERTH, Susan. p. 37

⁹⁶ ALBERTH, Susan. p. 37-38

⁹⁷ ALBERTH, Susan. p. 38

⁹⁸ ALBERTH, Susan. p. 38

periphery, continuing to be involved in group shows because of artist friends and connections within the group.⁹⁹

Women's lack of acceptance as artists in their own right within the male-dominated Surrealists was a hindrance, but was also further incentive to create work which spoke to their own identities and proved their deserved place within the realm of Surrealism. Contrary to male Surrealists work, whose work looks outward,¹⁰⁰ projecting their dreams and desires onto the bodies of women and creating dream-like landscapes far removed from themselves - sometimes to the effect of feeling exclusionary or distant, and not accessible to the viewer; female Surrealist work was almost entirely introspective. As Whitney Chadwick, author of *Women, Surrealism and Representation*, women's work "...collaps[ed] interior and exterior perceptions of the self."¹⁰¹ These self-portraits, which existed in many forms, directly related to that of their own identities, lives and experiences. In creating these works which subverted the portrayal of women as objects of sexual desire, women were able to change the meaning and interpretation of Surrealism in its original sense, allowing the viewer to engage and converse with the artist through their work - which in its self-examination acts like a mirror into the spectator's own psyche. The effect of this often feels more inclusive, as if the viewer is invited into the artwork. This movement within a movement - for women's surrealism is in fact stylistically different from that of male surrealists' work - provides a deeper understanding of the philosophies and histories that lie behind Surrealist work as a whole. Without the work of artists like Leonora

⁹⁹ ALBERTH, Susan. p. 38

¹⁰⁰ CHADWICK, Whitney, and Dawn Ades. *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*. MIT, 1998

¹⁰¹ CHADWICK, Whitney, and Dawn Ades. p. 4

Carrington, Remedios Varo much of the history and human experience for this period of history and art is lost to us. Although it has not been seen in this light until recently - the work of female Surrealists paved the future of Surrealism forward, and is more relevant than ever today.



Fig. 21: Self Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse) by Leonora Carrington, 1937-8.

In recent years, Leonora Carrington's work has sold at auction for over three-million US dollars, which is triple the amount it sold for two years before her death, in 2009.¹⁰² Although still far less valuable than that of the male Surrealist, Female surrealist work on a whole - including that by Dorothea Tanning, Leonora

¹⁰² THACKARA, Tess. Collectors Are Clamoring for Surrealist Women's Erotic Dream Worlds. *Artsy* [online]. 26 September 2018.

Carrington, Remedios Varo and Leonor Fini has increased in value, with curators launching retrospectives of the artists' work the world over to a receptive general public.¹⁰³ Scott Reyburn of the New York Times argues that there is a total shift underway of cultural values (in the west) prompting "The market for contemporary art [to] be ...transformed by some curators' desire to rehabilitate underrepresented names, particularly female and African-American artists".¹⁰⁴ This sudden surge of interest and motivation to showcase female work is not, however, entirely pure.¹⁰⁵ Artist Barbara Kruger sees it more so as a financial opportunity "to cultivate a new [art] market"¹⁰⁶ based on the current cultural climate. Galleries also seek to profit off the cultural climate which has been championing women as of late, and to remain relevant, while still struggling to achieve gender parity in their permanent collections.¹⁰⁷ Despite the undercurrent of interest driven by monetary gain, the enthusiasm for women associated with surrealism comes with a great positive impact, and reinforces the change happening within society. The transformation of female surrealism as a peripheral movement lost in history to a mainstream movement is extraordinary. While the twenty-first century seems entirely different - technologically, and socially, from the twentieth - the politics which define contemporary life and that of the nineteen-twenties and thirties which birthed the original Surrealist movement, bear many similarities. These parallels are what make Female Surrealism more prevalent than ever to the millennial generation, with exploration

¹⁰³ THACKARA, Tess.

¹⁰⁴ REYBURN, Scott. In Today's Art Market, the 'Male Gaze' Is Not a Good Look. *The New York Times* [online]. 16 July 2018.

¹⁰⁵ SHEETS, Hilarie M. Female Artists Are (Finally) Getting Their Turn. *The New York Times* [online]. 10 April 2016.

¹⁰⁶ SHEETS, Hilarie M.

¹⁰⁷ REYBURN, Scott.

of their themes of identity, especially pertaining to women and non-gender conforming individuals.

Socially, the internet has an enormous and radical impact - facilitating progress most notably for women and people of colour in a number of ways that would not have been possible before its advent. Drawing attention to women's rights and gender equality, as well as women's mistreatment and abuse on a number of levels - the *Me Too* movement has empowered women and provoked change worldwide with the platform - encouraging women to speak up about gender violence and sexual abuse. For people of colour, technology has been a tool which has been harnessed to share civil rights violations (including police brutality) through video, photos, and personal accounts - quickly gaining the public's attention on an issue that may have otherwise received poor coverage in the mainstream media. This general cultural shift¹⁰⁸ which desires to champion women and people of colour has also contributed to the renewed interest in the work of female artists, especially within the surrealist realm - and has coincided with great political and social unrest worldwide, leading to a renewed interest in the psychology, philosophy of Surrealism, and the creation of a new era of Surrealist art.

3.5 Women and Opera

As in the Surrealist circles of art which were historically dominated by men, opera is still an industry which upholds a hegemonic system in which white,

¹⁰⁸ THACKARA, Tess.

male and privileged men are at the top.¹⁰⁹ Many women in the industry are demanding change and visibility, with a momentous call to action taking place at the New Opera Workshop, in April 2019.¹¹⁰ The conference called attention to the unconscious bias - which is the “unreflecting process by which racism and sexism are perpetuated even by decent and fair-minded people” and the following structural nature of sexism within the opera industry, which has been a point of contention with many women working in opera since the seventies.¹¹¹

The lack of representation within operas regularly performed in large institutions takes into account the unequal representation of women working as composers, musicians, technical staff, and musicians.¹¹² This disparity within the industry has been quantified by the *Donne - Women in Music Project* and *Drama Musica*, who have compiled statistics showing that of concerts performed across the globe from 2018 to 2019, only about 5 percent (76 concerts in total) include work composed by a woman.¹¹³ This is hard evidence of the “massive systemic bias against women” says Alison Croggon, by which “the more subtle or ephemeral symptoms of exclusion [are] even more insidious.”¹¹⁴

The content of classical operas is also being taken into question, with Catherine Clements’ *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (1979) reverberating in the minds of those asking for change within opera programming. In her book, Clement draws attention to the tragic yet idealized fate which befalls most female

¹⁰⁹ ROBIN, William.

¹¹⁰ BLACKWOOD, Sally. *Limelight In-Depth: Shifting the Opera Gaze*. *Limelight* [online]. 30 May 2019. Classical Music and Arts Magazine, 30 May 2019.

¹¹¹ BLACKWOOD, Sally.

¹¹² BLACKWOOD, Sally.

¹¹³ CROGGON, Alison. *Opera and the invisibility of women » Witness Performance*. *Witness Performance* [online]. 7 May 2019.

¹¹⁴ CROGGON, Alison.

protagonists - with their rape, suicide or murder in an operatic end which has become an accepted and “classic” ending.¹¹⁵ In her article, *Is opera the most misogynistic art form?* Charlotte Higgins rightly deduces that the messages these tragic endings send to all the women watching are not positive ones, failing to value women’s lives, happiness or their own self worth.¹¹⁶ Women’s fated demise in opera is telling of the societal attitudes towards women in a bygone era, and not reflective of the societal liberation or progress that has been made over the last hundred years towards gender equality. Since so much has changed, it doesn’t seem unreasonable to expect the stories which are on our opera stages to be inclusive of the diverse group of men and women who are watching, which would serve only to increase the quality of work on opera stages.¹¹⁷

This homogeneity within operas themselves are also expositionary of the male authorities in “small historically privileged group” who make the programming decisions within the artform.¹¹⁸ This perpetuation of the traditionalist values within opera - which almost even in its definition is conservative and containing deeply embedded gender biases - serves to favour that of older, historically well-known male composers, preventing women composers from being given more opportunities.¹¹⁹

This stereotypical denouement of the tragic female in opera has come to be an expected part of the experience, accepted to the point where we should really be questioning our own desensitization to these stories, as well as the

¹¹⁵ HIGGINS, Charlotte. *Is opera the most misogynistic art form?* *The Guardian*[online]. 26 February 2016.

¹¹⁶ HIGGINS, Charlotte.

¹¹⁷ THE GUARDIAN. *The Guardian view on diversity in classical music: quality and equality* | Editorial. *The Guardian*[online]. 7 March 2018.

¹¹⁸ CROGGON, Alison.

¹¹⁹ BLACKWOOD, Sally.

people behind the institutions who program them. But there is progress happening slowly, which is allowing women more visibility and more opportunities within the industry. The recognition in recent years for women composers internationally has been growing. In 2016, Kaija Saariaho's now renowned production of *Love from Afar* was produced by the Metropolitan Opera - making it the first composition since *Der Wald* by Ethel M. Smyth in 1903 to be performed at the institution.¹²⁰ This production made way for more commissions by women composers, namely Jeanine Tesori and Missy Mazzoli at the Met.¹²¹ In April of this year too, Ellen Reid was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music for her debut opera, *p r i s m* - which "explores the lingering effects of sexual trauma."¹²² Almost simultaneously in Austria, Olga Neuwirth's composition of *Orlando* sets a precedent of making her the first female composer to be commissioned by the Wiener Staatsoper in 150 years¹²³ with any luck other institutions will follow suit.

3.6 Other Surrealist Operas

The rich but largely unappreciated history of surrealist opera gives us a good depth of insight and understanding into *Bärlamms Fest*. The genre and breadth of operas, although limited and mostly contained within the first half of the twentieth century provides an interesting case study in which a clear set of themes and motifs similar to those in *Bärlamms Fest*. The themes of identity, dreams, and a cyclical understanding of time are common within all the operas.

¹²⁰ BLACKWOOD, Sally.

¹²¹ BLACKWOOD, Sally.

¹²² NGUYEN, Justine. Composer Ellen Reid wins Pulitzer Prize for debut opera. *Limelight*[online]. 16 April 2019.

¹²³ SALTER, Steve.

Although not explicitly surreal operas, *Yan Tan Tethera* (composed by Harrison Birtwistle libretto by Tony Harrison) and *L'enfant et les sortilèges: Fantaisie lyrique en deux parties* or *The Child and the Spells: A Lyric Fantasy in Two Parts* (composed by Maurice Ravel, libretto by Colette) both bear incredible similarities to *Bärlamms Fest*¹²⁴ and so are included here. There are also a few operatic adaptations of earlier Surrealist stories and films - Max Ernst's *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil* and most recently Luis Bunuel's *The Exterminating Angel*. Productions performed as operas during the era of their composition are rarer still: namely the original Surrealist opera and art piece *Les mamelles de Tirésias* and Bohuslav Martinů's surrealist operas *Les Larmes de couteau*, *Juliette*, ou *La clé des songes*, *Ariane*, and *Alexandre bis*.

Yan Tan Tethera centres around two Shepherds - Alan, with a prospering flock, and Caleb with a dwindling one. Resentful of Alan and jealous of his wife Hannah, he steals Alan and his children away with the help of a mysterious supernatural force called the *Bad'Un*, trapping them behind the pagan Sarsen stones in the hill.¹²⁵ Many parallels can be drawn between the two operas: the pastoral, but otherwise barren rural plains (inspired by the United Kingdom) function in both operas as the canvas for supernatural occurrences.¹²⁶ While the chorus of sheep, despite them being both the catalysts of action (inciting incidents) as well as part of the resolution (Hannah uses counting of sheep to free Alan), are anonymous figures. Recurring rituals: deaths, in *Bärlamms Fest*

¹²⁴ WHITALL, Arnold

¹²⁵ BRECKENFIELD, Nick. Birtwistle at 80 – Yan Tan Tethera: A Mechanical Pastoral. *Classical Source* [online]. 29 May 2014.

¹²⁶ CLEMENTS, Andrew. Yan Tan Tethera review – a glistening, mysterious piece of music theatre. *The Guardian*[online]. 30 May 2014.

and counting in *Yan Tan Tethera* are also prominent themes, ones which only add to the cyclical nature of the operas and seeming absence of time within them.¹²⁷ The *Bad'Un* in Birtwistle's opera and *Jeremy*, the wolf man in Neuwirth's also play parallel roles serving as the looming supernatural presence; and lastly and perhaps most relevant to the socio-political climate today - the mistreatment of "outsiders" by "established residents" in each opera is alike, also giving us a sense of the history behind each of these stories.¹²⁸



Fig. 22: *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, Teatro alla Scala Chorus and Orchestra Glyndebourne Festival Production, 2016.

L'enfant et les sortilèges which has been previously been translated into the much more literal "A Naughty Boy's Dream" gives away a lot more about the surreal nature of the plot to follow.¹²⁹ Following her son's misbehaviour, a mother leaves her son alone in his room. He resorts to having a tantrum, damaging

¹²⁷ BRECKENFIELD, Nick.

¹²⁸ CLEMENTS, Andrew. *Yan Tan Tethera* review.

¹²⁹ "L'enfant et les sortilèges." *San Francisco Opera Association Program*, San Francisco Opera Archives. San Francisco, 1930, p. 41 - 42.

many objects in the room, including his pet squirrel - which then become animated, tormenting him to teach him a lesson. He escapes to the garden where he is confronted by more talking animals who also wish to give him a taste of his own medicine - the morality of the tale becomes clear when the boy shows kindness by bandaging his squirrel's paw. The *little boy* is much like *Theodora* and the *ghost of the little girl Margret* (Mrs. Carnis): Theodora's childlike behaviour in the nursery, destroying objects, parallels that of the little boy's tantrum when he doesn't get what he wants, and *little Margret* seems much the same in her sadistic torture of animals, which animate and tell Theodora of their abuse by her. Although much more extreme, and much darker, and without a moral, scenes within *Bärlamms Fest* exists within the same realm of child's bad dream or within their fears of - with anthropomorphic creatures that seek retribution.



Fig. 23: Illustration for Ernst's collage novel "*Rêve d'une petite fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel*" 1930.

Similarly, a more recently composed opera - namely *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*, which premiered in 1995 - also takes place in an ambiguous, although dream-like world, and centres around a young protagonist. The story is based on Dorothea Tanning's translation of Max Ernst's surrealist collage novel: *Rêve d'une petite fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel*.¹³⁰ Composed and written by Erling Wold, the story unfolds in four stages in which revolve around a little girl's self discovery and her "...journey into the vast interior of her own psyche".¹³¹ Her relationship with her body and erotic desires are explored through the mechanism of the four stages which lead her to self-discovery. Similar to *Bärlamms Fest*, the female protagonist seeks to find her place within society, but realizes her desires and beliefs are at odds with that of the spaces in which she inhabits and people who surround her, which is bourgeois society as a whole - represented in the story mainly by the church; while Elizabeth and Philip represent conventional of society in Neuwirth's piece.

The Exterminating Angel - composed by Thomas Adès, with a libretto by Adès and Tom Cairns - is another commentary on the upper class, based on the 1962 Luis Buñuel film of the same name. The opera premiered in 2016 at the Metropolitan Opera. The story, a commentary on "bourgeois mentality"¹³² centres around the dinner party of a group of aristocrats, who eventually realize that they are unable to leave the drawing room. Sanity within the drawing room unravels causing the situation to become even more extreme and ludicrous, with suicides,

¹³⁰ THE NATIONAL OPERA CENTER AMERICA. *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*. *OPERA America* [online].

¹³¹ THE NATIONAL OPERA CENTER AMERICA.

¹³² ROSS, Alex. An Explosive Opera of "The Exterminating Angel". *The New Yorker* [online]. 9 July 2019.

odd-goings on and sacrifices (of sheep), meanwhile revealing the characters' truths and clichés.¹³³ Notably, Mrs. Carnis disintegrates in the same way in Neuwith's piece, steadily revealing her hidden desires and truths, as well as most existentially - her true form. And although not trapped in one room of a house, by some unseen force, Theodora does seem unable to leave her husband, and the landscape which contains them.



Fig. 24: World-premiere production of “The Exterminating Angel” at the Salzburg Festival, 2016.

Like *L'enfant et les sortilèges*; *Les mamelles de Tirésias* or *The Breasts of Tiresias* has an ending with a clear moral. Composed by Francis Poulenc, and based on the original play by Guillaume Apollinaire written in 1903, Poulenc was inspired after seeing Apollinaire's 1917 premiere of *Les mamelles de Tirésias*, in which Apollinaire first used the word “surrealism” in his preface describing the

¹³³ ROSS, Alex.

play.¹³⁴ Poulenc composed the opera much later on in 1945, with its first performance in 1947. The farcical story begins with Thérèse changing her gender on command to become Tiresias, causing her breasts to float away, a beard to grow, and the chorus to cheer her on with 'No more children!' She takes on a stereotypically masculine role as a military leader - forbidding the birth of any more children. Her husband who has swapped roles and clothing with her, is concerned, so absurdly discovers a way of having children by himself - giving birth to 40,000 children in one day, only to discover there is a food shortage. The story ends with Thérèse throwing balls and balloons into the audience and inviting spectators to feed the children. Although absurd, the opera does seek to spread the serious message of re-populating a post-war country with lots of babies.¹³⁵ *Les mamelles* is evidently much more light hearted and morally transparent than *Bählamms Fest*, nevertheless both contain political messages for a war-torn twentieth century - the Carnis family is torn-apart because of their blood-lust and obsession with killing; their isolation and unhappiness too clearly stem from civilian sentiment regarding violence during the Second World War.

Not easily interpreted morally, but subjectively interpreted dream-like tales, the composer Bohuslav Martinů's operas make up the majority of extant historical surrealist opera. Deception is a common theme in his surrealist works, best known by their french titles: *Les Larmes de couteau/Slzy nože/Tears of a Knife*; *Julietta / Juliette*, ou *La clé des songes (Juliette, or the Key to Dreams)*; *Ariane*; and *Alexandre bis/Dvakrát Alexandr/Tears of a Knife* - within them, people are not always who they seem to be.

¹³⁴ LEWIS, Pericles. The Breasts of Tiresias. *Modernism Lab* [online]. [Accessed 1 July 2019].

¹³⁵ LEWIS, Pericles.



Fig. 25: Scene from the National Theatre's 1938 premiere production of *Juliette (The Key to Dreams)*.

In *Les Larmes de couteau* (composed in 1928, with a libretto by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes) Eleonore's mother urges her to marry Mrs. Saturn (Satan), instead of the dead man she's fallen in love with and wants to marry. So that she can be with her dead lover – she kills herself, but discovers Mr. Saturn, her lover, and Satan were the same person all along wearing various disguises.¹³⁶ *Julietta / Juliette*, ou *La clé des songes (Juliette, or the Key to Dreams)* was based on the play of the same name by Georges Neveux, and first staged in 1930. The opera is perfectly surreal in that it creates an atmosphere in which dreams, fantasy and reality are indistinguishable from one

¹³⁶ WALLACE, George M. Surrealism or Bust [Tears of a Knife and Breasts of Tiresias, Long Beach Opera]. *a fool in the forest* [online]. 12 March 2012.

another.¹³⁷ It begins with Michel's arrival in a small town, on his search for the voice of a girl he's heard three years earlier. It's soon revealed that everyone he meets in the town can only remember their interaction for a few minutes before they forget again. He finally meets Julietta near the woods where she recounts their (fictional) past love. Suddenly a peddler comes by, prompting her to run into the woods, and Michel to fire a shot after her. Michel eventually loses his memory too and makes the decision to stay with Julietta, despite her warning that he will be imprisoned in the dream state forever.¹³⁸ *Ariane* was composed in 1958, adapted from *Le voyage de Thésée* by Georges Neveux and in turn was inspired by the Greek myth of Ariadne and Theseus/Ariane et Thésée. The opera and poem reinterpret the meeting of the Minotaur and hero (Thésée) in the labyrinth and challenge the true identity and intention of Thésée, as Ariane cannot distinguish between the man and the minotaur, putting in question his intentions for wanting to find and kill the minotaur in the first place, and implying it may be the Minotaur who Ariane has fallen in love with, but who is who and are they one and the same? *Alexandre bis*, Composed in 1937 with an original libretto written in French by André Wurmser - is another tale of deception between lovers. Alexandre disguises himself and pretends to be a cousin from out of town. His wife, Armand recognizes him however, and plays along - both a faithful wife and an adulterer, until she begins an affair with another man, and Alexandre absurdly has become the cause of her infidelity in the first place.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ CLEMENTS, Andrew. Julietta – Opera Review. *The Guardian* [online]. 18 September 2012.

¹³⁸ "Juliette (The Key to Dreams)." *Juliette (The Key to Dreams)* - Národní Divadlo.

¹³⁹ SEYMOUR, Claire. Opera Today. *Opera Today: Bohuslav Martinů's Ariane and Alexandre bis* [online]. 2 June 2016.

4 My Work and Process

4.1 Project process: finding a composer

I began my process by trying to find a contemporary opera written by a female composer no earlier than 1980, which turned out to be a very challenging task. I knew I wanted to complete the research and project on an opera in particular, as singing opera and performing in operas formed a large part of my childhood, accompanying my love of visual arts and drawing which eventually translated into my interest in theatre and scenography.

The second part of the challenge I set out for myself hinged on personal experiences with sexism that I've had since completing my undergraduate degree and beginning to freelance in theatre and film. At times, this is an unconscious bias - being something that is so deeply ingrained in theatre's culture and literature that it goes unnoticed. Part of the problem lies in the representation and visibility of female creators within the performing arts industries. I wanted to address this lack of representation, and at the same time have the rare opportunity to take on a project that champions the work of female creators on several levels; this resonates with me deeply.

Despite my initial enthusiasm regarding having the choice to an opera and composer with whom I would be able to identify, I encountered many unanticipated and disheartening pitfalls and hurdles along the way. The first challenge and surprise was how difficult it was to find information on operas written by female composers after the year 1980. I had assumed that opera composed by women rarely saw the light of day because of institutional disinterest, ignorance and ambivalence which is partially true - but it was difficult

to find information anywhere about them. Since the beginning of 2017 when I started searching for a composer, the *Donne* for women in music database has been created in order to promote and publicize female composers.

One of the first composers I came across was Du Yun, a Chinese-American composer who won the Music Pulitzer Prize in 2017 for her opera *Angel's Bone*. The story centres around a couple who find two fallen angels and decide to exploit them for money. The exploitation of the angels is a commentary on present-day human rights abuses and human trafficking. Similar to *Båhlamms Fest*, the music in *Angel's Bone* is very musically eclectic - borrowing from many styles and eras and implementing a wide range of instruments. I attempted to secure this as my thesis topic, and was able to find the music online, but was unable to procure the libretto from the publisher before the spring.



Fig. 26: A scene from “*Angel's Bone*”, New Vision Arts Festival Production, Hong Kong, 2018.

I decided to move on and continue searching for other operas which fit the criteria, a process which took about three months of searching, while reading librettos, listening to music and gradually discovering female composers. With the help of friends' suggestions, and small compilations which had been made online, I made a list of all the composers I came across with work developed after 1980. During this research it is important to note, I discovered many composers whom I'll now look out for in the future (their bodies of work are not yet notable or international enough to be available widely); and I would be very interested to design productions composed by them in the future. A few of these composers, compositions, and associations that promote new work are: Tapestry Opera, American Opera projects, Lucia Ronchetti, Karin Rehnqvist, Maja Ratke, Alice Ho, Bora Yoon, Kamala Sankaram's *Thumbprint*, Tania León's *Scourge of Hyacinths*, Lisa Bielawa's *Electric Ordo Virtutum*, Afarin Mansouri's *Forbidden*, Cecilie Ore's *Ein Skuggeopera*, Kaija Saariaho's *Adriana Mater*, Meredith Monk's *Atlas*, and Judith Weir's *Black Spider* and *Armida*. Of those shortlisted, only a handful had both a libretto and music which would be accessible to me - this automatically eliminated the rest and left me with three composers and their operas: Kaija Saariaho's *Love from Afar*, Olga Neuwirth's *Báhlamms Fest*, and Judith Weir's *Blond Eckbert*.

Neither *Love from Afar* nor *Blond Eckbert* centered around particularly relatable or contemporary topics, and most importantly didn't resonate with me. Although I appreciated the acclaim *Love from Afar* had received, it didn't seem like much of a challenge to research something that had already been

recognized, and while *Blond Eckbert's* premise was intriguing, the music was not moving.

When I finally chose *Bählamm's Fest*, I had read enough librettos and listened to enough operas to have a fairly well-rounded view and understanding of the quality and range of work available, which was contemporary and written by women. The music appealed to me immediately – being unlike anything I'd heard before by any composer. The music is extremely emotionally charged and has many textured layers. The score uses pre-recorded sounds and live music played on conventional and unconventional instruments throughout the opera. I connected with the complexity and dark humour of the libretto too, which seemed multilayered and stylistically connected with the music of the opera. I discovered that the opera had a rich history too. Originally a play written by the surrealist painter and author Leonora Carrington, the artist wrote the play in 1940 during her affair with Max Ernst, at the onset of the Second World War. Olga Neuwirth then adapted the story into her first full-length music-theatre piece, like Carrington - also inspired by the Surrealist movement - but as a musical interpretation. Evidently, this was a topic with a rich history to research, and something I didn't want to miss out on learning more about. This seemed to be the perfect opportunity to explore how the design could connect to the music, history, art, and philosophy that all collided to form the piece.

Both the libretto, and Neuwirth's work journal however are written entirely in German. I translated both into "rough translations" for the sake of comprehension - which allowed me to get a clearer idea of her process and the specifics of the opera, as well as allowing me to better understand the composer

as a person. In addition, reading her work journal was a “second way in” for me on the project, as my focus had been elsewhere - causing me to struggle with the topic, and I wanted to feel excited and connected to it again, which was difficult. But reading Olga Neuwirth’s work journal helped - I was able to get an understanding of the context of her life while she was composing the opera in Venice, as well as how she saw herself at that time, and how her own experiences were connected to *Bählamms Fest*, even if indirectly - through the narrative, and the characters in the opera who resemble members of her own family. The opera and her work resonated much more so with me after reading about the creator herself, who is obviously so well able to capture and solidify an idea of sound from her mindseye, translating it into a musical reality. While I read her journal, I felt as if I was in Venice and Austria in the late nineties, experiencing the city and the art in a really intense way which seemed even more heightened by the projects she was working on - inspirational details of which she saw in the city streets and sounds around her. The weather too drastically affected her mood, and seems inseparable from the mood and music of the opera itself.

This is also similar to how I experienced Prague. Even though we’re from completely different countries, I related deeply to the way she perceives and experiences the new city she’s in, which seems like such a specific experience in itself, with its own set of hurdles to overcome. I could also really identify with her personal problems in life and work at the time, which are difficult to articulate if you haven’t had a similar experience. It seemed for Olga as if everything that could go wrong went wrong for her in Venice, which is similar to what happened

to me when I moved to the Czech Republic. Her experience included a spectrum of emotions - drastically different from day to day, from the extreme exhilarating highs to the extreme lows of her depression and discouragement seem like a commonality of moving to a new country, and just maybe in my case and Neuwirth's some bad luck too. Although there are many uplifting moments which distract the composer from the daunting task at hand - the overall effect of the journal is sombre. Coloured by her depression of the time, she combats this with her own dark sense of humour, making comic light of the most absurd and surreal situations in her life, which I had not expected to be so funny and human. It seems like it is out of this darkness and isolation which she is able to create her own surreal world in music, refusing to accept the world as it is laid out before her and seeking to provoke change through her own creations. Having lived through a similar experience to Olga - in a new country, I also felt at times isolated, misunderstood and as a result depressed. Although incredibly difficult at the time, these experiences have changed the way I'm able to perceive the world, being much more jaded than I used to be. I haven't lived through the terrors of war, but feelings of isolation and depression are universal despite the circumstances - and helped me understand this opera and others I could not have had a grasp on before living alone in Prague.

I found her journal quite poignant as many of her frustrations are akin or relatable to my own. Her struggle within her field as a female composer at the time and the challenges that faced her make up a large part of her uncertainty and scepticism during that period. Even though her journal was written over twenty years ago, this is a problem that has remained constant to this day.

After reading her journal, I began to understand why the connections between all the women associated with the history of this opera - which I also became indirectly a part of in a small way - were important. Projects like this allow the dissemination of forgotten knowledge and figures that might not otherwise be shared. They encourage like-minded artists who are women and minority artists with untold stories to pave the way forward with their stories and therefore their perspectives and voices - both real and fictional. Without this the lives and contributions of female artists of past and present would be relativized, and not appreciated in the future. Using *Bählamms Fest* as a platform to share her work and the work of other female artists is entirely political. Not only do the artists' stories gain new meaning when placed in relation to one another, becoming richer with layered histories, but in their collaboration and combination they form an entirely new art form which exists outside the boundaries of what is acceptable, therefore subverts the existing understanding of opera and women's place within it.

The combination of so many art forms, experiences, and places in this opera has created an extremely layered and complex experience which continues to fascinate me.

4.2 Design process and Inspirations

My inspirations for the practical portion of this thesis were originally paintings by Leonora Carrington, collages by Hannah Höch, and Miguel Valinas. Carrington's paintings were inspirational to me as they directly related to the characters, content and themes within the opera. As *Bählamms Fest* is adapted

from Leonora Carrington's play, it contains the same recurring character tropes which run throughout her paintings. Carrington's repeated portrayals of her childhood home and domestic spaces like kitchens were a good starting point to understanding the opera and its creator in a broader sense.



Fig. 27: *Bird Pong* by Leonora Carrington. Egg tempera, 1949.

An object in her paintings that I was particularly drawn to and returned to again and again was her unconventional use of tables within the spaces. In each of her “table paintings”, different figures are portrayed using the adapted neutral surface to suit their own needs: to play ping pong (Fig. 27), to feast (see Fig. 28), to conduct alchemical experiments, or for mystical activities in general (Fig. 29). The neutrality of the table made it ideal to suit a variety of settings within the opera. I found the association with the opera's title and climax (*The Feast of the Lambs*) fittingly symbolic of the feast too, and of traditional domesticity and women's spaces within the home, which feature strongly in Carrington's work. I considered using a larger than life table as the main set piece onstage, which

positioned flat would represent the wild heath and salon, both existing on the same literal platform/level of the table, and demonstrating the fixed nature of the house - part of and trapped in the foreboding landscape. During the Nursery and Feast scene, the same structure had the potential to be suspended or rotated at different heights and angles to convey each setting. In the Nursery scene it would be suspended above the space, eliciting a feeling of claustrophobia through the lowered elevation and creation of a darker space, appropriate for the dead creatures and little girl who appear here, like the graves of the dead below us.

In the final design, this idea did end up manifesting itself in an important way. The platform I decided to use does act like a multi-purpose object - with the ability to tilt upwards and reveal the nursery underneath - it is used for every scene. The Carnis house which it inhabits is lodged within the landscape - sunken and worn through the passage of time - it has become part of the natural world, and regardless of appearance the crimes and psychological turmoil inside and out are one and the same.



Fig. 28: *Hunt Breakfast* by Leonora Carrington. Oil on canvas, 1956.

Windows were also of interest to me as they seemed to present an important “porthole,” both in Carrington’s paintings (*Bird Pong*, *Inn of the Dawn Horse*) and to Neuwirth while she wrote *Bählamms Fest*. Windows were how Neuwirth viewed the world while she composed, only able to see a sliver of the outside much bigger reality. Unaware of the larger picture, this sliver of reality and temporary escape is what makes the most impact on our lives. These voyeuristic portholes, like that of the theatre - allow us to temporarily escape, while we remain outside or inside. We can exist in both places at once, and imagine a reality around what we’ve seen through the window. This is an important metaphor for surrealism, how what we perceive is not always as it

seems. This is an important symbol in the opera too; Theodora is unaware of the true nature and horror which lies outside, and this in turn inverts our understanding of the world on the inside of the Carnis house.



Fig. 29: *And Then We Saw The Daughter of the Minotaur* by Leonora Carrington. Oil on canvas, 1953.

In the final design, the window is a construction which amplifies the voyeurism already existent in the theatre. The placement of the window and open-faced house centre stage allows the viewers gaze in; the audience's perception of the third window (the proscenium arch) is heightened with the creation of this passageway to the core of the performance, actively inviting viewers own introspection and analysis by means of this theatrical tool.

In the early stages of the design process, I also explored creating a backdrop with a direct connection to her paintings - possibly through the use of painted or printed fabric to create an abstract landscape and the incorporation of multiple levels on which the performers could inhabit or “float.” This was inspired mainly by the Carrington painting *Took My Way Down, Like a Messenger, to the Deep* (Fig. 30), which also shows an inclination towards the flexible flat surfaces residing on many levels - physically and mentally.



Fig. 30: *Took My Way Down, Like a Messenger, to the Deep* by Leonora Carrington. Oil on canvas, 1977.

It was based on this idea, that professor Dušek recommended I see Katharina Grosse's *Wunderbild* exhibit at the National Gallery. Her massive format paintings hung from railings at the top of the ceiling in the space, and draped downwards into the space of the spectator - bringing you into the work. They were great examples of abstracted and layered backdrops, using stencils to create the illusion of depth and three-dimensionality within the space. The overall effect was impactful and stunning. These were the ideas I took away from the exhibition and considered using within my own scenography for *Bählamms Fest*.



Fig. 31: Katharina Grosse's *Wunderbild* exhibit at the Prague National Gallery, 2018.

With this backdrop, I explored creating some sort of “rough structure” similar to that of the table, but with multiple sides which could be rotated and had the ability to camouflage to the painted backdrop and the rest of its surroundings. This would have allowed the Carnis house to dissolve into the landscape at the appropriate moments within the play, and in general allow for a lot more flexibility

in the space - for animals to roam, and for the hunting scene in particular. I discussed this option with professor Korčák, who suggested the possibility of making this structure and the backdrop completely blank - and therefore relying on the use of lighting to “paint” the set appropriately in each scene, instead of having a single static and unchangeable painting throughout. Lighting, regardless was a necessary component to consider in the design, as it can provide such surreal and seamless shifts in atmosphere - it is as elusive as music within the surreal world of the opera. It is this element - like music which is so suited to surrealism - that offers the possibility to create tangible qualities while remaining immaterial and ephemeral. I did end up using backdrops as part of the final solution, as they allowed me to create a sense of depth and imply that the landscape extended beyond that of the platform visible on stage. Their emptiness and hopelessness is an emotional projection of Theodora / Leonora Carrington’s inner turmoil. We see nothing beyond the heath that contains the Carnis house because the characters cannot see beyond these confines. As in lots of surrealist narratives, the house acts as a disguise, concealing the true intentions and desires of its inhabitants.

Furthermore these backdrops allow lighting - which is possibly the most important element in creating Surreal stage design - the blank canvases on which to convey the emotion of the landscape through their dissipating atmospheres without the rigidity of more objects and structures, and act as a convention of theatricality to contrast and disrupt the “reality” on the heath.

My initial inspirations for the costumes were photo-collages done by Miguel Valinas, and Renaissance paintings which were based on the same concept - to combine the heads of animals and the formally dressed bodies of humans, the results of which were absurd hybrid creatures. These anthropomorphic creatures were ones that I thought may be suited to the world of the play - their facial expressions are so composed that in combination with their costumes they do seem to possess human characteristics and an empathetic human response.



Fig. 32: Animal collages.

I found this interesting and wanted to explore it more - their heads were so clearly animals but their bodies covered, and this disguise suggested so much about who they might be underneath an animal head or human clothing. It also changes the initial perception of the human-animal hybrid as one of a “monster” to someone who changes our perception of the outside world in the play to one we can also find relatable. It’s not a black and white world, where the world outside is good and the inside is bad - they both lie in this in-between space, and I felt that should be reflected through the character’s costumes as well. This

approach however failed to take into consideration the logistical necessity for the performers to be able to sing, with cumbersome full head masks that they would have to remove so frequently.

The human-animal hybrid is one of the main motifs within *Bärlamms Fest*, almost all of the characters having both animal and human qualities. This motif poses one of the biggest challenges within the opera: How can we create a unified visual language for characters who continually shape-shift and whose identities and histories seem too complicated for one character and the limits of the opera to contain? The blurred boundaries surrounding identity and inner emotional states which are existentially embodied through the characters and the landscape of the opera, make the design's focus less about replicating literal “half human and half animal” characters (like the ones in Miguel Valinas' work) but creatures which represent complicated emotional states of being, connected to the landscape, which we can perceive as a living breathing thing.



Fig. 33, Left: *Modenschau*, Hannah Höch photomontage. 1925 - 1935.

Fig. 34, Right: *Photomontage*, Hannah Höch 1920s - 1930s.

At first, I interpreted this in a more literal way - drawing inspiration from Hannah Höch's collages, which frequently mixed elements of animal faces and bodies with that of humans; and that of celebrity face-masks I wanted to recreate, combining celebrities faces with animals to form unique combinations suited to each character in the play. These full and half masks would be two dimensional and would then allow characters the flexibility to sing and remove their masks. I discussed this with professor Fischerová and we spoke about playing with the size of these heads, as well as mixing facial features on the masks of the actors to accentuate and elevate specific personality traits, like Höch does. This would have involved creating a visual language to include holes for singers' eyes and mouths, with the overarching idea of creating a "living collage" onstage. In retrospect, this concept was much more absurd and comedic than it was surreal. This was an important discovery however, as these aspects of the opera are hard to grasp, and are easily forgotten amongst the tragedy and darkness of the story.



Fig. 35: Celebrity Face Masks, Left - Right: Price Philip, Theresa May, Kate Middleton.

In November of 2018 I moved to England, which provided me with a new perspective and outlook on opera - it had brought me physically closer to the landscape in which Leonora Carrington grew up - not far from where I was living in the north of England. I found this inspiring and could imagine myself now in the places which populated her paintings and stories. I found I could empathize more with the country from which I had originally felt so disconnected , and therefore with the *Bählamms Fest* and history contained within it.

On a trip to the Lake District, I became absorbed by the heath-like landscapes and moors we drove through - inhabited by so many sheep - that stereotypical English countryside onto which existential pain and suffering are injected within *Bählamms Fest*. My physical presence in this landscape, combined with the darkness of winter and the thoughts that came with it all contributed to my understanding of the desolation and isolation within the opera. I was reminded of what I felt when I was working on *Káťa Kabanová* and tried to harness the same kind of energy - which was contained in the same vast, bleak, and inescapable landscape as in the world of *Bählamms Fest*.



Fig. 36: My design for *Káťa Kabanová*, 2017.

It's in the last year of the process that I've gained a new outlook on the opera which has taken time to manifest itself. Over this time I tried to find a language to express the fine line between the real and the surreal, that duality in the opera - which I believe is the most important aspect of the piece. Olga Neuwirth uses this duality of real instruments and electronic sounds in the orchestration of *Bählamms Fest* - and it seems that using both is the way to achieve the surreal. As well as harnessing the existing power of performance, allowing spectators can be introspective and outwardly reflective on the current state of the outer world. Implemented by Tröster in his work - design used in this way can speak directly to the audience and alter their perception of the opera, as well as their own reality in a two-way exchange of meaning - encompassing the real wishes, desires and realities of the audience through the mechanism of the artform. This methodology is apparent in Neuwirth's own work, as she acknowledges that a diverse interpretation by audience is important and is what fundamentally gives art meaning. The design is what must facilitate this process, while music and lighting carry the sensation and emotion of surreality through the piece. The series of windows into the heath and the kinetic nature of the set are both contributions to this audience facilitation.

In *Bählamms Fest* both the setting and characters convey a larger existential representation of the zeitgeist of the Second World War. My design attempts to convey this interconnectedness through the embedded placement of the Carnis house within the landscape - the house, which maintains the aesthetics of conventionality attempts to disdainfully reject the outer world of the heath, while being inherently a part of it and the sinister crimes therein. My use of

real-looking trees and bushes on the set seeks to question our perception of realism on stage, knowing that what we see is an imitation; still we allow ourselves to believe that what appears before our eyes is real, further interrupted by the confines of the heath, and the theatrical conventionality of the backdrops which interrupt the realism on stage.



Fig. 37: My design for *Bärlamms Fest* - Scene 8, The Feast of the Lambs.

The costumes use synthetic fabrics, as well as fur, feathers, wool, and leather to navigate this space between reality and surreality and express the hybrid nature of all the characters in the opera. The costumes are all disguises (for the actors of course) but also for the characters who use clothing as a disguise to match the conventional- appearing life they have adopted, and who take on familiar archetypes - the old woman, the young naive and beautiful girl, the beast. I wanted to use elements of these stereotypical qualities - in the silhouettes and staple items of clothing associated with the stock character, for

example, while also attempting to alter them slightly - subverting the spectators preconceived notions about the scope of the characters' identities, perhaps giving an expectation that there is much more beyond this outer surface than we perceive at the beginning. The tartan is one of these unexpected elements, which runs throughout the costume design, adding humour, and referencing an imagined location. The modernization of these costume elements, building on the rich history contained within the story of the opera and its production, is another way to interpret the Surrealism within my design. Each creator involved in its history and manifestation into a new form has used their own personal experiences, style, inspirations and emotional insight to give new meaning and understanding to this society and our own contemporary one. The hybridity of characters clothing and their mixed materials is yet another arguably surrealist medium onto which we can express our constructed identities, a fascination as of late which can also be seen in the world of haute-couture as designers engage with complicated identity and how to express this through clothing.



Fig. 38, Left: Costume rendering, Little Girl. Fig. 39, Right: Mrs. Carnis

4.3 Fashion Inspirations

The second round of costume inspirations I found was initially through concentrating on the hybridity in the opera. The human-animal-ness which is so hard to pinpoint and has its own logic within *Bärlamms Fest* has also been a fascination within recent years in haute-couture, with designers like Iris Van Herpen and Alessandro Michele (Gucci) using their garments as a way to explore contemporary society and technological advancement through hybridization. The topic is also explored, albeit in a different fashion, through the photographs taken by Charles Freger, in which he documents traditional European costumes which combine both human and animal characteristics. Iris Van Herpen - like Elisa Shiaparelli before her - is incredibly innovative with fabrics and seeks to combine

this innovation through the materiality of her designs. Her silhouettes, prints, and fabrics within the collection are designed to distort the body, while taking inspiration from mythology and scientific advancements which have been made around genetic engineering, which is enabling these once-fictional creatures the possibility to exist within the real world.¹⁴⁰

Gucci designer Alessandro Michele also explored the topic of identity in his 2018 collection, which featured “trans-humans”¹⁴¹ holding replicas of their own heads and animals, balaclavas, and a variety of other cultural references which were used to express how today people construct their own exterior identities.

Hybrids are reflections of society’s own fears and desires at any given time - seen as both outsiders and monsters - and can be an expressive tool in which Surrealism can be achieved. Van Herpen, Michele, and Freger’s photos build on these ideas which manage to create characters existing between reality and surreality. I was inspired by this and wanted to incorporate these elements into my design, as I could see parallels in the feared and revered hybridity in the opera, a metaphor for the horrors of the war. In the end, it was these artists’ combined use of synthetic materials, fur and feathers, as well as their specific cultural references to create distinct characters who could only reside in *Bählamms Fest* which I brought into my design.

¹⁴⁰ YALCINKAYA, Gunseli. Iris van Herpen explores human-animal hybrids in Shift Souls couture collection. *Dezeen*[online]. 27 January 2019.

¹⁴¹ MOWER, Sarah. Gucci Fall 2018 RTW Fashion Show. *Vogue* [online]. 15 March 2018.

5 Conclusion

Olga Neuwirth's work simultaneously connects the disciplines of Surrealism in Art with Surrealism in Opera. Her work, inspired by the histories contained within both mediums, challenges perceptions around musical convention, definition and form.

Her unique style, which is able to interweave synthetic and natural sounds into an indistinguishable soundscape has created a new genre of music and interdisciplinary art, namely *contemporary surrealist music* of which Neuwirth is a pioneer. Her compositions within this genre allows for the cross-pollination of surrealist art in any visual form, blending those with diverse musical influences - a style which was once lumped in with the classical music genre - but which needs the more precise definition of surreal music. We can deduce Neuwirth's music is the key to understanding the contemporary Surrealist movement and opera, and womens' place and importance within both genres.

Her work can be seen as a lens with which to view and understand anew past contributions of all female artists in opera, music and art, which champions the work of others through a modern recontextualisation of the female experience for the present day. *Bählamms Fest* is the first example of a music-theatre piece composed in Neuwirth's surrealist style, which seeks to build on the existing but overlooked rich history of women's contributions in the arts - through her dissemination of Leonora Carrington's play and body of work, as well as her collaboration with Elfriede Jelinek, a talented author in her own right; *Bählamms Fest* is an important piece of political music-theatre which seeks to elevate women's voices and importance within the arts for the present.

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