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CONTEMPORARY OPERA AND THE FAILURE OF LANGUAGE

Amy Bauer

Opera after 1945 presents what Robert Fink has called 'a strange series of paradoxes to the historian'.[1] The second half of the twentieth century saw new opera houses and companies proliferating across Europe and America, while the core operatic repertory focused on nineteenth-century works. The collapse of touring companies confined opera to large metropolitan centres, while Cold War cultural politics often limited the appeal of new works. Those new works, whether written with political intent or not, remained wedded historically to 'realism, illusionism, and representation', as Carolyn Abbate would have it (as opposed to Brechtian alienation or detachment).[2] Few operas embraced the challenge modernism presents for opera. Those few early modernist operas accepted into the canon, such as Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, while revolutionary in their musical language and subject matter, hew closely to the nature of opera in its nineteenth-century form as a primarily representational medium. As Edward Cone and Peter Kivy point out, they bracket off that medium of representation – the character singing speech, for instance, in an emblematic translation of her native tongue – to blur diegetic song, 'operatic song' and a host of other conventions.[3] Well-regarded operas in the immediate post-war period, by composers such as Samuel Barber, Benjamin Britten, Francis Poulenc and Douglas Moore, added new subjects and themes while retreating from the formal and tonal challenges of Berg and Schoenberg. As Björn Heile notes, we are left with few examples of contemporary opera that acknowledge the crisis of representation and the challenge of modernism, especially when faced with the 'apotheosis of realism' in current cinema.[4] Arnold Whittall agrees that contemporary operas continue to revisit the two broad categories of 'realist and mythic', but calls on musicologists and theorists for critical interpretations that determine opera's contribution to the continuing evolution of modernism.[5]

To be sure, there are important outliers: composers and works that radically rethought the relations between music, text and dramaturgy in the late 1950s and 1960s. Many compositions by Mauricio Kagel, from *Anagrama* (1958) onwards, treat text itself as musical material, while his theatrical works, among them *Sur scène* (1960) and *Phonophonie* for solo bass (1964), treat instruments and sounds as elements of the drama. *Anagrama*'s 'Babylonian mix of different existing languages' alongside nonsense leave scraps of meaning stranded, as Heile notes, like 'small islands in an ocean of incomprehensible babbling.'[6] *Staatstheater* (1970) presents a full-blown parody of grand opera, subverting every aspect – libretto, plot, pit orchestra, staging, focal roles – while retaining the distinction between solo, chorus, tutti and prop-based dramatic action. The collage

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that results resembles 'a do–it–yourself *opera povera*', prioritizing the relation between sounds and visual elements over narrative sense.[7]

Solo works for voice such as John Cage's *Aria* (1958), perhaps the first work to introduce 'unmusical' vocal noises and bodily actions into a dramatic performance,[8] greatly influenced the 1960s avant–garde. György Ligeti's *Aventures* (1962) and *Nouvelles aventures* (1965) retrace the mythical steps of sound discovery through the invention of a new language (sketched with reference to the International Phonetic Alphabet) that often blends with the accompanying instrumental ensemble. In each work three singers employ a carefully delimited repertoire of human affects to essay over a dozen virtual characters, enacting simultaneous 'plots' that rely on mimetic behaviour patterns to identify strands of the polyphonic drama. Henri Pousseur's *Votre Faust* (1961–68, rev. 1980), a 'variable fantasy in the style of an opera' (as it is subtitled) composed with librettist Michel Butor, combines an aleatory, mobile structure and a division of labour among actors, singers and instrumentalists with a vast collection of existing musical and literary materials based on the Faust legend.[9]

Such theatrical experiments were brought more closely, and self–consciously, into line with opera as genre in the 1970s. Luciano Berio's *Opera*, for ten actors, soprano, tenor, baritone, vocal ensemble and orchestra (1970, rev. 1977), intertwines three narrative layers that comment upon the theme of death (Alessandro Striggio's libretto for Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, a documentary on the sinking of the Titanic, and the spoken play *Terminal*, which deals with the treatment of the terminally ill). Rather than the individual singer displaying a wealth of extended techniques, *Opera* relies on a huge range of vocal styles and mannerisms. The work's proliferating styles complement its three narrative levels, as well as its relation to past and present opera history. Although *Opera* lets listeners chart several independent paths through its tissue of allusions, those paths are foreclosed with the death of two children at the end of the work.[10] Morton Feldman wrote his only opera *Neither* (1977), on sixteen lines by Samuel Beckett, as a monodrama for solo soprano; the soprano elongates words to such an extent that they not only lose all meaning but seem to freeze in the air (both recorded performances to date last nearly an hour).[11] Georges Aperghis, a Greek composer who worked in France with Pierre Schaeffer and Iannis Xenakis, created a series of theatre works positioned between play and opera. The comic flair of his work is reminiscent of Kagel's vocal experiments, but Aperghis's works address more general aspects of human experience and, specifically, human communication. *Récitations* for solo voice (1978) recombines French syllables and phonemes, which often seem to be chosen for sound quality over sense.[12] *Die Hamletmaschine-Oratorio* (1999–2000), based on Heiner Müller's eponymous 1977 play, salts the violent German text with English phrases (although none are taken from Shakespeare), and demands that its singers act and perform on instruments.

During the same period, John Cage's series of five *Europeras* (1987–91) took on the operatic tradition directly. All five *Europeras* rely on fragments of the existing operatic tradition, mixing the real-time performance of original and transcribed excerpts with pre-recorded music. Furthermore, all five maintain a strict separation among musical, dramatic, visual (scenery and costumes) and textual elements. Over almost five hours of stage time, Cage gradually reduces the number of singers and instrumentalists while adding pianists (playing transcriptions) and, in *Europeras* 3 and 4, Victrolas; *Europera* 5 introduces radio, television and a lighting system. Philip Glass's monumental *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) was the first of a trilogy that would include *Satyagraha* (1979) and *Akhnaten* (1983), yet *Einstein*, as Fink avers, was an opera in name only, 'a five-hour abstraction with no plot, no characters, no arias, no trained singers, no orchestra, and no intermissions'.[13] The succession of minimalist operas that followed, from both Glass and Michael Nyman (that latter's first opera was *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, 1986) met with a success that stemmed largely from their comforting adherence to earlier operatic

protocols: all featured clearly etched protagonists, narrative arcs and sumptuous settings (at least in the case of Glass). The 'continued vitality of opera as a public art'[14] hence followed from the public nature of opera as either a lavish spectacle or one with the potential to resonate with current affairs or events.

The fortunes of so-called CNN operas – John Adams's *Nixon in China* (1987) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991) – rose and fell on their contemporary themes and staging. Adams's *Doctor Atomic* (2005) appeared as the culmination of such ambitions, yet it is fascinating that in Fink's gripping study of the opera's reception history, the perceived gulf between its libretto and its music – the text versus the text-setting – surfaces time and again as an impassable barrier to its entry into the canon.[15] As at other familiar flashpoints in the long and storied history of music and drama from the Renaissance onwards, words and music stand at cross purposes. This brings Fink back to Boulez's famous interview on music theatre, in which the French composer rejects any operatic expression but the ideal: an opera in which music and language emerge together from a single creative impulse.[16]

If we agree with Fredric Jameson that language remains 'at the center of an essentially modernist "system of the fine arts"',[17] then that challenge to representation – especially with regard to opera – must begin with language and its vexed relation to music. This problematic, of course, is central to the history of opera as a genre, but I wish to tease it out from other contemporary explorations of voice, language and music, before exploring that challenge in a circumscribed manner. My scheme stages music 'overcoming' its historical subservience to language in four late twentieth-century operas and one from the turn of the century. Each has as its premise an embrace of the problem of representational language and its relation to truth, the law and subjectivity. There are other works I might have chosen: for instance, Brian Ferneyhough's opera on Walter Benjamin, *Shadowtime* (1999–2004), or George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* (2012). But the five operas selected for discussion each present a similar dilemma – the loss of the self, life or even world – as bound to the failure of language. Each treats this failure in a different way, yet in each the collapse of the representational function of the word can only be overcome, or affectively illustrated, by resorting to music and the sonic dimension of language. Each opera poses a unique challenge to this crisis of representation, one that marks it as modernist in both a material and an ethical sense: the ethics of the sensual and the particular as bulwarks against totalitarian rationalism, fear of the Other and the rule of capital.

Music, voice, philosophy, language

Andrew Bowie calls for a philosophy that rather than speaking 'of' music emerges 'from' it, one that takes music's expressive, symbolic and non-representational resources seriously as challenges to philosophy, especially to analytic traditions that address metaphysical questions via a strict, representational language.[18] The problem is, as Abbate remarks in her gloss on nineteenth-century transcendental claims for music, that even Nietzsche understood that this 'linguistically pure object [. . .] must still be described in words'.[19] The paradoxical need to couch music's philosophy in pre-existing philosophical terms proves the major obstacle to Bowie's goal, even as it illustrates philosophy's repression of music, in all its subjective freedom and concrete particularity. Any philosophical statement is above all about language itself, and is therefore only a view of language. In the words of Giorgio Agamben, philosophy 'can lead thought only to the boundaries of the voice: it cannot say the voice (or at least, so it seems)'.[20] We may admit, along with Christopher Norris, that the experience of music is unique in its combination of the 'sensory-perceptual with analytically informed and sociopolitically aware modes of listener-response'.[21] But how music might help philosophy retrieve something it has lost remains largely

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an open question. As Norris reminds us, music's mode of existence falls within the remit of intersubjective disciplines.[22] As such, it seems inherently wrong to even attempt to specify the normative criteria which would need to be met in order for a musical response to count as veridical, competent or indeed properly 'musical'.[23]
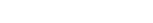
Recent work on the voice struggles with separating metaphorical, functional, psychoanalytic and transcendent notions of voice with its instantiation as a material object, a distinction that Adriana Cavarero develops from the Greek notion of phōnē onwards.[24] Cavarero turns to literature (Italo Calvino in particular) to find the musicality of song acknowledged a reflection of the musicality of the word.[25] But Barthes's famous 'grain' of the voice is a mere distraction where true communication is concerned: it is mediated everywhere by language, but cannot itself be transmitted, except obliquely.[26] Singing, therefore, is patently 'bad communication' in Mladen Dolar's view, a bearer of surplus meaning as such. The musical voice becomes another abstraction without purchase in the concrete, adding to the mystique of the voice an illusion of double transcendence.[27] Simon Porzak thus lauds Cavarero for not losing herself within idealizing or fetishizing tendencies regarding the pre-semantic character of voice, by directing it towards a destination: one 'absolutely particular other' to which that voice is directed.[28] In this, Porzak finds an echo of Stanley Cavell's description of the perlocutionary act, which may communicate more effectively when stripped of semantic meaning.[29]

This notion of a perlocutionary act stripped of logos returns us to the material basis of language. Roman Jakobson wrote of the multifarious babbling of the infant, the vast library of sounds that seem to be drastically, irrevocably discarded as the child acquires language.[30] These buried sonic treasures surface in adulthood as onomatopoeias or interjections, the latter constituting breaches of language as a representative system which, Nikolai Trubetskoi argued, pass beyond a single tongue 'into an indistinct region of sound that belongs to no one language – and that often seems, in truth, not to belong to any human idiom at all'.[31] Interjections and onomatopoeias lie on the boundaries of language as utterances: they are neither metalinguistic nor do they, in line with Agamben's futile plea, say language itself and show its limits.[32] Agamben hazards that what actually unifies us as a race is not a nature, nor a divine voice, nor even the common imprisonment of signifying language, but this experience of the boundaries of language, 'of its end'.[33]

We might begin to experience this boundary where music flips its historically subservient relation to representational language and, instead of being spoken by verbal language, speaks for it in purely musical terms. I argue that the five operas discussed below forge a new aesthetic for opera by questioning both the medium of representation and language itself as a site of stable meaning. Four of the operas stage the failure of language, as it is performatively subsumed by a musical discourse that 'speaks' in the place of a verbal text, while the fifth and most recent, I argue, employs sparing musical accompaniment to underline the collapse of meaning. Their composition ranges from 1977 to 2001: the brief *Prologue pour un Marco Polo* by Claude Vivier, *Le Grand Macabre* by György Ligeti, *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* by Helmut Lachenmann, *Luci mie traditrici* by Salvatore Sciarrino and *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* by David Lang. Vivier's one-act *Prologue* invokes the historical Marco Polo as a symbolic stand-in for the traveller in constant transformation, with no immediate precedents, while in Ligeti's opera each aria and one duet represent general number types familiar from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century opera, types often associated historically with just such a rhetorical enactment of the battle between music and language for supremacy. Lachenmann's *Das Mädchen* includes intertextual citations yet is grounded in the composer's high modernist techniques, which highlight the musical material and its means of production. Sciarrino's opera is a highly stylized gloss on the tradition, taking its cues from a Renaissance topic and a Baroque libretto. In David Lang's *The*

Difficulty of Crossing a Field (2001), Mac Wellman's repetitive libretto dissolves into banal music suspending logic and time like the unknowable absence that drives its narrative. Each work is rooted in a specific historical context – whether that be the references of Ligeti, Lachenmann and Sciarrino to both operatic and modernist tradition, or the mythic summoning of Marco Polo (in Vivier) and the antebellum American South (Lang). But the concrete, if idiosyncratic, nature of each evokes a universal experience: that point at which representation breaks down, and what is sayable gives way to what is beyond words, and irreducible to nonmusical expression.

Le Grand Macabre

Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* introduces us to the mythical realm of Breughelland on the eve of its destruction. As it opens, we meet our hapless everyman protagonist Piet the Pot. Upon encountering the demonic, otherworldly Nekrotzar and his homicidal rage, the drunken Piet begins an aria with all the signifiers of an eighteenth-century mad scene. His plaint begins lucidly in first person with 'Just had a bit too much to drink, have now and then hallucinations, hear horrible music', accompanied by a broken music box. As Nekrotzar reveals a coming reign of terror, Piet shifts to a paranoid third person, singing a highly disjunct line punctuated by screams of terror, and triple *forte* chords in the orchestra that grow ever more dissonant. Piet's aria ends in 'here in Breeu—ghel, ghel-la-la-la', splintering into meaningless, melismatic syllables drawn out by periodic repetitions of the musical line, over the infamous Petrushka chord, with its maximum number of dissonant tritones, as shown in the reduction of **Example 18.1**. His cries ascend chromatically, exploring divisions within the outer bounds of shifting intervals as note values decrease and the dynamics cycle from *pianissimo* to *sforzando* with each ascent, marked by the performance indication 'Piet has gone completely mad'. Upon reaching a falsetto trill in the fifth octave at triple *forte*, he is thrust to the ground like a puppet, at which point Nekrotzar 'springs into action, as if a film which had come to a standstill suddenly carries on.'[34]

Music and madness have been associated from the earliest Greek myths, threaded together, as John Hamilton notes, through the third term of language.[35] Hamilton views music and madness as opposing limits on language: the silence beyond either may indicate the complete breakdown of the subject – Piet as lifeless marionette – or act as a sign of transcendence into a realm beyond concepts. Madness may drag us down to an atavistic state, while music lifts us up, but both manifest themselves with an immediacy that is lost in language, with its inherent bias towards reflection. Either term may be co-opted by language as an abstract sign. Yet the 'mad aria' seems explicitly designed to thwart that impulse: it binds music and madness in a redoubled dissolution of sense, allowing voice to speak in language's stead and the audience to revel in senseless sound. Piet's mad aria goes one step further, by taking a toponym – a synecdoche for the world

Example 18.1   Piet's drunken aria. György Ligeti, *Le Grand Macabre*, revised version, Scene 1

of the opera – and dismantling it, syllable by syllable, until only a gasp is left. All of Breughelland in essence becomes 'horrible music', expressing an imagined fate beyond words for its citizens. That the music does not stop with Piet's collapse clues us in to Breughelland's unlikely survival, which, given all that has transpired, also transcends the bounds of sense.

Scene 3 of the opera introduces the reigning Prince Go-Go's quarrelling black and white ministers. Their tenor–baritone duet reflects the dark, comic themes of many a *buffa* aria and Gilbert and Sullivan patter song, in which the opulence of language seems ever on the verge of escaping the singer's grasp. Yet the duet's construction as a series of escalating insults more immediately evokes the tradition of the dozens in its scatological content. It reduces that tradition to the rote recitation of bare invective, constrained mechanically by the alphabet, as the ministers begin at A and exhaust the blasphemous potential of each letter before continuing, as if in a demented parody of a Sesame Street skit. The ministers' routine was merely hinted at in the play by Michel de Ghelderode that formed the basis for the opera's libretto.[36] In their original context these characters prefigured the Smiths and Martins of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, as the indistinguishable but archetypal pair of absurdist comedy, whose contrasting appearance is belied by their uniform discourse. Their farce, in good Oulipo fashion, is constrained by several juxtaposed 'machines'.[37] While the libretto cycles through the alphabet, a steady waltz in 3/4 is interrupted every third bar by duple time, which stops the dance dead in its tracks, punctuated by a chromatic chord orchestrated differently at each break.

The sung insults mimic the oom-pa-pa waltz rhythm with a compound melody; the upper voice descends by semitone, with each minister allotted two notes (and two curses) before shifting to the next letter in the alphabet. This broken waltz outlines a Bavarian *Zwiefacher*, a folk dance that typically alternates 3/4 waltz and 2/4 pivot steps, albeit an abbreviated version that accompanies the serial tune to shape a tipsy twelve-bar period.[38] The pitch cycle continues on repeat, at odds with both the alphabetical and the rhythmic cycle, as shown in **Example 18.2**. After the second period the letter cycle breaks down ('ha, can't think of anything with "I"', rehearsal figure 279), and shifts into double time: one 'insult' per minister (rehearsal figure 280). The letter 'O' halts the proceedings again, and the pitch series begins to decay. Melismatic elaborations are prompted by the profusion of abuse available under 'S' in the dictionary, but 'U' and 'V' bring the volley of abuse to a standstill, with 'X, Y, Z' serving as a coda to the withered strophic form.

In an opera characterized up to this point by surreal but still intelligible discourse, the duet strips the libretto of narrative and syntactic function. Language performs a musical role, serving merely as another layer of the polyphonic fabric, each serial curse punctuating the sequence like a dissonant orchestral chord. As the duet cycles towards entropy, language surrenders even its semantic content, its failure coinciding with a diatonic cadence composed of quintal chords. If language here has capitulated to music, one might also say that music has given up its vaunted freedom. The duet's serial construction mocks the arbitrary, pre-subjective automatism inherent in language, stripped of the pretence of meaningful content and reduced to a ritual, a catalogue aria of convention disguised as a vaudeville slapstick routine.

Both the madness of Piet and the serial joust of the ministers are revived and expanded in the three arias sung by Breughelland's secret police chief, Gepopo. Gepopo's arias resemble those sung by Mozart's Queen of the Night in their fearsome difficulty and fevered pitch. Gepopo's avian disguise and obsequious demeanour seem to conflate two characters in *The Magic Flute*: Papageno and the Queen, the obsequious male servant and the patrician female harridan. Gepopo moves with the dance-like rhythms of Papageno but acts with unthinking authority, a perfect conflation of Carolyn Abbate's reading of Papageno as a 'mechanist chimera' and the Queen of the Night's aria as representing 'soulless birdsong'.[39] As a confluence of man and

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Example 18.2 Zwiefacher of the black and white minister. Ligeti, Le Grand Macabre, Scene 3

woman, of bird catcher and queen, Gepopo embodies a contradiction: the mechanical, senseless voice of authority, of the Law, from her entrance uttering the nonverbal imperative 'Psssst!' to her paranoid recitation of random warnings. Her second aria begins backstage when, mute with terror, she enters as a pure voice on high B, revealed only as the orchestral masking subsides. The held B gradually turns into a wobbling trill and crescendos to quadruple *forte*, as the orchestra abruptly halts and the soprano begins again a semitone lower, before launching into a virtuoso

cadenza sung *staccatissimo*. When Gepopo again engages with language, she hovers on a precipice of intelligibility, shouting 'Secret cipher! Code-Name: Loch Ness Monster!'.

The orchestra cycles mechanically through twelve-tone rows in an equally mechanical Latin dance rhythm, as shown in **Example 18.3**, while the alternate screams of 'yes!' and 'no!' are amplified by offstage whispers. Here the libretto's language slips beyond mysterious nonsense to

Example 18.3   Gepopo's second aria. Ligeti, *Le Grand Macabre*, Scene 3

blatant paradox – a shift that reveals the crippling deadlock of language as a symbolic machine which, like the secret police chief herself, wields an ersatz authority with utter contingency and no connection to truth. Gepopo's final tirade begins with cries of 'Coming!' and devolves into nonsense syllables – a stew of hard consonants and rotating vowels – that cycle more rapidly as she continues (according to the directions in the score) 'insanely', 'completely insanely' and in 'a paroxysm of excitement, confusion and panic'. With syntax and meaning forsworn, her otherworldly voice becomes the sole, irrational support for her position. Wide leaps, repeated accents and extreme dynamics communicate a state beyond horror and beyond the reach of the symbolic. Her final rational phrase and final exercise of authority – 'Where's the guard?' – is gradually stripped of phonemes as it repeats, until she is left shouting the paternal signifier 'Da!' (or 'there') sixty times before returning to the high B she came in on almost six minutes earlier.

Prologue pour un Marco Polo

'The importance of the human voice to Vivier's output cannot be overstated', writes Jonathan Goldman.[40] Vocal compositions such as *Lonely Child*, *Bouchara*, *Trois airs pour un opéra imaginaire* and *Kopernikus* were the outcome of automatic writing sessions inspired by the surrealists, and often resulted in a kind of private language, even when those texts did not stray from French. But Vivier's own invented language dates back to his very first vocal work, *Ojikawa* (1968), in which it is treated as a kind of sound poetry, a string of colourful phonemes: 'O-ji-ka-wa/ Ah! . . . Ni-ê-do-ka-wa. . . '.[41] Laurent Feneyrou places such imaginative constructions in a Jakobsonian childlike world without grammar, syntax, meaning and/or Law, falling somewhere between Benveniste's categories of the semiotic and the semantic. Influenced by Stockhausen's focus on acoustic colour in *Stimmung*, they operate as a playful '*experimentum linguæ*, the pure fact that one speaks and there is language', before discourse proper.[42] This desire to flee representation has a whiff of the utopian, yet Vivier retains a playful and direct address that prompts an empathetic response from the listener.

This process is heightened by the juxtaposed and expanded forms found in *Prologue pour un Marco Polo* from 1981, which takes a historical avatar of cosmopolitan travel and adventure and focuses on his human loneliness and isolation. According to György Ligeti, the air of decadent sensuality and heightened pathos found in Vivier's earlier work was tempered in *Prologue* by its brilliant sonic synthesis, unique forces (six voices join a chamber ensemble composed of clarinets, strings and percussion, in addition to tape) and command of large form.[43] At only twenty-two minutes, the piece is sometimes performed as part of an 'opera fleuve', consisting of companion works suggested by the composer. Yet *Prologue* is self-contained, encompassing the journey of a 'misunderstood seeker' from the obscure towards a lucid apotheosis.[44] Vivier engaged the Quebec poet Paul Chamberland to write part of the libretto in French. Yet what literary French populates the work 'speaks more of Polo than it speaks [itself]';[45] the majority of *Prologue* is composed in Vivier's *langue inventée*, intended to symbolize Polo's general incomprehension as he moves through each alien landscape. The simple phonemes that characterize this imaginary language are of a piece with both the childlike mysticism of the work and the clear diatonic allusions found in all of the late works.[46] Yet they are enhanced in *Prologue* by spectral harmonies that thicken a primarily homophonic line.

Bryan Christian refers to this late practice with the term *grammelot*, derived from the use of nonsense by French *commedia* players and popularized by the playwright Dario Fo.[47] A grammelot in this sense functions not as but rather in place of natural language, relaying the sense of meaning with the aid of gestures, rhythms and sounds. If, as Christian asserts, Vivier's *langue inventée* represents a constant striving to express the ineffable, this ineffable is given a material shape in *Prologue*. Here *langue inventée* stands in not for a specific foreign tongue but for the

complete opacity of the 'other' in any incarnation. As a non-functional text that bears only the appearance of language, it represents anything and nothing, pointing towards the profound leap of faith that represents every true attempt at discourse.

A Sage who abuses the searcher speaks the first text in French, over *langue inventée* sung by the chorus, further obscured by techniques that include singing through tubes, tremolos at different speeds and locations, and phonemic colour changes. A single intelligible word recurs like a refrain throughout *Prologue*: 'Zipangu', a transliteration of the Chinese word for Japan in Polo's era. In the midst of nonsense 'Zipangu' marks a familiar unknown, a fabled isle that Polo never reached. When French text is heard again, it is on the lips of the Greek chorus, urging a rapt Polo, in the person of a soprano, to 'Seek out your true friends in the shadow of the mountains and the peace, the peace of the deserts', before subsiding once again into babble. The 'solo de solitude' comes in the middle of *Prologue*, spoken not by the soprano standing in for Polo but by a bass with the most elaborate text yet, as shown in Figure 18.1. If Polo began not comprehending his surroundings, now he himself cannot be understood. Polo does not receive the

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(g)
Bouchara sneu von t(r) euss
K̶iordou jreu yos Flietkloss
K̶ata–i nouss trâ yess dja vieu niou jtoustiè
G̶a nieu stou vlâ
O̶-i jtiè zneu Kakroustikia
N̶e tièotebrou tcheé ka keuss ties kouch
N̶or tiou chfleu kiardos dio krénélokio
K̶âtâro-i kátáro-i chiflu miardus do kou
    (mouillé)
N̶e-u-ille jdu fleukrinia yo frichtchia
S̶toy kiatchko neu la–i freu kiet chkovrou
v(r)i boy yak leu jniè

(r) : r roulé [rolled r]
(g)
ch : ch dur guttural (voir 'g' hollandais) [hard guttural ch (as in the Dutch 'g')]
o-i : passage de o vers i [transition from o towards i]

Dans ce texte toutes les consonnes sont dures. On peut aussi utiliser un larynx artificiel, dans ce cas les consonnes seront prononcées fortes et les voyelles ~~s~~ très douces. Le laryngophone sera silencieux pendant les arrêts du texte.

[In this text all the consonants are hard. An artificial larynx can also be used, in which case the consonants will be produced loudly and the vowels very softly. The laryngophone should be silent during the breaks in the text.]

durée totale : 80 secondes [Total duration: 80 seconds]

Figure 18.1 'Solo de solitude', from Claude Vivier, *Prologue pour un Marco Polo*

gift of intelligible speech until his final 'testament', in which the soprano climbs ever higher to approximate, in Vivier's words, 'the voice of God, almost the voice of madness'.[48] He is ultimately understood only in death, singing the refrain 'darkness over darkness . . . only in death will I find the ultimate language'.

Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern

Helmut Lachenmann's *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* may be the most famous contemporary opera to address the problem of language and representation, a problematic attacked on several levels of narrative, musical and visual structure. Commissioned in 1988 but not premiered until 1996, it was immediately hailed for its 'astonishing range, freshness, and grace'.[49] The opera seems to accord musical elements independence from the narrative burden of its accompanying libretto, even while that combination addresses weightier political and social issues. *Das Mädchen*'s innovative treatment of narrative, voice and text seems to belie its subtitle: music with images. Which images, a listener might ask? How do these images arise (are they literal or figurative?), and in what sense are they 'with' music (alongside? entwined?)? Music 'with' images suggests a doubled presentation, one we might read through a temporal lens: voices that *speak* of past events are reconstructed as *images* in the present. The narrated past, mediated through language, opposes 'the deictic gesture of the here and now'.[50]

And there is more than one reconstruction. While the Hans Christian Andersen story of the little match girl forms the work's basis, that narrative is split and refracted throughout the opera; texts from Lachenmann's childhood acquaintance, the Red Army Faction member Gudrun Ensslin, and the *Codex Arundel* of Leonardo da Vinci appear as extended excerpts, while musical quotations and programmatic episodes float in and out of the minimal libretto. The libretto cites not only Leonardo and Ensslin, but Ernst Toller, Friedrich Nietzsche, Mozart's *Magic Flute* and Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*, in such a way as to position the original fairy tale, in Christian Kemper's reading, at the 'crossroads of archetypical, mythical, utopian, and critical moments' given body by the conflicting images that arise from the texts.[51] Adult concerns about the relationship between the individual and society, art and knowledge, and the responsibility of political action are 'broken' (one might also say brokered) by the 'prism of childlike experience'.[52] The introduction of each subsequent story appears to upend the bare semantic elements of the previous one as a basic principle: cold inverts to warmth, light replaces dark, and the flux of society becomes the solitude of a prison cell, deserted street or Leonardo's cave. The first section of Ensslin's letter summarizes this conflict *inter vivos*: 'The criminal, the lunatic, the suicide, they embody this contradiction; they are annihilated by it.'[53] On the level of plot Andersen's original tale operates, as Matthias Schmidt notes, as a 'forgotten memory', momentarily illuminated or animated by its intertexts.[54] Such a structure exemplifies Lachenman's oft-stated dictum 'I hate – not only in art – the Messiah and the buffoon. One of them is a distortion of the other. Therefore I love Don Quixote, and I believe in the little Match Girl.'[55]

If Lachenmann writes music as 'ideological criticism from the outset',[56] that criticism reaches beyond psychological and sociological concerns to vivify archetypal human experiences by means of particular instrumental playing techniques (wiping, plucking, rubbing, striking, stroking, and so on). His concept of *musique concrète instrumentale* presumes that sound carries a 'message of its origin', one that mediates between itself and narrative meaning, even in the context of opera as an art dependent on language.[57] Thus we need look no further than the musical material itself for insight. Hence, when Lachenmann sets himself the task of illuminating the opera's structure through semantic means, he refers to the semantics of musical gesture as well as language.[58] Periodic movement becomes an involuntary physical reaction to the cold, which

becomes an expression of freezing. Likewise, the 'cold' tone colour of the 'Queen of the Night' citation – a toneless whistle with diaphragmatic accents – equates meteorological with social frigidity.[59] But musical semantics complement, and complicate, the verbal: the match girl is an 'it', Gudrun Enslin speaks of 'us', and Leonardo's researcher says 'I'. We move from the existential word of the girl to her world – a world she is powerless to change – to Ensslin, who acts upon the world, to Leonardo, who seeks to understand it.[60]

Alienated speechlessness

'I always paid familiar genres special attention – in a paradigmatically modified context. [. . .] "What do you think of voice?" [. . .] has remained a traumatic one to me', states Lachenmann.

> A musical understanding that eludes the voice, or even excludes singing is somehow not quite right. I knew that, it was gnawing at me. When we speak of the girl's genesis, then this includes the fact that this opera came to be thanks also to my – still unfinished – occupation with the singing voice.[61]

If singing, as a direct expression of emotion, has always stood for truth,[62] then noises, indecipherable text, and the sonic artefacts of voice comment on its indivisible assertion: they alienate it and express 'enlightened' irony, as in the hidden chorale 'O du fröhliche'.[63]

Lachenmann states that 'I try to make a precise definition of that which can be defined by language, to keep the mind free for what cannot be expressed by language. [. . .] The irrational, the transcendental, all the things we cannot define.'[64] The breadth of this sonic reach includes the sound of words, how musical sounds relate to those of language, and the 'non-sound of words, the "speechlessness" where words used to be or should be'.[65] Such sonic precision demands that listeners make a greater perceptual effort, an effort not normally associated with opera, a genre in which the confluence of language, music and dramaturgy may purposively overwhelm the senses and thwart concentrated listening. Yet many of Lachenmann's sounds – framed by silence or timbral halos – speak eloquently in place of a suspended text: the friction of each of the girl's matches as it is struck, or the two sopranos audibly rubbing their hands to create a non-pitched rhythmic expression of their frigid state. These nonverbal 'semantics' are augmented by a mild shock when elemental elements of language pop out of the texture, most notably the 'ich' that pierces the enigmatic surface of the work to signal the match girl's emotional depths and heights. And each intertext offers language at a different level of discourse: Gudrun Ensslin's statement appears as a tape overlay, while the Leonardo text is divided primarily into syllables, and recited in a hocket-like, pointillistic manner by two characters.[66] David Metzer traces Lachenmann's depiction of speechlessness in *Das Mädchen* as a concerted act to resist the various losses of speech experienced by the voices threaded throughout.[67] As an example, I present brief analyses of two passages that demonstrate the fraught relation between tone and text that characterizes the opera and its attempt to articulate what one reviewer called a pervasive 'alienated speechlessness' in place of sung language.[68]

The 'Chorale prelude' on 'O du fröhliche' (Joyous night) that opens the opera – in *flautando* strings, on a sustained A♭ chord with added sixth – plays the role of an anti-overture. As Daniel Kötter notes, before the music has begun at all, it is ready to stand still.[69] That A♭ marks the beginning of the chorale tune in D♭ major. The tune is then slowly deconstructed, its syllables merely implied by isolated phonemes – on discrete beats – in a slow, augmented rhythm marked by antique cymbals. This shadow chorale is further obscured by pitches related to B minor, distributed as harmonics in violas, cymbals, guitar, horns and pizzicato strings. Pitchless sounds

connoting the chill surround the chorale as it slips down gradually from C major to B major over the course of the first ninety-nine bars. Individual instruments separate specific chorale pitches from rhythms, but the harmonization defeats any recognition of the melody. We sense the rawness in the air, the struggle to express joy, the difficulty in moving forward, rather than merely remaining in place; hence the fragility of the subject in the opera's existential landscape.

Scene 12 in the opera's second act, titled 'Ritsch 1' (Stove) (bars 96–165), expresses the elusiveness of the hot, bright match, against the pervasive cold and dark to which all warmth must succumb. The passage begins in silence; 'ich' enters, divided into a percussive 'i' sounds followed by a sustained 'ch'. This fading phoneme joins the resonance of rolled cymbals and a cushioned dôbachi (large Japanese gong). Similarly, 'hol-' (from 'streichholz') is succeeded by a longer 'z' to onomatopoeically evoke the strike of a match and its hissing flame. Here identity, material object, action, temperature and image coalesce in one event. In a sense, the simple sound of a match being struck connotes life in the void, a 'sound as a message of its origin' that operates on several levels of meaning.[70] As instruments enter and expand the metallic corona, a huge waxing and waning orchestral sound evolves, and shifting tone colours and dynamics build to a sonorous equivalent of the blazing oven. Consonant harmonies emerge from the texture, dragging the two sopranos with them. The fragmented words are completely subsumed by the mass of sound, a climactic point of the opera that suddenly dies off. The oven's image – of a piece with its sonorous representation – vanishes with the dead match, while the next scene returns us to its antithesis: the sound of styrofoam blocks rubbed together against a frigid wall. The dry, white noise and unvaried pace of the styrofoam part mock the acoustic richness of the glorious cluster, and build to a kind of anti-climax that gives way to anticipation of the second match.

Luci mie traditrici

The plot of Sciarrino's opera *Luci mie traditrici* (1996–98) reflects the most flagrant melodrama: it moves swiftly from professions of eternal love between a Duke and his wife to the brutal murder of the Duchess, her lover and the servant who betrayed them. Following the provenance of its Baroque libretto, the music draws on stylized Baroque writing, while a 1608 elegy by Claude Le Jeune provides implicit commentary during the prologue and the three intermezzos. Yet contrary to the conventions of grand opera, passionate dialogues between characters are conducted in short, stunted recitative that barely rises above a whisper, while a twenty-piece ensemble surrounds their discourse with ambient punctuation that hovers between noise and tone. Christian Utz notes the discrepancies between text and music in his semiotic analysis of vocal lines and their contribution to a 'spiral form'.[71] In contrast, I view the opera as a challenge to language itself on three levels: 1) as the text and voice of the Le Jeune lament are replaced with instruments in its three repetitions; 2) in metalinguistic terms, in the way language is used in the libretto to undermine its own stability and inherent danger, and finally 3) by the sheer materiality of the vocal entreaties and their instrumental accompaniment, which eclipse the text by not simply signifying affect but also by embodying it and its psychological context. *Luci mie traditrici* pays homage to opera's longstanding staging of music's subservient relation to representational language, but there are good reasons to accept its creator's assertion that it represents an 'out-and-out assertion of a reform of the theatre'.[72]

The Le Jeune elegy opens as a monophonic lament emerging from darkness, with the soprano slowly appearing as she reaches the second verse. It marks an appropriate introduction to a work inspired by Gesualdo, both for its chromatic genus, so beloved by the composer, and its sombre theme. **Example 18.4** provides an annotated comparison of the first phrase in the prologue and each intermezzo. Intermezzo 1 brings back the elegy in its original, three-voice
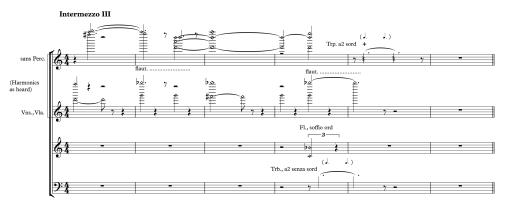
Example 18.4 Salvatore Sciarrino, *Luci mie traditrici*: comparison of the prologue and three intermezzos

harmonization, but with cello and alto saxophone taking the soprano part, bassoon and trumpet the alto, and viola the low voice. A direction for false unisons in the alto saxophone and a flour‑ish of harmonics in the violin lends the slightest air of instability to this appearance, as morning turns to noon within the garden. Intermezzo 2 paraphrases the original elegy, with ghostly flute harmonics and *flautando* in the strings. Winds and brass have vanished, with the melody now

held aloft in the fifth register by *divisi* violas. This version also marks a transition within the same space, as dusk becomes evening within the manor. The fourth and final appearance of the elegy occurs in Intermezzo 3. By now only a skeleton of *Qu'est devenu*, it appears mainly *pianissimo* through string harmonics and faint rustlings in brass and percussion as the drama withdraws even further to the bedchamber late at night. As Marcelle Pierson notes, 'Le Jeune's elegy has crumbled into ruins'.[73]

The plot references the true tale of the Renaissance prince-composer Gesualdo, as portrayed in a later *roman à clef*, Giacinto Andrea Cicognini's 1664 play *Il tradimento per l'onore* (Betrayal for Honour's Sake).[74] In *Il tradimento* the Duchess Armidea succumbs to her former lover and is betrayed by a scorned servant. Duke Federico sets up a rather elaborate scheme to exact vengeance, involving a dinner party with murder for dessert and the reading of *Il pastor fido* that forecasts her death. Sciarrino both compacts and expands the original text: the players lose their proper names, and the plot is whittled down to an archetypal tale of revenge honour killing sans garish melodramatic confrontations. But, in another homage to the work's early seventeenth-century inspirations, he retains *Il tradimento*'s stichomythic couplets, often pared down further to one- and two-word oblique retorts.

From the opening scene, in which the Duchess pricks her finger on a symbolic thorn, the stilted parlance suggests that language is not to be trusted: 'Too high a price is your blood. Not if from that blood the rose was born.'[75] This is but the first of many freighted conversations conducted in riddles, feints and outright contradiction. In Scene 4 the Guest and the Duchess implore each other to speak, to tell, while the eavesdropping servant cries 'I wish I had no ears'. As the scene ends, the Duchess murmurs 'Let silence protect me', foreshadowing a tragedy compelled by language. For when the servant promptly reveals all as Scene 5 opens, the Duke's answers 'I was not dishonoured as long as you were silent'.

The opera's vocal writing adopts a pitched declamatory style and a technique Sciarrino calls *sillabazione scivolata* (gliding syllable articulation), which combine to suggest a stylized form of High Renaissance freedoms with the unstressed syllables of text. But *sillabazione scivolata* clearly serves Sciarrino's modernist aesthetic, favouring the sensuous aspects of text over sense. These measured glissandos move more quickly than actual speech, often over a long-held note that quickly breaks off. The stilted replication of text pairs is framed by a silence that thwarts connection, and points both inwards and outwards to the instrumental cues that carry the emotional weight of the exchange. The background noise created by the instrumental ensemble becomes another character in the drama: constructed of tiny rotating modules lifted imperceptibly from the opening chanson, the instrumental web that buoys the action undergoes a continual transformation, one that keeps pace with the large-scale temporal, emotional and spatial motion of the opera, from morning to night, outside to inside, and tranquillity to horror.

Scenes 1–4 are set in the garden, where the rippling, overlapping dialogue is framed by the mimetic sounds of birds, insects and wind that animate the scene, performed using high harmonics and a full palette of extended techniques in the chamber accompaniment. When the action moves indoors and the sun sets, the orchestra comes indoors as well, sketching the interior landscape of characters in hushed tones. The undulating speech of earlier scenes is here replaced by a parlando, rapidly descending speech, and the Duke makes his fateful decision. The final scene will span the entire gamut of vocalities: whispering, soft pleading and singing at all dynamic levels. Yet the drama as an essentially static cycle is underlined by a return to the sounds and pacing of the first scene.

Two brief passages from separate points in the opera illustrate the dominance of pure sound over textual meaning, as the focus shifts from the external environment to animate the inner drama of the characters. In Scene 3 the Duchess meets her lover, the Guest. Gripped by a mutual

Guest	Taci, lingua	Be silent, my tongue
Duchess	Chiuditi, o bocca	Be closed, my mouth
Guest	Lingua presuntuosa	Presumptuous tongue
Duchess	Bocca temeraria	Rash mouth
Guest	Non parlo più, o Signora	I will speak no more, my Lady
Duchess	Nel silenzio mi profondo	In deep silence I fall
Guest	Parto, o Duchessa	I must leave, Duchess
Duchess	A Dio, o Marchese	With God, my Lord
Guest	Sentite	Hear (feel)
Duchess	Uditemi	Hear me. . .
Guest	Che?	What?
Duchess	Cosa?	What?
Guest	Nulla	Nothing.
Duchess	Niente	Nothing.
Guest	Ohimè	Alas!
Duchess	O Dio	O God!
Guest	Che confusione	What confusion. . .
Duchess	Che sconvolgimento	What turmoil. . .

Figure 18.2 Text of the duet between the Duchess and her lover in Salvatore Sciarrino, *Luci mie traditrici*, Scene 3

passion, they fuse into one entwined vocal entity, sharing the same vocal register, rhythms, images and rhetorical figures. An excerpt from the libretto at the end of the scene highlights its obsession with speaking and sounding (Figure 18.2).

Harmonics in flutes and high strings, tongued percussive punctuation in the saxophone, and tremolandos in the lower strings swell and subside with the voices without replicating their lines, as though the lovers had been absorbed into nature. Such is the absence of normal instrumental musical discourse – identifiable melodies and harmonic progressions – that the merest hint of a third motive, answering the Duchess's pleas for the Guest to 'hear' her, captures our attention as silence and confusion overtake language. The penultimate scene ends with the Duke having made his decision, while the Duchess leaves believing that she has been forgiven. Here the crickets, frogs and rustling wind of the garden scenes become a physiological sketch of the Duke's torment, his pulsing heart, laboured breathing and stifled sobs, before giving way to the final intermezzo as the ghost of the original elegy signals his resolve.

The Difficulty of Crossing a Field

In his *Los Angeles Times* review of the Long Beach Opera production, Mark Swed declared that David Lang's *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* was about the 'difficulty of existence [. . .] a hybrid opera/play, unlike any other I know'.[76] Based on a one-page story by Ambrose Bierce (1842–*c*1914), Lang's 'opera' concerns a plantation owner in the antebellum South who – in full view of witnesses – disappeared into thin air while crossing a field. As a 'hybrid opera/play', the work's form thus matched its subject. Words, music and drama fold into one another, mimicking the way in which each character's view of the opera's central mystery collapses into the unknowable absence that drives its narrative. Although Mr Williamson's disappearance remains ambiguous,

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the work's setting does not: the thoughts of his slaves, neighbours and family reflect different existential viewpoints even as the relations between slaves and owners, and among Williamson and his wife and daughter, fix the story squarely in 1854.

Based on the anecdotal report of a man's disappearance with no immediate rational, poetic, or allegorical import, Lang's *Difficulty of Crossing a Field* could glibly be said to be about nothing. Yet the entire music-theatrical experience creates a sense of profound unease. Mac Wellman's libretto makes deft use of the seven hundred words in Bierce's restrained account to illustrate the suspension of logic and time, while Lang's string quartet lines circle literally and figuratively around the hypnotic spoken and sung exhortations. Andreas Mitisek's novel staging for the Long Beach Opera further emphasized the gap between observation and reason by putting the audience on stage, while singers and actors moved forward and back, and up and down, from various locations in the fog-shrouded and dimly lit auditorium.

The opera's narrative, such as it is, is explicitly, almost didactically, structured around an absence that cannot be explained, or even named. Thus Wellman's libretto proceeds as a series of seven numbered 'tellings' removed from chronological time, but positioned to comment on each other through hidden repetitions and associative connections, aided by the almost subliminal effect of the subdued string quartet that accompanies most of the stage action. Each telling recounts the central event from a different viewpoint, one informed by the memories, psychology and ideologies of those for whom Mr Williamson's disappearance exerted such a strange and troubling power. In a previous study of the opera I attempted to account for its compelling affect through a series of seven 're-tellings', envisioning it as a convergence of seven entwined narratives that work together.[77] Here I focus on the minimal musical score and its accompanying libretto as independent, if complementary, narratives that structure the opera's surface.

Ambrose Bierce, a minor figure of nineteenth-century American letters, and one of its most notorious investigative journalists, was an almost postmodern 'literary hippogryph', who conjoined elements from realism and impressionism, naturalism and surrealism, while rejecting wholesale the sentimental and ideological assumptions of his contemporaries.[78] Bierce is popularly known for his Civil War tales and the cynical witticisms of *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911).[79] Yet Bierce's stories moved far beyond standard tales of the war and the macabre. Riddled with gaps and ambiguous details, they often challenge the reader's perceptions of events and characters, exploring the limits of the narrative as a mode of expression.[80] His varied tales share a singular obsession with time and the fallibility of human psychology. Bierce's narratives often focus on an arrested moment, a kind of hallucinatory tableau vivant that, paradoxically, is always in motion, while the act of reading recapitulates the doomed strategies that his protagonists employ to understand their predicament.

Bierce's tale *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* is the slightest of a particular subgenre in his oeuvre, one in which an inexplicable event is left unexplained by either rational or supernatural means. Despite its brevity and presentation, the story could therefore be seen as the prototypical Biercean tale. A journalistic report of the disappearance is followed by one of Bierce's favourite tropes: a trial or, in the words of the *Devil's Dictionary*, 'A formal inquiry designed to prove and put upon record the blameless characters of judges, advocates and jurors'.[81] We could turn to Bierce's *Dictionary* for further subtext, from his satirical take on 'inadmissible evidence' (that of slaves), down to the property across which Mr Williamson strides, the notion of land 'considered as property' being described by Bierce as something that, 'carried to its logical conclusion, [. . .] means that some have the right to prevent others from living'.[82]

In his original play Mac Wellman greatly expanded Bierce's text through repetition and the explicit incorporation of seven 'tellings'.[83] Wellman's attraction to Bierce follows from his fascination with dated language, stemming from his concerns regarding a lost richness in the American

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vernacular, one that has led to a concomitant flattening of affect and meaning. Wellman's politics and aesthetics are expressed materially by his concern with the physicality of language – words as 'objects flying around the room'.[84] This embodied aesthetics may be best illustrated in the play by those scenes in which slaves appear to spout nonsense, but betray a kind of understanding beyond sense. Wellman calls these passages 'moments of transcendence, moments of being absolutely spiritually naked'.[85] In the repetition of simple words and phrases ('crutch, crane'), the language transforms and interacts with the music, which has a life of its own.

Mrs Williamson's singular, troubled voice is closely identified with the central erasure at the play's centre: the gaps in a language that cannot name what is 'more than a mere disappearance'. Inasmuch as she has no name other than 'Mrs Williamson', her identity has been effaced along with that of her husband. The chorus of slaves that follow her introduction exist on a different ontological plane, their proper names replaced by mundane objects and qualities such as Round, Juniper, Crabgrass, Clock, Nuisance and Doorbell. The women in the Williamson household share affinities with the field hands as members of two classes whose speech is ignored. Meanwhile the presiding magistrate opens the second and fifth tellings in a closed room, where he interrogates Selma planter Armour Wren and the overseer, Andrew. Wren's testimony draws liberally on Bierce's richly detailed language, yet within each telling, events are retold several times, highlighting the 'gaps [. . .] in the factual evidence'. Andrew's testimony includes a manifesto on slave management, but when confronted with his ignorance of the matter at hand his discourse dissolves.

Lang agreed to use Wellman's *Difficulty of Crossing a Field* as a libretto as it already seemed to adopt 'premusical strategies' of recycling, repetition and permeable characters,[86] given its truncated source text. Yet there is little variability in Lang's monotonous score, which relies on two basic harmonic/voice-leading models and their variations. The opera begins with an introduction in E minor, which provides material for a series of chorale variations. A related series of four-bar (or slightly longer) ostinato figures arises from a simple contrapuntal framework: a four-note descending tetrachord set against a descending step-neighbour, as shown in the harmonic reduction of **Example 18.5**. This pattern appears in different modes and voices, opposed to a simple two-chord progression whose root motion descends by step. This vamp will be vocalized in several octaves, be altered to produce a more emphatic i–v progression, or at times be pared back to a barely perceptible harmonic tic. The brilliant heterogeneity of Wellman's surreal language pops out from its pale musical setting: the true music of the opera comes from the sound and poetry of language performing its impasse with meaning and history. The final scene opens with the opera's only true aria: an unabashed, unaccompanied ABA, compound ternary form for Mrs Williamson, with recursive aspects that emphasize the circularity of the narrative.

Example 18.5   Descending tetrachord that pervades David Lang, *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*

Bierce's politically astute, dispassionate and succinct treatment of race, class and history commented wryly on American politics in 1854, after the Kansas–Nebraska Act had repealed the antislavery clause of the Missouri Compromise. But writing about slavery directly, claims Wellman, would rob those characters of 'of their cunning silence, patience, their terse and succinct truth-telling. Their irony.'[87] The chorus of slaves makes no more conventional sense than the mad character of Mrs Williamson. As 'it is not the purpose of [their] narrative', owners and authority figures eventually depart the stage, leaving the dispossessed, whose voices have been stricken from the official record. Those same dispossessed suffer a double loss. The disappearance of 'Mr Williamson' is also the loss of the signifier that knit them to their symbolic universe. *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* acknowledges that truth – that 'ingenious compound of desirability and appearance' in Bierce's words – is a burden to be questioned.[88] The minimal musical score works to deny the redemptive power of narrative while underlining the musicality of the libretto, offering repetition, remembrance and re-reading as an ethical act.

The failure of language and 'anti-(anti-)opera'

Music interrogates the libretto in the first four operas presented above – as a site of stable meaning in Lachenmann and Sciarrino, or as a discourse even intelligible as language in Ligeti and Vivier. In Lang, meanwhile, I argue that the score merely highlights the inherent musicality of the libretto, released from its habitual duty to communicate rational meaning and drive the plot forward. Brief assertions, long passages and breathless imperatives are all rendered mute when they fail to ground us in narrative sense. Hence these works embody the fear of being struck dumb that haunts all investments in voice and opera, as Jeremy Tambling asserts.[89] Words and their constituents become voluble music, a process that reflects in microcosm the failure of representation and the triumph of musical meaning described by all five operas as a whole. Ligeti's 'anti-anti-opera' eschews a master narrative in which evil is defeated by good, yet *Le Grand Macabre* retains an ethical charge. The apocalyptic destruction promised by Nekrotzar – 'All do now as I say: when Death speaks, men obey!' – was nothing more, it would seem, than a verbal construction, mere death by description. Thus the citizens of Breughelland elude their obscene fate by escaping the 'bitter word' of the *Grand Macabre*'s tidings. They reject the pathological demands of language, so as to live experientially in music alone.

But for the emotional peaks of the opera – Piet's and Gepopo's arias – *Le Grand Macabre* rests on a comprehensible libretto that merely subverts what appeared to be a predetermined outcome. But the libretto of *Prologue pour un Marco Polo* dispenses with any pretence of a rational plot. Here we are privy to Marco Polo's struggle for mutual understanding through the scrim of *langue inventée*, which functions as a kind of delirious bridge between the demands of language and music. Vivier's text fits Jean-Jacques Lecercle's notion of *délire* as a discourse founded in the material side of language, its origin in the human body and desire – a discourse no longer bound by its abstract function as a means of communication.[90] As Lecercle reminds us, nonsense words structure the text: 'The function of nonsense is to create sense, to make sense.'[91] *Langue inventée* exists on the frontier between language and music, lacking meaning but not sense: its orderly appearance expresses an exaggerated respect for the form of language combined with a repudiation of its goals. The only intelligible language in *Prologue* is that which points beyond language – to the lands and people Polo cannot reach, and eventually beyond life to an 'ultimate language' which resists even musical expression.

Prologue pour un Marco Polo, with its quasi-mystical, almost utopian appreciation for the sonic and expressive properties of language, stretches the boundaries of opera as traditionally

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understood. Yet *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* arrived on the scene explicitly heralded as an 'anti-opera'. A large portion of the literature devoted to *Das Mädchen* reflects on its 'poly-morphic manipulation' of opera as genre.[92] Kötter asserts that what begins as pure negation is gradually converted into an opera that establishes its own standards.[93] But many scholars are sceptical. Laurence Osborn, for instance, asks how 'a composing philosophy based on the predi-cate that sound can only truly express its own existential conditions [can] be reconciled with a genre whose proclivity is to establish a perceptible relationship between music and dramatic narrative'.[94] If Lachenmann was concerned with 'images in which observation – like listening in music – comes to its own senses, in which one looks with one's ears and listens with one's eyes', is anything left of the traditional dramatic conflicts and representational arcs that constitute opera as we know it?[95] Metzer sees the opera as mired in an outdated 'rhetoric of autonomy and purity', while Wolfgang-Andreas Schultz cautions that Lachenmann, 'who puts claim on his reflection of the material, has not himself reflected how historical his material has become'.[96]

Das Mädchen may stand as a historical model of late modernist 'autonomy and purity', but many would consider it a belated acknowledgement of modernist ideals within the hidebound walls of the opera house. Its ambitions – creating new myths out of old, reflecting contemporary injustice – stretch far beyond issues of language and representation. Still, *Das Mädchen* stands as a monument to the attempt to transcend verbal representation with sound, 'to keep the mind free for what cannot be expressed by language'.[97]

In contrast to the surreal *Macabre*, the ~~Dadist~~ *Prologue*, and the high modernist *Das Mäd-chen*, *Luci mie traditrici* revels in a kind of hypernaturalism that intensifies the irregular tempos, dynamics and inflections of speech. Representation is in a sense wrested from recitative, with verbal sense supplanted by pure material immediacy: sounds that, in Sciarrino's words, 'only the characters can hear'.[98] The unnatural speech rhythms, melodies, and hushed volume of its sung text enact time and again that point at which representation breaks down. As an allegory of a world in which language kills, the opera's aesthetic invokes an ethics of the particular that privi-leges what is unsayable, irreducible to nonmusical expression and hence beyond the dangers of representation. It reflects the operatic past without dwelling on it; *Luci* is neither anti-opera nor anti-anti-opera but a 'reform of the theatre, because the use of the voices, the invention and the maturation of the vocal style allow us to do theatre again, not just sing generically on the stage.'[99]

As befits a modern provenance (as opposed to the postmodern minimalism of its score), *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* emphasizes the central mystery of the modern subject as a lack laid bare, replacing a central figure with a central lack, and a conventional plot with a circular, almost motionless narrative. If the music emphasizes this theme with a heavy hand, Wellman's libretto celebrates the infinite variations through which language indicates lack, and performs Lecercle's four stages of language. Language first speaks without a subject: 'in the beginning was the text'. Speech then possesses its speaker, and interpellates the subject, yet *délire* rules the text, which remains empty, and has no object other than to fulfil a sense of urgency that can never end.[100] Mr Williamson has exited both the material world and the roles he played as patriarch, land-holder and overseer. Yet he is not categorically dead, and thus cannot be memorialized or put to rest in his proper symbolic place. The 'undeadness' of Mr Williamson, a kind of zombie signifier with no material remnant, is but the first of the opera's revelations. For the work reminds us, as Hegel wrote about the Egyptians, that 'the mysteries of Selma, Alabama' are mysteries for the Alabamians themselves and, by proxy, their audience: the 'objective riddle par excellence', whose meaning remains obscure to all who witness it.[101]

Such is the nature of language, which 'is equally certain and incomprehensible'.[102] Hence Cavell's sense that opera, in its uniquely intimate address, is capable of reinscribing an ethics

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of revelation that functions outside of language.[103] In is in that spirit that I offer *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, *Le Grand Macabre*, *Prologue pour un Marco Polo*, *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* and *Luci mie traditrici* as five completely different operatic attempts at foregrounding the failure of language as representation. Not only the ambiguity but the threat of language becomes germane to the actual plots of *Macabre* and *Luci*, while *Das Mädchen* puts language under the microscope, splitting it into affective atoms of sound dispersed into the musical fabric of the whole. *Difficulty* and *Prologue* revel in language as *délire*, its meaning remaining forever just out of reach while compelling our attention. The challenge of modernism is met head on in these works by musicalizing language, turning it into a particularity that must be experienced, a task for which opera is uniquely suited. As Bowie avers, it is because music is musical that it can speak to us of things that are not strictly musical, with a voice whose very opacity demands our engagement. It is this aspect of all five operas which – more than their staging, narrative openness and self-referential historicism – points towards a new operatic practice that engages fully with a modernist aesthetic.

Notes

1 Robert Fink, 'After the Canon', in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. Helen M. Greenwald (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1066.

2 Björn Heile, Review of *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*, ed. Mervyn Cooke, in *Music & Letters* 88, no. 3 (2007), 347. The reference is to Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). See also Arnold Whittall, 'New Opera, Old Opera: Perspectives on Critical Interpretation', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21, no. 2 (2009), 181–98.

3 Peter Kivy, 'Speech, Song, and the Transparency of Medium: A Note on Opera Metaphysics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 1 (1994), 63–68; Edward T. Cone, 'The World of Opera and Its Inhabitants', in *Music, A View from Delft: Selected Essays*, ed. Robert P. Morgan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 125–38.

4 Heile, Review of *Twentieth-Century Opera*, 347.

5 Whittall, 'New Opera, Old Opera', 182.

6 Björn Heile, *The Music of Mauricio Kagel* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 24.

7 Heile, *The Music of Mauricio Kagel*, 58. Paul Griffiths labels *Staatstheater* the first anti-opera, in *Modern Music and After*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 201. For Paul Attinello, the rhetorical deconstructions evinced by *Anagrama* – and the non-hierarchical works of *Staatstheater* – mark both as postmodern. See 'Imploding the System: Kagel and the Deconstruction of Modernism', in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner (New York: Routledge, 2002), 263–85. See also Karl-Heinz Zarius, *Staatstheater von Mauricio Kagel* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1977).

8 Francesca Placanica, '"Unwrapping" the Voice: Cathy Berberian and John Cage's *Aria*', in *Transformations of Musical Modernism*, ed. Erling E. Gulbrandsen and Julian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 264–78.

9 See Pascal Decroupet, 'Citation et collage dans *Votre Faust* d'Henri Pousseur et *Die Soldaten* de Bernd Alois Zimmermann', *Art and Fact* 6 (1987), 70–82; also Andre Bregegere, 'L'harmonie revée: An Analysis of Henri Pousseur's *Votre Faust* and *Les litanies d'Icare*' (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2014). See also Eric Salzman and Thomas Dési's account of the reception to *Votre Faust* in *The New Music Theater: Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 153–55.

10 See Raymond Fearn's discussion of the work in *Italian Opera since 1945* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 121–30, and Claudia Di Luzio, 'Opera on Opera: Luciano Berio's *Opera*', in *"Music's Obedient Daughter": The Opera Libretto from Source to Score*, ed. Sabine Lichtenstein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 463–82.

11 Morton Feldman and Samuel Beckett, *Neither*, hat[now]ART 102 (1997) and Col Legno WWE 1CD 20081 (2000).

12 See Daniel Durney, 'Quelques repères d'analyse pour les récitations de Georges Aperghis', *Musurgia* 2, no. 1 (1995), 52–60; also Erin Gee, 'The Notation and Use of the Voice in Non-Semantic Contexts:

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13 Fink, 'After the Canon', 1068.

14 Ibid., 1068.

15 Ibid., 1070–81.

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17 Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (London:Verso, 2007), 6.

18 Andrew Bowie, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

19 Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 17.

20 Giorgio Agamben, 'The Idea of Language: Some Difficulties in Speaking about Language', *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 10, no. 1 (1984), 144–45.

21 Christopher Norris, *Platonism, Music and the Listener's Share* (London: Continuum, 2006), 3.

22 Ibid., 27.

23 Ibid., 28.

24 Adriana Cavarero, 'The Vocal Body', trans. Matt Langione, *Qui Parle* 21, no. 1 (2012), 73. See also Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), and Simon Porzak, 'Zerbinetta's Laughter: An Introduction to the Marginality of Song', *Qui Parle* 21, no. 1 (2012), 3–69.

25 Cavarero, 'The Vocal Body', 79.

26 Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 179–89; see also Porzak, 'Zerbinetta's Laughter', 56.

27 Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 30.

28 Porzak, 'Zerbinetta's Laughter', 42.

29 Stanley Cavell, 'Performative and Passionate Utterance', in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 173; cited in Porzak, 'Zerbinetta's Laughter', 43–44.

30 Roman Jakobson, *Child Language, Aphasia, and Phonological Universals*, trans. Allan R. Keiler (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), 21; cited in Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 9–11.

31 Nikolai Sergeevich Trubetskoi, *Principles of Phonology*, trans. Christiane A.M. Baltaxe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 207–9; cited in Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias*, 17.

32 Agamben, 'The Idea of Language', 148.

33 Ibid., 149.

34 György Ligeti, *Le Grand Macabre*, rev. version, ED 8522 (Mainz: Schott, 1996), 35 (rehearsal figure 51). Peter Edwards analyses the 'leit characteristics' of Piet's first aria in chapter 3 of *György Ligeti's* Le Grand Macabre*: Postmodernism, Musico-Dramatic Form and the Grotesque* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 51–62.

35 John T. Hamilton, *Music, Madness, and the Unworking of Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 5.

36 Michel de Ghelderode, *La balade du Grand Macabre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952).

37 Oulipo was a French literary group founded in 1960 that used mathematical and other arbitrary constraints as goads to inspiration and formal invention; see Warren F. Motte, ed. and trans., *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998).

38 The majority of *Zwiefacher* follow two waltz bars with two Dreher, or pivot bars, although there are infinite variations (see www.folkdancing.com/Pages/seattle/Zwie-Patn.html). Many thanks to Björn Heile for pointing out this connection.

39 Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 76–77.

40 Jonathan Goldman, 'Claude Vivier at the End', in *Contemporary Music and Spirituality*, ed. Sander van Maas and Robert Sholl (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 205.

41 Claude Vivier, 'Les écrits de Claude Vivier', *Circuit: musiques contemporaines* 2, nos. 1–2 (1991), 48.

42 Laurent Feneyrou, 'Claude Vivier: parcours de l'œuvre', *IRCAM Brahms Composer Database*, http://brahms.ircam.fr/claude-vivier#parcours (accessed 5 September 2017).

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as György Ligeti, 'Zur Musik Claude Viviers', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Monika Lichtenfeld (Mainz: Schott, 2007), 1: 497–501.

44 Claude Vivier, *Prologue pour un Marco Polo* (1981), composer's note, http://www.boosey.com/cr/music/Claude-Vivier-Prologue-pour-un-Marco-Polo/47759 (accessed 16 May 2017). Bob Gilmore reads *Prologue pour un Marco Polo* as partly autobiographical; see *Claude Vivier: A Biography* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 181–82.

45 Vivier, 'Les écrits', 111.

46 See Patrick Levesque, 'L'élaboration du matériau musical dans les dernières œuvres vocales de Claude Vivier', *Circuit: musiques contemporaines* 18, no. 3 (2008), 104–5.

47 Bryan Christian, 'Automatic Writing and Grammelot in Claude Vivier's *langue inventée*', *Tempo*, no. 270 (2014), 15–30.

48 Vivier, *Prologue pour un Marco Polo*, composer's note.

49 Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, 394.

50 Barbara Zuber, 'Die doppelte ästhetische Differenz und noch einmal die Frage: Was heißt "Musik mit Bildern"? Zu Helmut Lachenmanns *Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*', in *Helmut Lachenmann: Musik mit Bildern?* ed. Matteo Nanni and Matthias Schmidt (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2012), 187.

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54 Matthias Schmidt, 'Schöpferische Bilderinnerung: Geschichtliches Sehen und Hören in Helmut Lachenmanns *Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*', in *Helmut Lachenmann: Musik mit Bildern?* ed. Nanni and Schmidt, 201.

55 Helmut Lachenmann, 'Selbstportrait 1975', in *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung*, 154.

56 Christian Grüny, '"Zustände, die sich verändern": Helmut Lachenmanns *Musik mit Bildern* – und anderem', in *Helmut Lachenmann: Musik mit Bildern?* ed. Nanni and Schmidt, 41.

57 Daniel Kötter, 'Die Irreführung der Oper: Sprachlosigkeit und -fertigkeit in Helmut Lachenmanns "Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern"', *MusikTexte*, no. 105 (2005), 45.

58 Helmut Lachenmann, '"Klänge sind Naturereignisse": Helmut Lachenmann im Gespräch mit Klaus Zehelein und Hans Thomalla', in *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*, programme book (Stuttgart: Staatsoper, 2001), 20–35.

59 See Matthias Schmidt, 'Schöpferische Bilderinnerung', 203, and Stephanie Jones, 'The Cruelty of Coldness: An Interpretive Analysis of *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* by Helmut Lachenmann' (MMus thesis, University of Leeds, 2012).

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62 As cited in Peter Kivy, 'Speech, Song, and the Transparency of Medium'.

63 Discussed in Max Nyffeler 'Helmut Lachenmann und die Tranzendenz', http://www.beckmesser.info/helmut-lachenmann-und-die-transzendenz/ (accessed 28 April 2018); from Nyffeler, 'Himmel und Höhle: Transzendenz der Musik von Helmut Lachenmann', in *Der Atem des Wanderers: Der Komponist Helmut Lachenmann*, ed. Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich (Mainz: Schott, 2006), 79–89.

64 Paul Steenhuisen, 'Interview with Helmut Lachenmann – Toronto, 2003', *Contemporary Music Review* 23, nos. 3–4 (2004), 13.

65 David Metzer, *Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 205.

66 See Piotr Grella-Możejko's analysis in 'Helmut Lachenmann – Style, Sound, Text', *Contemporary Music Review* 24, no. 1 (2005), 57–75.

67 Metzer, *Musical Modernism*, 220–21; see also Helmut Lachenmann, 'Les Consolations (1967/78)', in *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung*, 391, and Zuber, 'Die doppelte ästhetische Differenz', 176.

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75 'Troppo gran prezzo il vostro sangue / No, se dal sangue la rosa ebbe il natal'; Salvatore Sciarrino, *Luci mie traditrici* (1998), score (Milan: Ricordi, 2000), scene 1.

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78 Cathy N. Davidson, *The Experimental Fictions of Ambrose Bierce* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 1–4.

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92 Eberhard Hüppe, 'Rezeption, Bilder und Strukturen: Helmut Lachenmanns Klangszenarien im Lichte transzendenter Gattungshorizonte', in *Helmut Lachenmann: Musik mit Bildern?* ed. Nanni and Schmidt, 70, and Kötter, 'Die Irreführung der Oper', 38.

93 Kötter, 'Die Irreführung der Oper', 47.

94 Laurence Osborn, 'Sound, Meaning and Music-Drama in Lachenmann's *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*', *Tempo*, no. 268 (2014), 24.

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100 Lecercle, *Philosophy through the Looking-Glass*, 76–78.

101 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 360.

102 Agamben, 'The Idea of Language', 144.

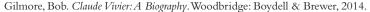103 Cavell, 'Performative and Passionate Utterance', 180.

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