Performing a feminist utopia:
Music theatre as democratic practice

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Introduction

Please allow us to introduce ourselves. We are Dr. Pia Palme and Christina Lessiak, MA from the KUG University for Music and Performing Arts Graz, Austria. Together, as a team, we make up the leadership of the artistic research project *On the fragility of sounds*, which is funded by the Austrian Science Fund FWF. Through Spring 2021, we will be exploring the twin terrains of composition and contemporary music theatre as they are interwoven with democratic practice – or, to be more specific – with feminist and queer practice. In so doing, we are looking into the process and practice of composing from the artist's perspective. This perspective guides us as independent researchers within the context of this project, which we will address individually in our own voices:

> *Pia Palme*:
> A few words about us: I am a composer, performer, producer, and artistic researcher, while my assistant and co-researcher Lessiak is a musicologist who is also a skilled manager of cultural events and a pop musician. In my function as principal investigator, I compose and perform new experimental works as case studies, reflect on my practice, and document my process.

> *Christina Lessiak:*
> My role as musicologist is to conduct both an autoethnography and ethnography: I notate everything that is *externally* observable. This includes what I observe about the composer's practice from the outside. Further, I take into account: the surrounding discourse, the collaborations and interactions, the institutions and policies, etc. I am reframing the concept of autoethnography into a basis for artistic research. Looking and listening inward, I also critically investigate my own position in this research endeavour, adopting a self-reflective, autoethnographic approach.

In this paper, we would like to introduce the structure of our project, presenting and providing context for the main research topics we intend to address during the course of our investigation. In

so doing, we will also present and discuss our innovative methodological approaches. After demonstrating how our work is informed by aspects of democracy and feminism, we will discuss the act of listening, which we see as a core practice in our work. Finally, we will look into the compositional practice in music theatre, and introduce and propose autoethnography as an instrument to strengthen the method of artistic research within the context of a democratic and feminist position.

The topic *fragility of sounds* allows us to collectively address an array of conceptual material:

  – transience, vulnerability, precariousness

  – membranes, skin, surfaces

  – filtering, transition

  – physicality, identity, gender.

These themes are indispensable to any discourse touching on listening perception, compositional practice, performance, or feminist practice – all of which can in turn merge in contemporary music theatre.

We understand our organisational activity during this research project to be political; the commissioning of works, as well as the curation and organisation of events is a form of feminist activism. Throughout the course of our research, interviews will be conducted with artists, curators, theorists, performers, and audiences. We are constantly engaged in exchange and reflection, whether as a core team or in reaching out to our international network of collaborators. We believe that, together, as we reflect on our process, we generate knowledge. As we discuss our ideas, together, we perform a feminist utopia.

In order to pursue various lines of inquiry in connection with our research topics, we are actively commissioning the composition of new works and facilitating the infrastructure of reciprocal dialogue. To date, we have produced or co-produced public performances of four of my new scenic works.[1] In 2020, we will present a festival and symposium at the KUG Graz featuring artists such as Elaine Mitchener, Chaya Czernowin, Elisabeth Schimana, Electric Indigo, and Juliet Fraser. On a theoretical level, we are engaged in constructive exchanges with musicologists and researchers such as Dr. Irene Lehmann, Dr. Susanne Kogler, Dr. Sarah Weiss, and Darla Crispin. We will also collaborate with research being carried out in conjunction with the *Composing Women*[2] programme headed by Dr. Liza Lim at the University of Sydney.

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[1] *DUSK SONGS #1* and *#2* for voice, ensemble, video, dance, and lecture-performance, the multimedia lecture-performances *MATTETOLINE* and *The Womb Manifesto/ENTSCHEIDE.*

[2] See https://sydney.edu.au/music/industry-and-community/community-engagement/composing-women.html

Democracy and feminism

> *Democracy* is the belief in freedom and equality (or equity) between people, or a system of government based on this belief, in which power is either held by elected representatives or directly by the people themselves.

> *Feminism* is advocacy for social, economic, and political equality of the sexes; this includes organised activity on behalf of the rights and interests of women*.

We understand feminism and democracy to be interwoven. As vibrant democracy exists in a culture of critique and discourse, feminists thus play an important role. They criticise political systems for their underlying power structures and for the exclusion of women* in political participation and decision-making.[3] Feminist analysis focuses on those who are excluded and marginalised; feminists proclaim and give voice to a diverse citizenship.

As long as the hierarchical gender binary impacts the lives of people world-wide, we consider it necessary to use the term 'feminism'. To this end, we draw on feminist theories and queer feminism and our reflections assume a plurality of fluid gender identities. We also pursue what the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak describes as *strategic essentialism* for political actions (Spivak, 2009 [1993], p. 3). In accordance with her, we propose a strategic group identity as women* in music, in order to bring about necessary change.

At the same time, we are aware that the term feminism is evolving. Not only is it under siege from conservative, post-feminist, and neoliberal positions (Scharff, 2016, p. 3), but the current development of feminism also reflects the expansion of the overall approach towards gender as multiple interpretation of sex. While still a student at Harvard, Tasnim Ahmed formulated in her 2015 contribution *The evolution of Feminism*[4] that

> The feminist ideal seems simple: it is a movement fighting for gender equality. The feminist movement has always been seen as the women's movement. But it is not; it is the people's movement.

Or, per bell hooks (hooks, 2000): "Feminism is for everybody".

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[3] In this paper, we use the term women* for female identified persons of all genders, including transgender and non-binary females.

[4] See http://harvardpolitics.com/harvard/evolution-feminism/

Pia Palme:
As an artist, I feel at times uncomfortable when using the label feminism. I want to be perceived as a composer, not solely as a feminist. Initially, when drafting my project idea in December 2017, I used the subtitle *Music theatre as feminist practice*. In a later revision, I substituted the term *feminist* for *democratic*, preferring the latter's more open and inclusive connotation. Using the term *democratic* would not provoke as much unease, bewilderment or resistance among my colleagues from the music scene.[5] Molly McDolan, musician and project collaborator, noted that "ironically, the term democratic is less political than the term feminist." (Perhaps another term, such as *queer* or *non-binary*, would better acknowledge a wider and more fluid position?) Despite any perceived connotation, both practices, the *feminist* as well as the *democratic*, are essential to our research and to music theatre performance (This conviction was again underscored in my recent performance commission *ENTSCHEIDE*, which explored the topic of reproduction.[6]) Both practices necessitate each other, in my experience. We must therefore be mindful of how and when we use these terms in our discourse.

Feminism, as well as the situation of women*, is widely discussed throughout the worldwide music scene. A number of platforms currently monitor the presence and situation of composers and artists as women*, collecting data which can be used as a basis for comparison.[7] While there are still significantly fewer women than men performing at music festivals, there is disagreement as to the interpretation of these statistics, which in turn produces ambiguous conclusions.

Listening as a core practice, listening as empowerment

This research project expands from the intersection of listening, composing, and feminism in one's personal practice. From this intersection, we begin our research into music theatre, and include a number of collaborators, such as artists, researchers, composers, performers, and audiences. Further, we use the method of autoethnography and touch into political aspects in connection with music theatre. Listening perception is at the core of each of these fields of research. As the foundation for our work, it is therefore imperative to understand the perceptional process of listening within the respective cultural context. Recent discoveries in neuroscience and brain research not only contribute valuable input, they also highlight the importance of cultural and social contexts in any

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[5] In this paper, I use the term 'music scene' to describe my professional environment, that is, the international field of contemporary and experimental music and musical performance, both within and outside academia, and including the so called '*Freie Szene'*.

[6] The performance was part of the 2019 festival *The Art of Reproduction* directed by IMA Institut für Medienarchäologie. It was conceived as a "performative ritual for vocals, contrabass flute, and electronics intended to strengthen woman's freedom of choice and decision-making power" (see http://piapalme.at/live/).

[7] We are actively collaborating with the following platforms and institutions: *Keychange, Gender Research in Darmstadt GRID, Gender Relations in New Music GRiNM, UNESCO* conference *Être Compositrice,* and the *female:pressure* network.

discussion on listening and artistic research. Listening perception is discussed as an enactive process, that is, as a complex and productive operation which actively creates the perceived environment (Kandel, 2012, p. 205). Listening as an active process demands mental activity beyond mere information processing, such as imagination, consciousness, and attentiveness. Listening is thus a carrier and metric of culture. It is currently accepted among neuroscientists that perceptional processes are tied to cultural training (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch, 2003, pp. 222-232). Neuro-materiality (Schmitz & Höppner, 2014, p. 17) "has to be discussed in terms of culture, society, cognition, and behaviour, which all give meaning to each other in this process of enacting and intra-acting." It is imperative that perception is acknowledged in its socio-cultural context. Neuroscience has established the term 'brainbody-in-culture' for this perceptional phenomenon (Schmitz & Höppner, 2014, p. 17). The nexus 'brainbody-in-culture' nexus helps stimulate feminist neuro-discourse surrounding gender construction.

Pia Palme:
As I listen between the lines in conversations, into background noises and bodily messages, I activate what I would term my 'feminist' ear – another kind of ear that extends from habitual patterns of hearing perception. Contextual sonorities come to the foreground of my perception and awareness. I notice my thinking process as well. In this way, listening spans the external and internal spatial expanses; it links my internal reality to the public. In-depth listening extends and explores *vertically*. I use the term 'vertically' because listening perception is directed into, not at, phenomena, towards the deep – as far down as possible. Here, I build on my doctoral thesis *The noise of mind: a feminist practice in composition* (Palme, 2017). Vertical listening is listening into precarious life (Butler, 2006, p. 18) and also into the fragility of sounds. When listening is re-oriented along the vertical direction, linear time becomes less prominent, while, as perceived in my compositions, spatial considerations come to the foreground.

In composing, I ask: where is the aural phenomenon in space? Where does it appear on stage? How does it move, how does it vanish, and where does it vanish to? Located in space, sound takes on an almost physical quality, appearing as a sonic body-in-space. This new physicality is tactile and fragile. Sounds are subject to decay. Sounds decompose like living entities.

I experience an autonomous biological process when working with sound.

Christina Lessiak:
In connection to listening, I refer to *feminist standpoint theory*. This theory was developed in the 1970s and states that experiences and knowledge are socially situated. Those who experience oppression or marginality not only have experiential knowledge of their own reality, they must also understand the reality of mainstream society or privileged groups (Harding, 2004). Thus, they can develop a *double* or *multiple consciousness* (Gouliquer & Poulin, 2005, p. 325; Crawley, 2012, p. 152). The feminist standpoint is not merely a theoretical perspective, as theorist Sandra Harding (1991, p. 127) declares: "(…) a feminist standpoint is not something that anyone can have simply by claiming it. It is an achievement.

A standpoint differs in this respect from a perspective, which anyone can have simply by 'opening one's eyes' ". A feminist standpoint builds on lived experience as well as political and theoretical knowledge; both are required to bring about political action and empowerment. "As such, standpoint theory does not split the actor into rational minds and emotional bodies, instead fusing both into the analysis" (Crawley, 2012, p. 146; see also Davies 2002, pp. 62-64). Feminist standpoint theory, I propose, has the potential to frame listening as feminist practice.

Music theatre …

    and the compositional process

On the fragility of sounds defines and explores key research questions surrounding listening perception and feminist practice, in order to bring clarification into the compositional process of music theatre. Is it possible to conceive and compose contemporary music theatre with *another ear* – rather than from the perspective of the *male gaze*? Can the fragility, identity, and finiteness of human existence become compositional and performative factors? Is it possible to subvert and re-compose music theatre? To explore these questions, the entire span of the composition process is the subject of this research exploration. As understood here, this process unfolds from the composing individual towards the listening individual.

    Pia Palme:
    Composition begins within my imagination, deep inside my internal dimension. I to refer to the composer and artistic researcher Gérman Toro-Perez, who describes his compositional activity as individual and autonomous (Badura, Dubach, Haarman, et al., 2015, p. 173). I further observe that my process then expands outwards as I notate this imagination, stretching yet further outwards towards instruments and media, continuously integrating more artists, collaborators, and interdisciplinary performers. The compositional process only comes to completion upon its reception by the audience, who individually recreate the composition in their own (unique and creative) process of listening. Our artistic research is guided by these questions:

    What happens if feminist listening filters into composition and music theatre? Activated in the compositional process, could feminist listening influence the entire body of performing individuals, moving through the community of listeners and back again until the entire system is affected? In my experience, it is the moments of decision-making that are crucial in the compositional workflow. In these minimal fractions of time, I observe the feminist practice at work. During certain intervals in my process – such as when working with instruments or writing instrumental or vocal sounds – I rely on my experience, knowledge, and skills as a composer; it is precisely in these moments that I experience my political activity.

Music theatre …
　　as political practice

Feminism is a political practice, whereby politics is the practice of making decisions. To compose is to decide. As noted above, from a perspective of neuroscience, listening perception is tied to cultural context. We thus argue that taking a feminist position, with its inherent altered mode of listening, strongly impacts the compositional process of decision-making. We posit that this re-listening can lead to uncharted compositional terrains – terrains that are to be discovered with 'another ear'.

Observing certain developments in society, we believe that the composition of music theatre today calls for a radical outlook concerning physicality and identity. Firstly, the degree to which digital technologies are now seemingly integral to human life and interaction has an impact on every aspect of the perceptional process. Our perspective of the human body, that is, the everyday perception of our physicality, has become altered in a complex manner. Marshall McLuhan (1961) already foresaw such a development. The cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han (2014, p. 21) suggests that music in the virtual dimension lacks physical gravity due to the conspicuous lack of human interaction; the audience as a collective body is missing in digital space. Disconnection from the physical dimension is "leading to disembodied entities" (Baym, 2015, p. 105). This divergence from the physical prompts our research question: what is the role of embodiment in music theatre against the background of the digital dimension? The digital image deceptively pretends immortality, whereas music theatre in itself is a transitory event.

Secondly, there is a vivid discussion of gender and identity, especially in the music and performance scene, which affects understanding of performance at all levels. This discussion is explored in *Staging Gender. Reflexionen aus Theorie und Praxis der performativen Künste*, published by Irene Lehmann, Katharina Rost and Rainer Simon.[8] Their discourse around gender in the performing arts touches on a wide array of issues, ranging from questions of festival organisation and production, to performance and physical presence on stage, to content and aesthetic considerations. This current discourse can be understood in the context of the influence of the digital on human physicality per Elvira Sanolas' essay '*Geschlecht als Wille und Design*' (Linkerhand, 2018, pp. 188-200). Along these lines, we propose that, paradoxically, the shift towards the digital appears to have re-invigorated the live performance of contemporary music and experimental theatre. It can achieve emancipation from its media image. Consequently, the emphasis on physicality, voice, and the body in performance is not a reactionary, but a revolutionary development.

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[8] The book will be published in October 2019.

Music theatre …

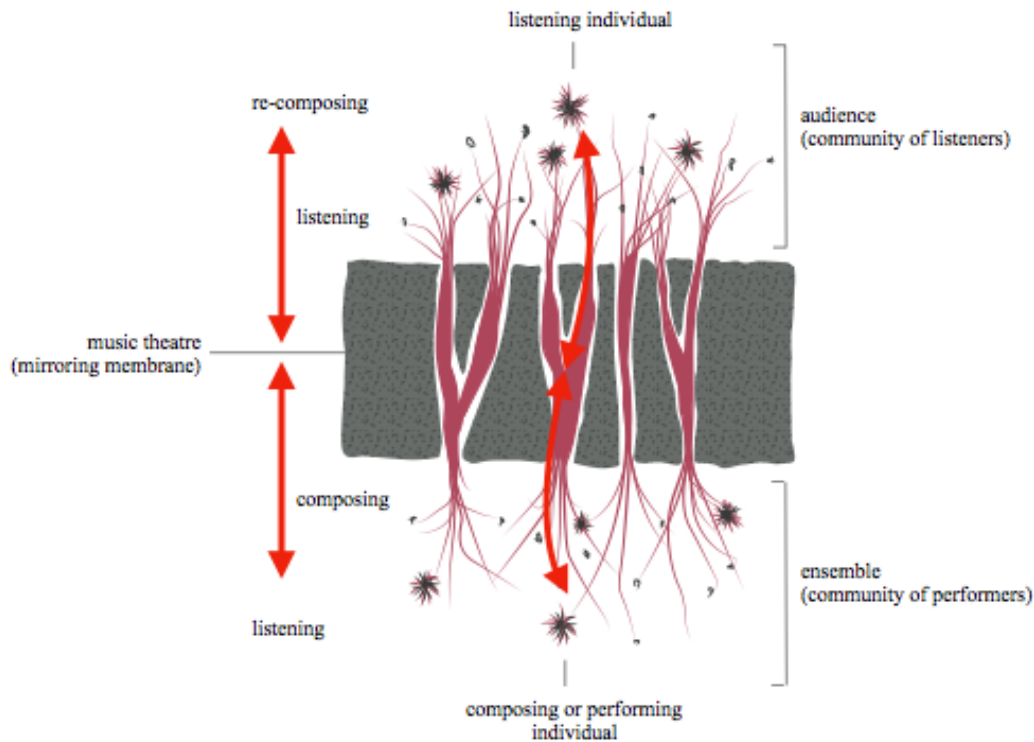   **as a mirroring membrane**

Fig. 1 Music theatre as a sounding membrane (by P. Palme, Ch. Lessiak & D. Palme)

Pia Palme:

I propose that the best strategy to access music theatre is to understand it as a biological system. It functions as a *sounding membrane*, much like an actively filtering biological structure (see fig. 1). Listening perception borders on touch; it has a physical and very intimate quality – much like the act of composing, in my case. The compositional and/or listening process is a kind of intimacy and community building is compositional practice. Jean-Luc Nancy described the situation as a "finite existence exposed to finite existence, co-appearing before and with it" (Nancy, 2015, p. xi). A musical performance can be understood as an event, a political place, a social membrane, which creates a being-in-common of audience, performers, and myself as a composer: a mutual exposition. Sonic events act as intermediaries, facilitating community between listeners and performers. The brief perceptive exchange occurring in music theatre is profound, yet fragile. As listeners re-compose a work in their process of decoding, they become empowered as artists themselves. It is along this membrane model that I explore the impact of my feminist practice on music theatre.

A music theatre performance generates an immersive environment. People come together – performers of various disciplines, technicians, assistants, organisers, and the members of the audience – to share a live event in a certain space. The membrane model helps to focus awareness

on the profound interactions that happen within this assembly. Following the membrane model in cell biology, music theatre is a sounding and fluid filter that enacts and regulates human exchange. It is through staged performance that listening is filtered. The individuals present become entangled through their common act of listening to the performance. Intensified perception becomes an activity that builds community: a community that can be experienced as a polyphony of voices, bodies, and genders in the performance space. From a position of neuroscience, the brain activity while perceiving a work of contemporary art is identical to the process of creating it. Listening is composing. Composition is mirrored in listening perception. Everyone who is present during the performance, as a listener, is empowered as an artist. Understood in this way, contemporary music theatre can cultivate democratic interactions.

Artistic research and autoethnography

Within a cultural context, autoethnography can be a useful tool when recording and notating individual artistic and democratic processes.

> *Christina Lessiak*:
> Autoethnography is the study of culture through the lens of the researcher. Autoethnographies can appear as performances or books, as podcasts or poems. They can take forms that are more experimental and accessible for broader audiences, thus circumventing the infamous 'ivory tower' criticism. They disseminate knowledge which then becomes part of the public discourse. As Stacy Holman Jones (2005) argues, this makes autoethnography a kind of "radical democratic politics" (p. 763). Here, this method is important because it acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity and partiality. The compositional process begins within the composer, in a place only the artist herself can enter. In terms of artistic research, it makes sense to investigate the self to reveal an internal, individual view of the compositional process.
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> Autoethnographic research has developed to include new methodological approaches in the last ten years. Although these approaches differ in their theoretical and analytical background, they all share the use of the researcher's experiences as data. Here, the *personal* is a metric of culture. Autoethnographic research is not a hermetic approach to exploring the *self,* but rather systematically describes and analyses one's experiences in relation to the cultural context. Whereas an autobiography is a narrative of one's life, an autoethnography also incorporates contextualising material, such as interviews, literature, theories, observations of interactions, etc., in order to understand cultural phenomena (see Chang, 2008, p. 49 and Ellis et al., 2010).
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> This kind of research is radical, feminist, and democratic. It not only challenges dominant paradigms and practices of research, it questions the definition of knowledge as such. There still is suspicion in academia about research that emphasises subjective and personal narratives. Practicing autoethnography "challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act" (Ellis et al., 2010).

The act of simultaneously acting as both researcher and informant undermines established power relations in research. Taking oneself as a subject, one is able to reclaim power over one's own story. In this way, artists can reframe their own narratives, as experienced through their own eyes and ears – something that nobody else can do. Autoethnographies become performances of the artist herself; they can provide valuable testimonies for further research by musicologists.

We understand autoethnographic, self-reflective writing as a feminist practice. Following the filmmaker and composer Trinh Minh-Ha (2010 [1989], p. 33), by telling our own stories we become "holders of speech". We occupy a position of power and leadership in writing and voicing personal experience. These ideas strongly resonate with Hanisch's proclamation that "the personal is political" (2009 [1969]). For Trinh Minh-Ha, writing is a process distancing the writer from her own text, and thus fosters empathic listening: first to one's own work and further to the position of others.

The question remains: whose stories and insights should be told? Our short answer to this question is: everyone's. We focus on diversity. Autoethnography in this sense can produce counter-narratives, fill gaps, and reveal hidden experiences. In regard to our project, this means that we speak from the standpoint of women* in a music culture that is still very much dominated by men and shaped by a gendered music discourse. As women*, musicians, researchers, feminists, being conscious of discrimination, we are best equipped to contribute valuable insights into this field of interest. In notating silenced voices, we contribute to the creation of a feminist utopia.

Autoethnography can help to raise awareness of our diverse society. By listening to the struggles, challenges, and successes of others, we deepen our empathy and understanding. In producing and publishing autoethnographies, we not only mirror our diverse society, but also motivate others to tell their stories. Ideally, this creates a sense of belonging for those who identify with those narratives. Practicing autoethnography can offer researchers an opportunity to empower and emancipate both themselves and others. Autoethnography thus emerges as a political, feminist, and democratising practice.

Conclusion

With this project, it is our aim to contribute to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the process of composing within the context of society. To this end, we are exploring the practice of listening as it relates to the composer's creative and the audience's receptive processes, as well as to the practice of artistic research and autoethnography. A new conception of autoethnography will help create an instrument and a practice by which we can both observe, notate, and explain the compositional process as we understand it. The new works that will be commissioned in

conjunction with the themes of our project will offer a number of composers the opportunity to pursue their own in-depth artistic research. The possibility of extensive rehearsal periods will facilitate a more radical exploration of aspects of fragility in connection with sound and space.

In our evolving discourse, together with a number of contributors, theorists, and performers, we create cultural knowledge as we go: we perform music theatre as feminist utopia and democratic polyphony.

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