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Opinion

RITUAL SPACES Up Close and Personal: Connecting the Body in Concert Performance
by Jocelyn Ho (*Published on January 06, 2020*)



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My relationship with the classical concert is perhaps more fraught than it ought to be, given that I have been a classical pianist for most of my life. At such a concert (typically an evening of two halves, intent listening punctuated intermittently by discerning applause), I often find myself moved to deep feeling, but in a paradoxically disconnected way. The musicians, stirring the most intense and intimate emotions, are situated unreachably high on the concert platform; my companions, though sitting close to me, are separated by an invisible wall of silence. Bursting with energy after a concert, I extol the exuberance of a glorious plunge into A major and am met with perfunctory nods and polite dinner talk. At the end of an evening, I am left alone with intense but orphaned emotions, even though the listening experience in the concert hall was, by and large, communal. Never, indeed, is there a time when I feel as lonely as after a classical music concert.

This concert format and associated etiquette may well be familiar, but it's not rooted in permanence. As readers will know, the idea that classical music is somehow 'serious' is relatively recent; two hundred years ago, a programme mixing 'elite' and 'popular' music – say, a symphony, an opera excerpt and a comic song – would not have caused controversy (Weber, 2009). Concerts would go on for as long as four or five hours, an unimaginable feat for today's fastidiously still and silent audiences. Hand-in-hand with lengthy and miscellaneous programmes went real-time dialogue between audience and performers. Boisterous bursts of cheering and clapping between and even during movements would not only have been acceptable, but eagerly anticipated by composers – and considered necessary to gauge the work's reception (Spaethling, 2005). Our pre-nineteenth-century counterparts would have been perplexed by the cool passivity of today's concertgoers and taken aback by the impenetrable divide that seems to have emerged between those on stage and off.

As hinted above, reverence towards classical music, and silence in the hall when it's performed, is a product of the nineteenth century; readers may be familiar with historical anecdotes of Richard Wagner and Felix Mendelssohn exhorting audiences to listen without interruption to the entirety of their works (Ross, 2010). In the present day and age, however, the scenario might seem anachronistic, especially to millennials such as myself. Technologically savvy and attached (both literally and metaphorically) to mobile digital devices, millennials enjoy easy access to a variety of musical genres, styles and historical traditions: streaming services open windows onto multiple musical worlds, summoning in an instant, say, Leonard Bernstein conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, and from many different camera angles. With music at our fingertips, stepping out to a live musical event becomes more and more of a calculated act. Calculated, but not rare. According to scholars and cultural commentators, millennials value experiences over possessions (Eventbrite and Harris, 2014); we spend more money on live events than our parents' generation, driving what marketers call the 'experience economy'. Yet we are also the generation that reports the highest rate of loneliness (Cigna, 2018). With social lives woven together almost exclusively by texts, filtered Snapchats, Facebook updates and Instagram posts, we yearn for live experiences that lift us out of our isolation and interminable screen-staring, and connect us to our friends and co-consumers. The standard classical music concert offers little hope for millennials, in pursuit of such a real-time, flesh-and-blood connection; instead, we remain isolated from our companions in the darkened concert hall, listening to performers who seem as distant as the stars.

Opportunely (and perhaps inevitably), creative practitioners have seized upon our present-day *Zeitgeist*: while grand enterprises and large-scale spectacles abound (such as those offered at New York City's recently constructed Shed), we are also witnessing experimental performances that forge human connections by appealing to the intimate, the imperfect and the vulnerable. These experiences are transgressive; as if in response to our disembodied online interactions, they draw meticulous attention to our bodies, connecting us in physical and tangible ways that break through social niceties and polite distance. In the following paragraphs, I bring to light a few examples of such modern-day performance initiatives by various artists, including myself.

* * *

In *Synaesthesia Playground* (2016), a multimedia and interactive piano recital, I directed fifteen composers, visual artists, fashion designers and technologists to create six new works that focused on the deeply personal. Inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of corporeal knowledge (and, consequently, the idea that music is an inter-sensory, full-bodied experience), I asked each collaborative team to write a multimedia piano work that pertained to one specific part of the body. Together, the first five works explored an inward bodily journey traversing the skin, voice, core, heart and breath; after such introspection, the very last work broke the fourth wall, catapulting outwards to the audience who participated with their own gesturing bodies.

Throughout *Synaesthesia Playground*, I transformed the concert hall into an intimate space by revealing the corporeal fragility of the performer (myself), the piano and the audience. While performing, I wore a wearable artwork called *Bio-Lux*, a fibre-optic attire that responded to physiological markers usually invisible to the audience. For example, while I was playing Andrew Batt-Rawden's *Love Spiral* (see Figure 1), my heart rate, tracked by an Arduino-driven heartbeat sensor, was made visible as colour pulsations on the *Bio-Lux*. The veneer of performance composure thus disappeared: as I became more nervous, my heart rate – and, as a result, the tempo of the music – would accelerate. On display was my fluctuating psycho-physiological state, a constant loop of performance stress and the affects or expression I was trying to convey. In contrast to the spectacle of the superhuman musical virtuoso, I was exposed as a vulnerable mortal, capable of stress-induced feelings and the possibility of failure. Instead of witnessing my playing from afar, the audience drew near in sympathy (and, some said, even in heart rate), taking the risk of performance with me as we rode the roller coaster of my inner biological-affective world.



Figure 1: The author performs *Love Spiral* by composer Andrew Batt-Rawden (from *Synaesthesia Playground*); she is wearing *Bio-Lux* by Nobuho Nagasawa, HUL ARNOLD and Ho; photograph by Christian Carroll. Film footage of the performance can be found at: https://youtu.be/hFAOxR41_ml (https://youtu.be/hFAOxR41_ml)

As I dissolved the performer's once-impenetrable façade, I simultaneously attempted to soften the hardness of the piano, a formidable technology of steel and iron that affords repertoire of ever-increasing volume and brightness throughout its centuries of evolution. Inspired by the practice of painting artworks onto the harpsichord's body, Celeste Oram created *Piano Epidermis*, a mapped video projection onto the side of the piano (see Figure 2). Rather than being lauded as an impervious feat of mechanical engineering, the piano was reimagined as a living body with a skin that could respond to the pianist's gestures. Oram's *Toccata and Bruise* – the opening piece of the *Synaesthesia Playground* programme – explored the sense of touch through a choreographed meditation on ways to open a closed piano. I stroked and caressed the instrument, alongside shadow hands projected onto its surface, as I peeled open the lid. When fully opened, the piano's inner resonance gradually took visual form, appearing as live-captured pulsating waveforms in Sidney Marquez Boquiren's *Missa de Glossa* (see Figure 3), a piece evoking the visceral aspect of spiritual experience. Inspired by the rite of the Catholic Mass, Boquiren alluded to the mysticism behind the physical act of receiving Holy Communion, a movement from the tongue (or 'glossa', a keyword within the title of the piece) to inside the viscera, then finally to the soul. Imitating this process, the piece began with shrill chords, gradually descending to low pulsating fifths, and ended with ghostly resonances created by snapping the soft, sostenuto and damper pedals – the last of which was famously poeticized as the piano's 'soul' by Anton Rubenstein (Banowetz, 2003). As the piece travelled inwards, the piano's vibrating inner waveforms gradually became more conspicuous until the last pedal sounded, the piano's 'soul' now fully manifest as phantom-like echoes and striking light pulsations.



Figure 2: The author embraces the piano, featuring *Piano Epidermis*, during a performance of *Toccata and Bruise* by composer Celeste Oram; photograph by Louis Ng.



Figure 3: The author performs Sidney Marquez Boquiren's *Missa de Glossa* featuring *Piano Epidermis* by multimedia artist Takefumi Ide; photograph by Louis Ng. Film footage can be found at: <https://youtu.be/uxhsry6g508> (<https://youtu.be/uxhsry6g508>)

This exposition on corporeality culminated with a final piece in which the audience's gesturing bodies became the focal point. In my interactive composition *Sheng*, I collaborated with software engineer Andrew Petersen to transform the audience's smart phones into makeshift musical instruments using the mobile devices' accelerometers and gyroscopes. The audience received playing instructions on their phone screens throughout the piece as they participated in a collective, game-like improvisation – with me at the piano. Inspired by Pauline Oliveros' *Sonic Meditations* (1974), written for her ♀ ensemble, the instructions asked the audience to listen attentively to themselves and others (see Figures 4 and 5). In response to intimate sounds and movements (a flutter, a scratch or one's own breathing), the audience slashed their phones, scratched the air or tickled the bubbles on the screen to play sounds, breaking the concert-hall etiquette of stillness and ambient silence. While stifled coughs or foot shuffling are usually frowned upon by concert attendees, these body-rich sounds now became the impetus for a new communal music. Recasting the act of listening as full-bodied and responsive, I sought to close the distance between participating bodies and rehabilitate the once-silent concert hall as lively and social, as multidirectional rather than singularly focused on the stage.



Figure 4: Instructions appearing on four audience members' mobile phones during the first section ('Metal') of *Sheng*, an interactive composition by the author.



Figure 5: Instructions during the second section ('Underwater') of *Sheng*.

In *Sheng*, I made audible – and, moreover, made focal – what is usually embarrassingly bodily, imperfectly biological: a nervous swallow or a fluttering heartbeat became significant constituents of a new collective music. For this music to emerge, participants had to reveal normally hidden and vulnerable aspects of their corporeal selves. To me, it is precisely this risky potential for exposing the fluctuations and flaws that makes way for intimacy and the connection for which modern-day audiences pine. To turn briefly to the world of theatre, the appeal of being open to others through one's bodily vulnerability cannot be more evident than in the booming popularity of site-specific immersive works. Directed by Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle, Punchdrunk's wildly successful New York City production *Sleep No More* (2011), based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, is the most longstanding site-specific work to date. Numerous scenes take place simultaneously across five floors of two adjoining renovated warehouses. The audience is invited into confined spaces in which the performers also reside: dark-lit corners and corridors, couches in a hotel lobby, the bar of a speakeasy, and so on. One could be standing three feet away from a bloody Lady Macbeth grappling with her sanity. Storylines intertwine yet are timed in such a way that an audience member can move around the warehouses, follow different actors and experience major plot events of *Macbeth* in non-chronological order.

Attending the show a few years ago, I was plunged into a *Sleep No More* haze for days. It was deeply engrossing: not because of its unconventional setting or even its choose-your-own-adventure format, but because I was made to stand transgressively close to the actors' bodies in live performance. I felt, saw and heard every twitch and bodily movement in an electrifying way. In an age when feelings are communicated more often through text emojis than real-life encounters, standing too close for comfort to raw displays of fury, insanity or fear awakened my senses in a deep, biologically wired way. It was as if I *had* to feel what they were feeling; their expressivity in such proximity demanded it.

Similarly breathtaking is opera's answer to site-specific theatre, Industry's *Hopscotch Opera* (2015) directed by Yuval Sharon. While *Sleep No More* comprised heavily choreographed and wordless scenes with pre-recorded soundtracks, *Hopscotch Opera*'s exploration of emotional resonance through radical physical closeness is in relation

to its live sound world. Subtitled 'A Mobile Opera for 24 Cars', the opera allowed the audience to experience performances inside limousine cars that took them to various locations across Los Angeles. As the audience set foot into each car, they entered as invisible confidants to different characters – a wedding couple riding to City Hall or a young woman on the day of her Quinceañera, for instance – who divulge their innermost thoughts in song. The interior of a limousine hardly provided ideal acoustics; any noise that musicians would normally conceal – the sound of saliva smacking as one parted one's lips or shuffled one's bottom in the less-than-ergonomic car seat – suddenly became louder. Yet this claustrophobic space became fertile ground for a microscopic study of affects. As the groom breaks down in a wedding-day-crisis aria, the limousine space amplified the strained timbre of his high G-sharps and gasping intakes of air; those small yet significant sounds of despair, together with every furrowing brow and weary blink, are shunted into the foreground of the audience's experience. Moreover, our sinuses throbbed with the microtonal wobbles of the electric guitar's chromatic clusters in the limousine's confined acoustics, not unlike the neurosis that crowded his head. The audience began to identify with these bodily minutiae, as the sensory-filled spectacle fired our mirror neurons and empathic physiological impulses. Sitting three feet across from the groom, we gave over our bodily reactions to his plight, feeling his despairing reality in our throats, our eyes, our heads.

These site-specific approaches, through play on proximity, ask the audience to feel the chill in another person's bones, so to speak; the collaborative performance venture *Women's Labor* does this even more boldly by inviting the audience to *assume* another person's body – that of a woman doing housework. In this project-in-progress, I re-purpose old household appliances with embedded technologies to become musical instruments. According to their very name, domestic activities unfold away from the public eye, inside the confines of a home where, traditionally, women 'belong'. Inspired again by Oliveros and her musical-feminist activism (O'Brien, 2016), *Women's Labor* uses sound to project private domestic rituals into public discourse. While the feminist agenda of breaking the workplace 'glass ceiling' continues to be important, the validation of traditionally 'feminine' skill-sets and their adoption by men are equally crucial in creating a gender-equal twenty-first-century culture.

Embedded Iron is the first instrument of the project (see Figure 6) in which the act of ironing produces pitched sounds. Ironing along the horizontal axis of the ironing board, the rotation of the iron and the downward force of the ironing gesture: these correspond to pitch, timbre and dynamic changes, respectively. In a typical performance, I invite the audience to interact with *Embedded Iron* as a sound installation, in which they assume the role of the performer in the eyes of others in the space. I reorganize the musical experience to take place within a participant's bodily gesture as the centre of a social statement: domestic work can be done by a person of any age, gender or colour. The movement-sonic experience aims to disrupt the audience's preconceived notions about domestic tasks, beckoning them to reflect on the domestic sphere in their own lives. In addition to the interactive installation, I perform Margaret Schedel's *Ringdown for Embedded Iron* (2019), in which I meditate on the act of ironing with methodical deliberateness. I invite those witnessing my sonic ironing to listen intently to each action and each fabric's sound, and to contemplate my possible relationship with the pieces of clothing that I iron – a man's jacket, a woman's scarf and a baby's onesie. While a woman speaking about 'feminine' issues at work can be regarded negatively (undermining her credibility), in a self-reflexive stroke, I conjoin my domestic and professional spheres in my performance, prompting the audience to consider how my family demands might bear upon my professional role. There is nothing more personal and, thus, more political than one's own body; in *Women's Labor*, the bodies of the performer and the audience are cast as agents of social change.



Figure 6: The author during a performance of *Embedded Iron* (part of the installation project *Women's Labor*), a collaboration with Margaret Schedel and Matthew Blessing; photograph by Matea Friend.

The above examples of contemporary approaches show an enthusiasm for shattering social and physical barriers within traditional performance spaces to connect us intimately and physiologically. Conjuring the physical closeness that today's social media renders superfluous, present-day musical practitioners buck the technological trend to attest to the body as an indispensable part of our human connection. We spend a significant portion of our headspace floating in the virtual world, and so we are ineluctably drawn to experiences that confront our corporeality and break the chains of social isolation to connect us with others on a radically sympathetic and corporeal level. These experiences jolt us back into our mortal bodies, leaving us feeling uncomfortable and vulnerable yet exhilarated: in other words, feeling unmistakably alive.

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