Plague Fragments: Transmediating Performance Practice during COVID-19

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Abstract

This diaristic essay describes adapting a new vocal work, Lawrence Kramer's "The Convergence: Notes on the Plague Year 2020," itself an adaptation of Thomas Hardy's poem on the *Titanic*'s sinking, for virtual premiere. As a singer already exploring ways in which classical musicians can de-center conventional, privileged practices, I am particularly interested in the asynchronous recording process between musicians who have never met. Transmediating elements of live vocal and piano music into a digital format also has the dual effect of flattening a performance space and at the same time foregrounding the fragmentary quality of Hardy's poem. Paradoxically, the poem begins to sound more rather than less material, and the virus-isolated voice more vulnerable than slick. Editing the recorded layers, in addition to further transmediation through video and sound art, creates an ongoing, adaptive process that would not be possible in a recital hall.

Keywords; adaptation, performance practice, pandemic, transmediation, word and music studies

Biography

Heidi Hart is an arts researcher, musician, and Pushcart Prize-winning poet, currently serving as an Arts & Humanities Research Fellow at SixtyEight Art Institute in Copenhagen. She holds an M.F.A. from Sarah Lawrence College and a Ph.D. in German Studies from Duke University. Her publications include monographs on Hanns Eisler's activist art songs and on music in climate-crisis narrative. This year she is curating an international arts laboratory, *Climate Thanatology*, which extends hospice music practices to climate grief through sound, visual art, theatre, and participatory events. She also serves as a Nonresident Senior Research Fellow in the Environment & Climate program of the European Center for Populism Studies.

Introduction

Windows closed, refrigerator off, the house is as quiet as it's going to be. I bend down to click the arrow on my laptop and adjust my headphones. A recorded piano plays repeated, insistent pitches, then opens into oscillating octaves that linger in what feels like canned air in my ears. I begin to sing into the mic plugged into the USB-linked AudioBox. Even my "opera voice" feels dry as I try to evoke the underwater menace of Thomas Hardy's poem "The Convergence of the Twain," on the sinking of the *Titanic*:

> Over the mirrors meant
>
> To glass the opulent
>
> The sea-worm crawls—grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent
>
> [Hardy 1923, 288]

The music is by Lawrence Kramer, known for his influence on 1990s New Musicology and for compositions including "A Short History (of the Twentieth Century)" for voice and percussion, premiered in Krakow in 2012 as an embodied record of wartime trauma, and "Bearing the Light," a thorny, joyful take on Nietzsche for voice and cello that once took me months to learn. In this case, too, what seems at first to be a difficult score begins to sound inevitable, to the point of the odd earworm (if not Hardy's cinematic "sea-worm") haunting my sleep. Normally I have what now seems like a long-ago luxury: rehearsals with my musical collaborator(s) in person. Several years ago, when reading through Kramer's Nietzsche setting, I met with him and the cellist in a Fordham University classroom, where we could test tempo and dynamics, start and stop, and hear from the composer what was working or not, and what he might revise, too, in response. This kind of dialogic process is habitual for working musicians; in the strange isolations of 2020, performing artists have had to adapt, to find new ways to learn new repertoire, rehearse, and share with audiences, whether online or outdoors.

As a singer working with a pianist 2,000 miles away, I have had to face new, material challenges in adaptation, not only from text to musical score but also from live singing/playing to separate tracks of recorded sound and then to an edited, visually augmented final version for online premiere. Transmediation, an aspect of adaptation in which common elements such as rhythm can cross from one medium to another, becomes paradoxically more physical, not less, as I layer tracks of sung text on my computer, and as they undergo more editing and find their way into a video [Rajewsky 2002; Salmose and Elleström 2021]. Creating an asynchronous "performance" exposes the constructedness of human concertizing and the still-privileged position of making classically informed music at home. We are transmediating our own music-making bodies, making them into artifacts; there is a belatedness about hearing the final version of "Convergence," a relic of this year of plague and political crisis. Unlike a brief live performance, though, this compressed material can continue to float in the ocean of streamed archive, lock-down improv, and Zoom ensemble. Breaking down and adapting the project further, in collaboration with sound art duo Silo Portem, yields even smaller sonic fragments, as the recording is sampled and layered into a dark ambient mix. In Lawrence Kramer's rendering of the piece as slide-based film, the music takes a more sidelong role. Though pianist and singer are never visible onscreen, digital media allow us

to "be present in multiple ways and in multiple formats", with surprising forms of materiality, for all the constraints of the COVID era [LaBelle 2006, 270].

Process, Glitch, and Privilege

Lawrence Kramer's compositional process began while "looking for a historically resonant poem" to set as a response to the pandemic year. Unlike composer Lisa Bielawa's *Broadcast from Home*, based on collected lockdown speech in documentary-lyric format, Kramer has made a metaphorical leap [Bielawa 2020]. He happened on Hardy's famous "Convergence of the Twain," with its shipwreck written in fragments and references to "arrogance and ruined opulence," and, as he put it in an email, "the deal was done, snap! like that" [Kramer 2020b]. In his official notes for the piece, he writes,

> Thomas Hardy's poem "The Convergence of the Twain" is about the loss of the *Titanic* in 1912, but its narrative forms all too apt a metaphor for the shipwreck of 2020: a collision between human and natural forces that upsets the order we foolishly thought was secure, a shock wave that rips across the entire globe. The poem, with its reflection on "vaingloriousness," seems especially pertinent to condition in the United States, where arrogance and ignorance at the top levels of government, led by one vainglorious man, gave the virus a free hand to spread more misery and death than it could do anywhere else on the planet. So this musical setting is a work of political art as well as a kind of elegy [Kramer 2020a, 1].

Kramer found that the fragmentary poem "was also telling me how to set it," with eleven numbered stanzas that he could associate with different "reference note[s]," making twelve in total with the prologue to fill out the chromatic scale. The piece works cyclically, returning to the prologue's tonality at the end. Most of the segments begin "with a variant of the initial figure of the piece", a repeated note that may evoke associations with underwater sonar or insistent knocking [Kramer 2020b]. Knowing that live performance would be impossible, the composer had three layers of adaptation in mind: setting the text to music, eventually setting the music to a slide-based film, and adapting, in a broader sense, to the demands of pandemic isolation and available technology.

After contacting the pianist (Joshua Groffman, also a composer) and me about preparing the piece for a virtual premiere, Kramer sent the score via PDF along with a computer-generated MP3 recording. The robotic sound of the "keyboard," changing tempo according to metronome markings but not of course according to human breath, at least gave me an idea how the piece would function as a whole. The equally robotic "voice" that traced my melody, not quite on an actual vowel, helped me internalize some difficult intervals while going back and forth between the recording and my own keyboard. Josh and I worked separately on the music before a Zoom meeting to discuss logistics. Kramer introduced the software we'd be using to layer individual tracks at our convenience, and we marked our scores on where to accelerate for breathing in long phrases, how declamatory (or not) to sound, and how bright or dark the vocal timbre should be – as if we were rehearsing in the same room, but without rehearsing.

Our first real pandemic challenge came when Josh could not access a quality piano for

recording. He was in the midst of moving and, understandably, did not want to "perform" on the provisional upright at hand. Despite efforts to find an available college practice room in New York, administrative policies during the spring lock-down made this impossible. We understood this, too. Our stopgap solution was for Josh to record a section of the piece on the upright, so that we could figure out the electronic layering and check our ensemble. Hearing the piano track alone, Kramer was concerned that the initial tempo was too slow; with my voice track added, he felt that it sounded fine. All of this took weeks to work out what would have happened in an hour's rehearsal, not because of any disagreements, but simply because technology takes time. Despite the illusion of Zoom-era immediacy, our process required me to order an AudioBox, test out the USB connection and phantom mic power, and experiment with volume controls and different export formats, not to mention get used to singing over a pre-recorded track that required me to follow it, not the other way around, as in the singer's usual presumptive role.

This exercise in humility and slowness also made my voice sound different in my headphones: less resonant, with every glitch exposed. I've come to appreciate the glitch as part of the materiality of Zoom performance, the moment of lapse or "breakage" [Rutherford-Johnson 2017, 203] when musicians play together live-but-not in separate living rooms, and in the larger sense of "glitch feminism," which is "all about traversing along edges and stepping to the limits, those we occupy and push through" [Russell 2020, 22]. This exploration of limits also yields new vulnerabilities, as I am finding in another, experimental performance in complete darkness, when I cannot rely on gesture or concert dress to amplify (or distract from) my all-too-human voice. In this case, as a singer stuck in her own house, focusing on a moment of rhythmic hesitation or excessive force on a high note can lead to over-recording, trying too many times until the voice loses its shine. That Kramer's piece lasts 10 minutes means that the voice can tire after three or four attempts. Mine might well sound a little worn. I was comforted to hear a slight editing glitch in the piano track, and a moment when the pedal creaked; the awkwardness of COVID music-making became part of the performance, too.

Recording at home brought other, unexpected challenges. Without the ease of live rehearsal to discover aspects of the text we wanted to stress, the words' odd materiality, pressed into the percussive keyboard recording, became almost an obstacle. I found myself resisting my own usual bent toward speech-like diction, opening up each syllable and holding the first vowel in diphthongs like an old-fashioned opera singer. Not only had the composer asked for a more lyrical and less declamatory style than the text might at first suggest, but Kramer's music itself demanded liquid push-back against Hardy's barnacle-like text, like waves rushing through each line. The sound of the piano, once Josh was able to find a more suitable one, echoed the text on the page in its percussive quality; it also sounded strangely antiquated, almost out of tune, in the recorded version, without the space of a recital hall around it. Stuck in pandemic lock-down, in my own confined space, as time seemed strangely warped, too, I sang "The Convergence" over and over. I wanted a sound that would somehow transcend these strange constraints.

The version of my track that I decided to keep happened last-minute, late in the day when my voice was rested. Normally I would not have had this much agency in determining what went out into the world. In a live performance, more would have been left to chance, humidity, and nerves. In a recording studio, the other musicians, the engineer, and a

producer would have had more say. But here I was in my living room, left – or literally hooked up – to my own devices. I thought, "why not?", plugged in my headphones, and sang the whole piece with my eyes closed, as if underwater with the sea-worm sliming its way across the mirrors of the wealthy dead, all their jewels turned "lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind" [Hardy 1923, 288]. While I wouldn't wish a shipwreck on my neighbors, living as an alien in a ski town of upper-income Trump supporters, I found this take eerily cathartic in the month before the 2020 election. Singing as a classically trained white woman, I was uncomfortably aware of my own privilege, too, with all the blind spots and exclusions of the European art-song tradition, embodied in vibrato and open vowels.

But here was "The Convergence," part political statement, part elegy, and it needed to be sung. My non-expert editing process, before sending the combined tracks to the pianist and composer, consisted mainly of volume and resonance adjustments. At times I flirted with too much reverb, in order to fake the sense of playing and singing in the same acoustic space; I also wanted to add even more "wet" to Hardy's text, still sounding a bit brittle. I realized, though, that this wasn't only the fault of my "dry" living room. Hardy's poem, broken into fragments as it is, also shows his penchant for vocabulary that sounded fossil-like, even a century ago. "Stilly couches she," he writes, picturing the *Titanic*'s wreck on the ocean floor. In the next numbered stanza, the weird vision continues:

> Steel chambers, late the pyres
>
> Of her salamandrine fires,
>
> Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.
>
> [Hardy 1923, 288]

This section is meant to be sung both rhythmically and lyrically, as the meter shudders from 4/4 to 3/4 to 5/4 time and back again. What I found, listening to the recording, was that these words sounded as if heard from a remove, like lost objects lifted from the wreck itself, having taken on not so much wetness as the ocean's "pressure, salinity, and coldness" [Jue 2020, 5], as "blue media" theorists seek to do with their usually land-bound terminology. I read back into the poem itself, as my own background in dialogic adaptation studies would have me do [Bruhn 2013], because I was so struck by the chilly strangeness of the words, now fixed, more or less, in a digital track. As a private experiment, to literalize what I was hearing, I messed with adding audio effects such as pre-recorded ocean waves, a sci-fi voice modifier, and some metallic ambience. This amateur underwater opera transmediated Hardy's text further, into hissing sibilants and echoing vowels with elusive, if any, poetic meaning attached. Though the project would eventually be given professional treatment by sound art duo Silo Portem, my experiment gave me a sense of possibility in non-live performance, and freed me to hear *through* Hardy's strange words, as sonority transmediated from text to voice to digital space, still rising from the tonal "as the ground of utterance" [Kramer 2018, 86].

In my final stage of editing "The Convergence," I experimented further, amplifying and compressing the file in several versions, the flatter, more easily emailable MP3 and richer, data-heavier WAV. Here, too, I was reminded of literal compression underwater. Instead of handling recorded tracks as bodiless digital traces, I found that they took up space; they

had weight; they could shrink or expand; they could move. I recalled Patricia Fumerton's idea of the "protean archive," with reference to the English Broadside Ballad Archive, in which songs "can be as slippery and multiple in their transformations as Proteus," god of the sea [Fumerton 2013, cited in Jue 2020, 117]. I passed along several versions of the combined tracks to pianist and composer, for more editing and digital mastering. Hearing the final version several weeks later, I found that it did convey a sense of pianist and singer in one space, at least in terms of well-coordinated ensemble, but it left me with a sense of ghostliness, too, as if both were remembering a past performance. Already I hear our digitally synched, amplified, and compressed performance as a relic, the piano's insistent pinging or knocking as a reminder not to forget, not to return to "normal," not to forget where and who we were then, in a future when we may sound even stranger.

Coda

Since our long-distance recording process, Lawrence Kramer has added visual slides to "The Convergence," after a month of collecting and arranging *Titanic*-related images [Kramer 2020]. A title slide showing an almost pastoral iceberg scene shifts to a black screen that sets the composer's introductory notes next to the image of a woman in a mask. Here the piano's introduction begins, leading into the next slide, an iconic image of the *Titanic* at sea. Black-and-white shots of rescue boats and masked nurses with stretchers, also referencing the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918, alternate with color photos of the ship's underwater remains, discovered in 1985. This montage sits uncomfortably – as it should, avoiding feel-good ambience – between documentary and music video, in which screen images usually respond to and amplify the song. The video literalizes Thomas Hardy's idiosyncratic text, but not in a smooth, cinematic way. Breaks between images do not correspond to pauses between fragments in the text-setting, adding to the sense of delay (or "*relay*" in Robert Bresson's approach to film-sound counterpoint) and belatedness [1985, 149]. The one moment when an image of the *Titanic* is supposed to pop into view at a climactic moment in the music, it skips a beat, reminding me that digital performance is a construct, too.

Hearing my own voice, estranging as that is anyway, I find it sounds more vulnerable than "wet" or "dry." This is a voice unused to singing after months of isolation, and alone in a living room, though the luxury of this is not lost on me, faced with the images of masked nurses. And for all my far less risky work at balancing those open vowels with solid consonants, Hardy's words like "stilly," "thrid," and "salamandrine" still sound alien. If they were easier to grasp, though, the film would risk becoming too illustrative. Viewers/listeners tell me that the audiovisual experience is pleasurably discomfiting, perhaps in Mark Fisher's sense (applied to Lovecraft's fiction via Lacan), of *jouissance* as disturbing fascination with a "Thing that is both terrible *and* alluring" [Fisher 2016, 17]. The *Titanic*'s rusted, broken hull in bluish seawater may be a familiar sight, but in the context of current political and public health disasters, it takes on an almost prophetic weight. The piano's percussive repetition and harmonic snaking through the chromatic scale create more than a programmatic soundtrack. The course of images seems to slow and stretch the recording's pace, opening spaces between the text's fragments more obviously, and offsetting the music to a sidelong role.

In the last stage of transmedial adaptation, Edinburgh-based sound art duo Silo Portem worked our "Convergence" recording into a complex texture of ambient hum and water noise, along with fragments of work by Dominik Grenzler ("An Moku") and industrial rhythms by FL Soutu (Brazil). The "lockdown jam" recording that resulted (before being further fragmented into shorter sound pieces) is a surreal journey that begins with broken-record piano repetitions, foregrounding the sense of stuck, warped time that I experienced when recording in my living room. Watery gushing, static pulses, and overheard human speech (also in glitchy repetition) take over the sound space, along with mechanical knocking sounds that echo the piano's earlier patterns. Best heard with headphones, Silo Portem's work takes an intimate, unsettling, almost narrative trajectory that moves from piano to underwater sounds that seem industrial at first and gradually morph into trills and hums that could be made, maybe, by deep-sea creatures. My electronically transformed voice could belong to something alien, too, as if emerging from the shipwreck as a ghost. That said, Si and Gillie Young, the couple behind the Silo Portem moniker, refer to the work as "abstract" in the sense that it resists figurative thinking [Silo Portem 2021]. This time, when I put my headphones on and close my eyes, I am not singing but listening, loosening attachment to the idea of performance, letting Thomas Hardy's barnacle-words drift away. I stop resisting the "artificiality" of COVID collaboration and appreciate this long, strange journey that would not have happened otherwise. Piano octaves, vibrating wires, metal striking metal, slush and hum and static, all of this emerges when the ship of human hubris sinks, feeding an unknown future. Maybe we can hear it, though, a humming in the background, an impossible vowel sung fathoms deep.

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