The librettist's adaptation of source in collaboration with the composer

Why might the adaptive librettist of operas that address contemporary experiences of the extreme appropriate narrative sources, form and aesthetics from Japanese sources?

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Introductory quotation

At the age of seventeen, I wrote a quotation from Bertolt Brecht in the front of my Arden Shakespeare edition of Shakespeare's *Pericles*. Many years later, these words are still the ground from which this research has emerged:

> Stylization means a general elaboration of what is natural, and its object is to show the audience, as being part of society, what is important for society in the story. Thus the so called 'poet's own world' must not be treated as arbitrary, cut off and 'obeying its own logic'; instead whatever it contains in terms of the real world must be brought out and made effective. The 'poet's own words' are only sacred in so far as they are true; the theatre is the handmaiden not of the poet but of society.
>
> Brecht in 'Masterful Treatment of a Model' (Brecht, 1948, p.213).

Abstract

This practice-led investigation explores strategies for addressing extreme events drawn from a contemporary context through the collaborative process of composing opera. In particular, the thesis examines possibilities for managing the emotional impact of such work on the audience through looking beyond the Western tradition at the aesthetics of Japanese Nō theatre and the haiku. It explores the differing functions of words and music, and posits suggestions towards a method of composition designed to develop a more considered, thinking relationship between the members of the audience and the performed opera, where they habitually 'experience intense emotional narratives without being aware of what is at stake, thus without seeming to be accountable' (McClary, in Clément, 1989, xiv). As an exemplum, the author examines the Church Parable, *Curlew River*, by Benjamin Britten and William Plomer, a collaborative precedent based on the Nō play *Sumidagawa*, depicting a mother's grief after her child is kidnapped into slavery. The process of this collaboration and the relationship between the form and content of the work are analysed to identify how it has influenced the adaptations completed during the period of research.

The investigation has included three collaborations with composers and musicians:

- *Red Angel,* an adaptation of Yasuzo Masumura's 1966 film of the same name as a full length opera set in the Sudanese Civil War of 1991–92, with a full score for scenes 1, 2, 9 and 10 composed by Ayanna Witter-Johnson.

- *Green Angel*, an adaptation as a chamber opera of Alice Hoffman's novella for teenagers written in 2002, the year after 9/11, composed by Dr Lauren Redhead.

- *I am the ferryman*, a meditative film that explores the relationship between words and music in Benjamin Britten's and William Plomer's *Curlew River* made in collaboration with film maker Lucy Bergman and 'Our Liberated Winter' (Simon Prince – flute, Robin Bowles – piano).

Methodology

This research began by responding to the call for a collaborative PhD (University of Leeds/Opera North) to investigate 'the librettist's adaptation of source in collaboration with the composer'. The notion behind an AHRC funded collaborative PhD is that the research will be of some use to the non-university partner, with a projected result of new insights and new approaches. Unlike writers such as the TV satirist Armando Iannucci for Opera North (collaborating with composer David Sawyer on *Skin Deep* in 2009) and the Indian poet Jeet Thayil for The Opera Group (collaborating with Edward Rushton on *Babur in London* in 2012) who were contracted to provide libretti for composers because of their reputation in another genre, this writer-researcher has been given an extended opportunity to investigate the specificity of the relationship between his practice and the collaborative process of making opera. When I was awarded the PhD scholarship, as an already established professional artist (a script writer, poet and theatre director), I decided – in order to investigate a question that had emerged through a series of creative projects exploring contemporary experiences of the extreme – that the research would be 'practice-led', that is research conducted through creative writing and performance practice rather than research into performance practice, to use Baz Kershaw's distinction (Kershaw, 2000, cited in Piccini, 2002, no pagination). My experience of the research process suggests that the relationship between practice-led research and research-led practice is constant and fluid, 'interwoven in an iterative, cyclic web' (Smith and Dean, 2010, p.2) or the spiral of understanding that Melissa Trimingham proposes in her 2001 PhD thesis, an open-ended spiral that can be entered at any point allowing 'indefinite returnings to the point of departure with renewed understanding' (Trimingham, 2001, p.41). Hence the need to keep re-visiting the original question, inventing new secondary questions to define more sharply the scope of the inquiry. Closely defining the scope of the enquiry through new questions may take the researcher into new fields of knowledge, like the

insights from ecology and anthropology offered in this writing, that were not originally envisaged. Throughout this exploration of the relationship between the act of writing libretti, the contemporary extreme and Japanese aesthetics, there has been a continuous return to theory (and to the exemplum of *Curlew River*) in order to challenge, modify and widen thinking, and in order to formulate 'new and better questions, in the light of experience' (Trimingham, 2001, p.43). The patterns of the iterative cycle and the open-ended spiral inherently challenge binary formulations such as the 'conventional polarities between theory and practice, (...) process and product, artistic and academic – through the degrees to which [the research] successfully evolves methods that are holistic in conception and operation' (Kershaw, 2010, p.123). The purpose of the research is to improve both the practice itself and the theoretical understanding of that practice.

As a writer-director, I had used song and music in my theatre works but had not addressed the form of opera as a possible framework for the investigation of a long-term concern with devising live performances that explore extreme contemporary events. With my interest in Roland Barthes' aesthetic, defined in his essay 'Lesson in Writing', drawn from his observations on the Bunraku puppet theatre, where 'emotion no longer submerges everything in its flood but becomes matter for reading' (Barthes 1977, p.177), opera, as an analogous 'total spectacle, but divided' (Barthes, p.177) seemed to offer a possibility for the presentation of such problematic material. The need to find an appropriate performance form, where performers and audience would not become submerged in emotion, had become increasingly important in my shaping of the experiences of refugees from Africa's wars in the cities of West Yorkshire. The forms explored over a two-year period prior to commencing the PhD (reflective poetry, solo performance, biographical and autobiographical poetry, and a multimedia, participatory educational project) had seemed inadequate in the face of the extreme emotions and intellectual complexity of the source material, especially since my ambition was to present it in a public context. The basis of this research was therefore an intuitive artistic hunch 'generated by the researcher's own practice, which has become important to pursue in order to continue that practice' (Rubidge, 2004, no pagination). As a researcher,

sensing that there might be something to offer in the operatic form, in the aesthetics of Japanese traditional theatre, and in the process of collaboration with a composer, I devised a methodology using artistic practice and reflection on that practice as 'a means of interrogating a pre-determined theoretical issue' (Rubidge, 2004, no pagination). The PhD research is therefore the latest, and most methodical, stage on a complex journey of exploratory writing and performance in relation to contemporary intercultural material that addresses the shaping of harrowing experiences for myself, my collaborators and our audiences. The complexity of my journey through forms before arriving at the beginning of a collaboration with a composer on the opera *Red Angel* is detailed in Chapter 6 of this accompanying commentary. The process of the evolution of the opera *Red Angel* has been a series of discarded, progressive experiments, and the opera-in-progress (libretto, full score for four scenes and piano score completed) is the product of the most recent stage of this inquiry, differentiated from the previous stages by the application of a practice-led research/research-led practice methodology to the question.

The sub-title (or question) for the research was, over an eighteen-month period prior to the transfer, framed as a precise inquiry relating both to opera and the aesthetics of the Nō theatre. Again, I had been working intermittently with ideas and practices from traditional Japanese theatre for many years, and was familiar with Barthes' aesthetics, but bringing these ideas to the construction of a strategy for writing opera libretti dealing with the extreme, and to the act of writing libretti, was a new piece of practice-led research/research-led practice. We might say that this research is a continuation of a long period of reading, writing and doing but, unlike most work in the professional context, the project has been to find approaches and solutions to a particular line of enquiry (Robin Nelson's 'clew', or thread, perhaps) through an intentionally progressive, iterative series of reflective practices constantly informed by conceptual thinking and reading. The rigour, as Nelson asserts, is in the syncretism necessitated by bringing a wide range of theatrical, musical, dramaturgical, choreographic, scenographic, cinematic, aesthetical, historical, anthropological, ecological, poetical and philosophical knowledge to the enquiry rather than 'depth-

mining' (Nelson, 2013, p.34) a proscribed field, like the works of one author or the history of a performance company. Each stage of the PhD has been framed as a progressive investigation of secondary inquiries, narrowing down and defining particular areas.

A central feature of the method, from the earliest stages, has been a close examination of the composition of Britten's and Plomer's *Curlew River*, an operatic adaptation of a story of extreme emotion adapted from a Japanese Nō play. This is consistently described in this commentary as the 'exemplum'; an exemplum provides a model for behaviour and, in this case, something to test the research collaborations against, serving a pedagogical function by being something both to imitate and to depart from, since the composition of *Curlew River* addressed many of the same concerns of form, content and collaborative process. The constant returns to this source – as score, published libretto and drafts, correspondence between collaborators, photo-documentation, archive video-documentation and live performance – has allowed the researcher to use it as a 'still point', testing his own ideas about collaboration and composition against an analogous model, and placing his own work within a recognisable operatic context. In returning to original drafts, sources and correspondence held at the Red House in Aldeburgh and Palace Green Library (Durham University), I have followed the evolution of an analogous collaborative process that places the designer/stage director and lead performer at the heart of the collaboration as well as the librettist and composer. The examination of *Curlew River* has been undertaken primarily to inform the creative process of operatic composition, and not to offer a critique of the collaboration between Britten and Plomer. Although the notion of this exemplum was present in my thinking from the beginning of the research, it became more important – structurally and aesthetically – during the composition of *Green Angel*, completed after *Red Angel.* In order to reflect this stronger connection with the exemplum and my reading of the Plomer and Britten archives, the order of the chapters in the thesis does not conform to the chronological order in which the works were written and composed. Since *Green Angel* exemplifies more clearly the close relationship between my work, *Curlew River*, the Nō and haiku, I have chosen to give the reader a detailed exposition of this

before considering the more complex, collaborative journey of adaptation from source explored in the *Red Angel* opera.

Research undertaken by a writer may be perceived as obviously logocentric, but it is apparent that the collaborative process of making opera involves far more than the composer and the librettist, in particular the director, the designer, the choreographer, the performers and the audience. Though this is a creative writer's PhD, it is research into collaborative performance, including image, performance, action, movement and music. In short, the libretto is one part of a score for a live performance that involves the musical score, the costume and set designs, the choreography, the performers' creation and interpretation of parts and roles, the architecture of the theatre space and the socio-political context in which building and audience are situated. The 'text' is not the words on the page but a series of interlinked relationships. This 'writer' is concerned with the relationship of the breath to word and sound, with the relationship between music and word/sound, and with the body in action in a designed space. The 'medium of my choice', to borrow terminology from Lesage (Lesage, 2013, p.145), is the process of making of an opera, not only as words and notes on the page but as a series of sensory, somatic and intellectual relationships. This research has therefore become a complex interrogation of my own practice as an artist, exploring the creation of opera for the first time. The notion of research, unlike the professional work that has continued alongside the PhD, also implies the possibility of failure or partial success, since the work tests out ideas and must – by definition – present a series of new and untried answers to the research question which, in turn, will lead to further questions.

Haseman and Mafe make the point that practice 'needs to be understood in its wider sense as *all* the activity an artist/creative practitioner undertakes' (Haseman and Mafe, p.214, original italics). The documentation of my practice and thinking has necessarily taken a number of forms including scenarios and structural plans for operas; completed libretti and drafts of libretti; compositional notebooks; rehearsal plans and notes; dialogues with collaborators, supervisors and audiences; musical scores; sound recordings;

reflections on rehearsals and live performances of new and existing works of opera and music-theatre; metaphorical poetry; a collaborative film; a journal article; this commentary, and films and photographs of live performances.

I am convinced that film and photographic documentation cannot, unproblematically, stand in for the performance itself, however many cameras are used. Performance 'frames time and space as singular and unrecoverable whilst time and space are constructed as fixed and repeatable within recording practices' (Piccini, 2002, no pagination). There is also an ease of consumption in viewing the recording or reading the text of the libretto, which can too easily become a substitute for the live event. Just as 'a map is not the territory' (Korzybski, 1948, p.38), in the famous aphorism of Polish-American scientist and philosopher Alfred Korzybski, so the documentation is not the live performance. But what is the territory? Gregory Bateson, whose understanding of the shared pattern between mind and nature ('what happens between things') is essential to aspects of the argument developed in this commentary, argued the essential impossibility of knowing what the territory is, since any understanding of it is based on some representation:

> What is on the paper map is a representation of what was in the retinal representation of the man who made the map; and as you push the question back, what you find is an infinite regress, an infinite series of maps. The territory never gets in at all. (…) Always, the process of representation will filter it out so that the mental world is only maps of maps, ad infinitum.
>
> (Bateson, 1972, p.429).

In his essay 'Form, Substance and Difference', in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), Bateson argues that a map is not necessarily useful because of its literal truthfulness, but because it has a structure, for the task in the

present, analogous to the territory, and structure, as Walter Gropius wrote, 'can transform the mind' (Gropius and Wesinger, 1961, p.12) whether that 'structure' is the framework defining this series of chapters or the scenarios devised to generate libretti. So perhaps the multiple strands of research within this PhD, and the corresponding complexity of documentation, might be said to be analogous to the collaborative territory I have been involved with. Only by bringing these fragments together, and by examining the spaces between them, can the spectator-reader begin to piece together the territory of the research. The libretti are as much workings of the mind as is this commentary, which – at least partly – offers a 'short cut' for the reader to an understanding of the many facets of a six-year period of reflective practice and documentation. On a deeper level, if the subject of my research is the shaping of the extremes of contemporary experience into artworks, then the research posits a way of thinking about the world; it is a kind of philosophy in action.

One way I attempted to circumnavigate the conundrum of live and recorded media was, as part of the latter stages of the research, to make a film that is itself a collaborative work, and which uses image and text to investigate the process of making a particular opera (*Curlew River*) and how this connects with my artistic autobiography and creative process. This work exists in the time of the film; there is no attempt to transfer theatrical time to film time. As part of my work on the film, I experimented with poetry as a form of critical discourse, using the act of writing poems about my own creative relationship with the exemplum of *Curlew River* to work towards a series of definitions of the poetics of the libretto. This sprang from my 'hunch' that 'poetic writing can help/reveal as much as [analytical writing]' (Le Meur, quoted by Biggs, 2010, p.78). The Australian ficto-critic Anne Brewster describes this kind of practice as a research strategy to allow the creative writer to escape 'the author-evacuated analytical prose of the Anglo-American scholarly tradition' (Brewster, 2010, p.126). Crucially, the language of the series of poems presented in the commentary is the language of metaphor, a possibility towards a kind of understanding not available in more conventional academic writing. Haseman and Mafe, drawing on the ideas of Gray (1996), state that the practitioner-researcher's task is to take the terms and

technique of his practice and 'repurpose them into the language and methods of research (Haseman and Mafe, 2010, p.215). As a 'performer' within the film, as a 'poet' on the recorded soundtrack and as an active collaborator throughout the process of making the film, this researcher has addressed the notion of the contemplative participant. The exercise has been taken one stage further in a series of prose reflections on each poem in this commentary, expanding the thoughts and insights already present in the poems in wider, conceptual contexts. This process is 'interruptive and dialogic, not fusile; each mode retains its generic specificity' (Brewster, p.141).

A model of practice

The practice of libretto writing, for the purposes of this research project, is based on a model where the librettist decides on the subject, writes an initial scenario, decides on the staging for the piece, and then commissions a composer. The librettist and composer then discuss the content and form of the opera at length. The librettist presents drafts of sections for discussion, including stage directions and an indication of set design, before writing the complete text. The composer makes alterations in consultation with the librettist during the process of composition and further changes are made during rehearsal when the work is realised aurally, visually and choreographically. In the case of the three works composed as part of this research, for both economic and artistic reasons, the researcher has also been the producer and the director, continuing his authorship throughout the practical realisation. This model reflects the researcher’s professional background as an ‘auteur-director’ of original works and adaptations for theatre, and to some extent the economic given of the PhD research, where it was necessary for the librettist to approach composers and raise funds for the realisation of the collaborations. It also bears some relation to the Baroque or eighteenth-century model, where an impresario or theatre owner often obtained a libretto or commissioned the librettist before handing the text over to a composer. When the words were by the house poet and the music by the house composer, there was an opportunity for close discussion at an early stage of planning and this has been the case for all collaborations during the research project. In the case of both operas, after exploratory discussions, the composers received a completed libretto, which they studied and agreed to before writing a note of music, following an important aspect of Britten's method of operatic composition recounted by his preferred stage director Colin Graham:

> Benjamin Britten once said to me after an unsatisfactory rehearsal: It's the words that make me write the music I write, so they must be more important than the singers think they are!' Although each opera and its format inevitably gestated in his mind beforehand, not a note of music was ever written until he was entirely satisfied with the libretto.
>
> (Graham, 2006, p.3).

According to Britten in his Foreword to *The Rape of Lucretia,* the composer and poet (sic) 'should at all stages be working in the closest contact, from the most preliminary stages right up to the first night' (Britten, 1946, quoted in Herbert, 1989, p.117), and this is the practice that has been followed in the collaborations undertaken for this project. The model followed was, however, different to that practised by Britten, who emphasised the pre-eminence of the composer; in 1940 he described the stages of composition as 'the construction [by the composer] of a scenario, discussions with a librettist, planning the musical architecture, composing preliminary sketches, and writing nearly a thousand pages of orchestral score' (Britten, 1940, quoted in White, 1948, p.19). Though the initial ideas for content always originated with Britten, in his post-war career, and especially with William Plomer, he was willing to take some direction from a librettist in the construction of the scenario. It was Plomer who set the direction for *Gloriana,* posting J.E. Neale's 1934 biography of Elizabeth I to the composer as a corrective to Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex*, which Lord Harewood and Britten had been using as the main source in their deliberations about the opera. In a letter from Plomer to Britten on 27 April 1952, the librettist insisted on depicting the moment when Essex bursts in upon the Queen after his return from Ireland (Plomer, 1952, cited in Reed, 1993, p.19).

At the end of the chapter about the composition of *Curlew River,* at the end of the two chapters considering the operas *Green Angel* and *Red Angel*, and at the beginning of the chapter connected with the film *I am the ferryman*, I have provided a prose description of each model of collaboration, together

with a diagram. Though the models have aspects in common, like the initiation of the concept by one artist and the close involvement of artists or artistic roles other than those of the composer and librettist at the centre of each collaboration, each model is different, indicating that the journey of adaptation from source to form depends on the nature of the content being shaped, the differing experiences and attitudes of the collaborators, and the economic circumstances of the work's creation and performance.

Chapter 1

The art of writing a libretto as an *écriture* of the extreme.

C. Day Lewis in *The Poetic Image,* discussing Eric Crozier's libretto for Benjamin Britten's *Albert Herring*, wrote:

> The writing of words for opera demands an entirely different technique from the writing of lyric poetry as we now understand the term. Words for music are like water-weed: they live only in the streams of melody. When we take them out of their element, they lose their colour, their grace, their vital fluency: on paper they look delicate perhaps, but flat and unenterprising.
>
> (Day Lewis, 1947, quoted in White and Evans, 1983, p.156).

The art of writing a libretto demands sparseness, delicacy; an attention to the precision of the vowel, consonant and diphthong sounds within individual words, and an attention to the rhythm of phrasing. The latter should be anything but 'flat', unless this is the flatness the poet and broadcaster James Kirkup (1918–1997) found in William Plomer's libretto for Britten's *Curlew River*:

> Often it uses lines taken actually from the English translation of the play, a rendering with a peculiar poetic style, curiously flat, prosaic but filled with poetic spirit.
>
> (Kirkup, 1964, p.4).

During my research, I conducted a lengthy correspondence with the Leeds poet, playwright and songwriter, Peter Spafford, who said he was reluctant to engage with the writing of libretti for opera because there is no subtext. I replied:

> I can't convince you to like opera Peter. I'll just say that in opera the sub-text (or perhaps better described as the enlarged text!) is the music.
>
> (Strickson, 2012, personal communication).

My own perception as a librettist is confirmed by Linda Hutcheon:

> Characters in an opera (...) may appear two dimensional because of the compression of their stories, but their music has been likened to their unverbalized subconscious. The words they sing may *address* the outer world, but the music *represents* their inner lives.
>
> (Hutcheon, 2006, p.60, original italics).

The music may also shape the story in a different dimension of time to the libretto and the images presented to the audience. In *Green Angel*, the central character, originally named Green, has lost her identity as a result of a traumatic experience and has renamed herself Ash at the start of the action; the story of the opera is the gradual recovery of her identity as Green. This role is shared by an actor-singer and a singer within the accompanying ensemble. In the opera, the composer, Lauren Redhead, writes that the protagonist's 'identity as Green is musically constructed from the beginning of the opera, whilst being only visually constructed in the third act' (Redhead, 2011, p.23), so the subtext of the musical narrative is that Green is always present in Ash. The reality of subtext in relation to libretto and music is, however, rather more complicated. The nature of Ash/Green's identity is also present for the performer in phrases from the libretto before

the addition of music, and – as a director – I ask the singers to read the words aloud before they begin work with the score. For instance, in *Green Angel*, a clear example of pre-existing subtext, before the addition of the music, is when Ash, the teenage protagonist, introduces herself to the Old Woman:

> <u>Ash</u>
>
> My name is Ash   I knew the girl who lived here
>
> she was my friend   special friend   best friend
>
> (*Green Angel*, 2010, pp.12–13).

'The girl who lived here', 'Green', is in fact Ash herself, who feels that she has lost her former self. The performer is aware of this in the moment of singing, allowing the spectators the possibility of deciphering this intimation of who she really is through her attitude to the words. The character of the sung words, especially in the slow drop from the B flat of 'special' to the F of 'friend' (Redhead, 2011, p.21), in this instance, coincides with the performer's existing subtext, reinforced by the composer's instruction 'Psalm singing, following roughly the rhythm of speech'; musical and dramatic narratives are congruent at this moment. There is also another kind of sub-text in the libretto of the opera which is both intertextual and intermedial. The first repeated words of the opera, sung by the ensemble singer, are:

> Grinding   roaring   falling
>
> (*Green Angel*, 2010, p.5).

These words are borrowed from the sculptor David Nash's notes about his sculpture, *An Awful Falling* (2001), a series of pieces made from charred wood, accompanied by charcoal drawings. This work was exhibited as a separate installation within Nash's major retrospective exhibition at Yorkshire Sculpture Park (29 May 2010 – 27 February 2011). Since it says explicitly in

the programme for the opera *Green Angel* that the eponymous novella by American writer Alice Hoffman was written in the year after 9/11 (Strickson, 2011 1, p.4), it was intended that – without any visual reference to the Twin Towers – spectators would associate these three words with that extreme event, especially since they are the first words of the opera to be heard.

There is a presumption behind Peter's statement above that the writing of a libretto is an inferior form of writing, certainly inferior to a stage play. The libretto is usually an adaptation and therefore not original; it may quote from a primary source text, and other supplementary texts; it serves the action and does not seek to draw attention to itself. Despite this the work of a librettist is recognisable; it is his or her own recognisable *écriture* or mode of literary writing chosen from the possibilities available, signifying a relation to the world.

Roland Barthes drew attention to the fact of the spare use of language; it is neither natural or neutral but a deliberate attitude towards the act of writing. The reasons for the choices that shape the librettist's *écriture* relate to his or her understanding of the relationship between word and music, to cultural influences, to the content being reconfigured, and to his or her own unconscious verbal habits and obsessions. And they may relate, as in my case, to the autobiographical even though the 'I' who approaches the act of writing a text is 'already a plurality of other texts, other codes which are infinite or more precisely lost' (Barthes, 1974, p.100).

What does the act of writing libretti about the extreme reveal about this author, and the appropriateness of the libretto form for engaging with extreme material? This research project is part of the progression of a writing journey concerned with processing and ordering the first-hand experiences of refugees, asylum seekers, travellers/gypsies and Holocaust survivors I have worked with for a number of years. At first, I approached the task of making sense of these lives that seemed beyond reason, and so far beyond my own experience, through the metaphor-strewn genre of poetry. But poetry began to seem too dense, too rich, too 'deep'. The people I had met and worked with had been pushed about by violent, external political

forces. I was looking for a public, dramatic form to shape such experiences that would be of social use.

To be submerged in the emotion of the stories I had been hearing was profoundly useless; it did not lead to a clear understanding of their context or to the possibility of redemptive action, so I wanted to investigate a way of telling such stories that would enable both myself, the performers and the spectators to ‘walk around’ these experiences as if they were sculptures in an exhibition, with similar perceptual possibilities. I planned that author, performers and audience should view them with due care and time, be moved by them, consider what was being expressed and what we all, as individuals and groups now conscious of our unconsciousness, might do with this material. An analogous shaping is that of the narratives of individual Holocaust survivors I have collaborated with in presentations for young people. Traumatised and unable to express anything of their experience until thirty or more years after the original events, from their 60s onwards they have developed fixed performative routines: 'detached', chronological, highly selective accounts of events they repeat and present, which they are willing to answer questions about. Young people hearing these stories may on occasion be moved to tears but the survivors have learnt to include this reaction within a useful dialogue following the 'performance', so that the audience members, or 'readers', have an active creative role in the processing of the experience in the present. My project of writing libretti goes beyond the texts' function in relation to music; the rejection of ‘literariness’ or the self-expression of the poetic ‘soul’ is a public stance towards the world. This intercuts with Barthes’ view that it is the responsibility of the dramatic art ‘not so much to express reality but to signify it’ (Barthes, 1972, p.74). Perhaps Verdi, in his letter to Clara Maffei, 20 October 1876, offered a related perception when he stated that the opera composer and librettist 'do not copy the truth but invent it' (quoted by Plant, 2013, no pagination).

Verdi also wrote 'Let us return to the past - that will be progress' in a letter to Francesco Florimo, 5 January 1871 (Osborne, 1971, p.169). In addressing the extreme, my research examines a particular invented exemplum that drew profound lessons from fourteenth-century Japan and medieval

England: Benjamin Britten's and William Plomer's Church Parable, *Curlew River*, based on the Nō play *Sumidagawa*. This opera is concerned with the violent kidnapping into slavery of an only child, his death and his mother's grief. If we examine the words of 'Our Music Critic' from *The Times* of 1964, we find his account of the experience of the first performance at Orford church echoes the words of Barthes:

> the work's tone of voice is of a dignity that seems to scorn anything so frail as a lump in the throat. And yet the nobility of the diction, musical as well as dramatic (...), makes the Mother's predicament clear in nerve as well as bone. Afterwards these characters, severally and in their dramatic interplay, lodge doggedly in the mind and will not go away. They are more real now, four days later, than they were in the moment of performance.
>
> ('Our Music Critic', 1964, no pagination).

A writer who corresponded with Plomer from 1962 to 1965, the period encompassing the later stages of the composition of the libretto for *Curlew River*, was James Kirkup, who lived in Japan for most of his adult life. Like Plomer, he was a poet who wrote the words for music-dramas performed in churches, including *Upon This Rock, A Dramatic Chronicle of Peterborough Cathedral* (1955). Kirkup wrote that when he attended *Sumidagawa* in Japan it happened to be shortly after the discovery of the dead body of a Japanese boy, Ohara Yoshinubu, who had been kidnapped and had disappeared, at a time when children were frequently kidnapped. The body had been discovered after two years under a gravestone in a Buddhist cemetery. Kirkup writes that in this context *Sumidagawa* 'seemed terribly up-to-date, almost a piece of factual reporting, and I think there was no one in the audience that afternoon who was not moved to tears by the climax of the play' (Kirkup, 1964, p.4).

Being moved to tears is not to be confused with being 'submerged in emotion'. In Barthes' most personal work, *Mourning Diary*, written after the

death of his mother, he moves between the committed emotion of grief and a 'lightness' experienced in solitude that allows him the reflective detachment he had so often proposed as the desired reaction of the reader:

> *November 3*
>
> On the one hand, she wants everything, total mourning, its absolute (but then it's not her, it's I who invest her with the demand for such a thing). And on the other (being truly herself), she offers me lightness, life, as if she were saying: 'but go on, go out, have a good time...'
>
> (Barthes, 2011, p.32).

His dead mother is the invisible dramatist, 'measuring' and controlling his mourning. Since she no longer exists, she is his own necessary fiction. Similarly, the Nō dramatist, Motomasa, when constructing the imagined dance-drama of the woman who has lost her child in *Sumidagawa*, offers us a beautiful abstraction of the child's absence and yet – like the grief Barthes feels for his mother – it may be 'painful, lacerating' (Barthes, 2011, p.42) for individual members of the audience. The reason for this laceration is the projection of our own experiences into the grief that is happening on stage; hence the grief expressed, though abstract, is painful for us since it is replete with 'the pain of absence – perhaps therefore love?' (Barthes, 2011, p.42). It is precisely Barthes' perception of Japanese theatre as the vigilant evocation of the 'presence of absence' (Barthes, 2011, p.69) that allows the individual member of the audience to suffer and to experience the act of performance with detachment and 'lightness' from their own solitude. The Nō evolved to fit the tastes of the Samurai, 'who forbade the uninhibited expression of emotions: this consideration was crucial to the formulation of an art characterised by extreme stylisation' (Reed, 2008, p.416). In film, this stylisation, and consequent lacerating lightness can be achieved by the choice of shot, as director Elia Kazan illustrates with this example of his dialogue with Bud Lighton, his producer on *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945):

> I'd shot [this scene] with the little girl facing the camera, and there'd been tears rolling down her face. This affronted Bud; he abominated 'over-emotionalism'. '(...) shoot the scene again,' Bud said, 'and keep her back to the camera.' I did, and although the emotion wasn't as intense, the scene was better. A viewer could guess from the tension and quiver in her shoulders what was going on. We imagined an even greater heartbreak than we'd seen before.
>
> (Kazan, 1989, p.275).

As in Kazan's film, it is the paradox of the Nō that by carefully limiting and defining a frugality of expression, it achieves a moving emotional profundity.

Observers frequently commented on the detached nature of William Plomer's facial expression and Stephen Spender's description of his features almost becomes a metaphor for the committed emotion and 'lightness' demanded by Barthes:

> His clear-cut features (...) had something of the mask (...), a certain impassivity imposed on most unoriental features. (...) During the coming years I was to see how the effect of his 'mask', which concealed his feelings, was to give him exceptional sympathy for the difficulties of others and a capacity to ignore his own troubles, or, if they were discussed, to treat them with a lightness which had the effect of objectifying them.
>
> (Alexander, 1983, p.165).

Like the deep feeling and detachment simultaneously present in Plomer, the experience of the grief and loss signified through *Sumidagawa* is a Zen paradox for the audience, 'prosaic but filled with poetic spirit' (Kirkup, 1964, p.4), and close to the experience of opera that Benjamin Britten sought to create for his audience in the Church Parables. But what exactly was Britten's understanding of the process of operatic composition when

engaging with extreme material, and what makes this a distinctive aesthetic and practice upon which this librettist can draw? In order to place Britten's and Plomer's approach to shaping the extreme in context, I shall first examine the nature of opera itself, and how and why I first became engaged with Britten's operas through Opera North's production of *Peter Grimes*.

Chapter 2

Opera and the extreme, and Britten as an operatic model.

It is a commonplace to say that tragic opera is an art of the extreme, portraying the deep emotions stimulated by exceptional, serious and often violent events to the utmost degree. This investigation is concerned with the development of what I have come to think of as a contemplative aesthetic of depicting the extreme, and the implications for the shaping of the libretto that develop from this. A brief examination of some of the changes in attitudes to the handling of the extreme in the composition of opera during the past four hundred years will place the extreme in Britten's operas, and my own work, in context.

Early opera sprang from the meetings of the *camerata* in late sixteenth century Florence, a group of scholars and composers whose research suggested that continuous singing would be an authentic way of performing the classical Greek drama. *Orfeo* (Monteverdi/Striggio, 1607), the first opera to earn a regular place in the modern repertory, emerged from their concerns. The aesthetic of this work shares something with that of the reflective Japanese Nō, since the messenger recalling Euridice's death to Orfeo clearly and cleanly portrays the emotions of this event in retrospect; Lord Harewood wrote that Britten told him his passion was for the 'clear and clean', depicted with 'slender sound' (Harewood, 1952, p.6). In *Orfeo*, there is no intimation of the lead soprano's virtuosic expression of the whole gamut of tragic emotions we find thirty six years later in the same composer's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (Monteverdi/Busunello, 1643). This style of expression developed into the eighteenth century declamatory soliloquies of Rameau and perhaps reached its climax in the last aria of elaborate desperation sung by Floria Tosca in Puccini's 1900 opera or the eponymous

heroines' melodramatic arias in *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909), by Richard Strauss.

The influence of the extremes of emotion depicted in ancient Greek drama, in terms of both content and form, has been ever present in opera and shows no sign of diminishing. A recent manifestation of the constant return to this mother lode was Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Greek* (1988), adapted by the composer and Jonathan Moore from a play by physical theatre director Stephen Berkoff, grittily and rhythmically re-imagining the Oedipus myth in the grasping East End of 1980s Britain. Turnage's concern with the Greeks extends to his opera *Anna Nicole* (Turnage/Thomas, 2011). With its intense heroine and chorus of reporters, it could be said to be a re-imagination of Greek tragedy, using an operatic form that still owes much to the early ambitions of the *camerata*. But in parallel to this continuing mainstream strand of immersing opera's heroines in bravura displays of extreme emotion, there have been forms offering a critique of this approach and different 'cooler' strategies for the depiction of extreme content. Most important for Britten was Purcell. What Britten recognised in this seventeenth century composer was an impeccable sense of form and a restrained expression of emotion very different to the bulk of the European operatic repertoire. Thomas Betterton , the great tragedian, paid tribute to his composer friend:

> Purcel (sic) penetrates the Heart, makes the Blood dance through your veins, and thrill with the agreeable Violence offer'd by his Heavenly Harmony.
>
> (Betterton, circa 1709, quoted in White, 1983, p. 134).

'Agreeable Violence' expressed in 'Heavenly Harmony' might equally be applied to Britten's musical depiction of the extreme. But English dramatic opera, to all intents and purposes, faded away at the end of the seventeenth century and, with the arrival of Handel in 1710, was replaced by a demand for Italian-style opera. Demands from the native Italian audience for virtuosic singing and sensational plots led to the eighteenth century *opera seria*:

'opera based on arias illustrating a series of stock emotions (unfulfilled desire, vengeful anger, painful remorse and so forth' (Christiansen, 2012, p.4). By the 1730s, there was already a vogue for satirising the excesses of the Italian opera style. John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) – adapted for performance by Britten in 1948 – with its music from street ballads and folk tunes, was at least partly a reaction to the Italian style, and Handel responded with his 'cooler' *Serse* (1738). The classical simplicity of Gluck's 'reform' operas, like *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Gluck/Calzabigi, 1762) was a deliberate reaction to the *opera seria* style. In the nineteenth century, 'grand opera' in four or five acts predominated, usually based on dramatic historical events with heroic protagonists, in works like Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (1829) and Verdi's *Don Carlos* (1867). This was superseded by the highly charged myths and archetypes of Wagner and the *verismo* of Mascagni, Puccini and Giordano from the 1890s to the 1920s. *Verismo* means 'realism' (from Italian 'vero', meaning 'true'); this term does not relate to its florid vocal style but its intention to bring something of the real lives depicted in the novels of Zola and the plays of Ibsen on to the operatic stage. The notion of 'realism' in opera has always been problematic and the word Britten uses repeatedly to describe opera is 'stylised'. While opera may not require the vociferous vibrato and histrionics of *verismo*, by its very nature it demands of the 'actor' that he or she ‘speaks’ the words in a distinctly unnatural manner, like a quotation. Opera, 'the last remaining refuge of the high style' (Lindenberger, 1984, p.15), is as unashamedly artificial as the Nō, and – by its nature – a disrupted narrative that is always drawing attention to its own surface, with dramatic development depicted in a series of scenes or tableaux, which may sometimes seem to halt or freeze narrative rather than progress it. *Larvatus prodeo*, 'I advance pointing to my mask', to quote Barthes' favourite phrase.

**Figure 1: Mariko Mori, 2004, 'Mask'
Photo: Mori Koda ©Tokyo University.**

As the singer Natalie Dessay comments, drawing attention to the act of narrative is intrinsic to the art of creating character too:

> An actress friend of mine says she takes people along with her on a journey. That expresses it best for me. You leave a place for the person watching you, and their imagination, so they can travel along. You can use your own experience and imagination, and it takes a long time to use your emotion in a proper way. That means without hurting yourself, with the necessary distance between you and your character, but at the same time leaving the door open to real and deep emotions.
>
> (Interview transcribed in Jampol, 2010, pp.72–73).

The act of the performance itself calls attention to the way meaning is produced. The collaborative art of opera necessarily eliminates consistently complex subtext in the libretto sui generis, and by implication poetry,

successfully usurping the plenitude of meanings in the written text that Barthes, in *Critical Essays* (1972), perceives Brecht and the novelist Robbe-Grillet trying to dispense with, 'attempting a heroic but impossible elimination of meaning, thus bringing to our attention the ways we are accustomed to make things intelligible' (Culler, 1983, p.42). But the libretto is only one of the plural texts that define the experience of opera. To return to the observation that the music is the principal sub-text through the creation of its own narrative (words and music are always at least a double meaning), this takes us back to Barthes' separate 'matters for reading', which the spectator brings together in the live experience as the singer brings the character and herself together. Barthes describes the experience of the Bunraku puppet theatre as 'three separate writings which are given for reading simultaneously in three areas of the spectacle: the marionette, the manipulator, the vociferator; the effected gesture, the effective gesture, the vocal gesture' (Barthes, 1977, p.175). Arguing that the West has pursued 'the illusion of totality' (1977, p.174) since the Greeks, Barthes points out the relationship of the aesthetics of this 'total spectacle, but divided' (1977, p.177) to Brecht's project of the distancing effect by breaking with 'the habit of assimilating a work of art as a whole' (Brecht, 1936, p.91). The idea of providing separate, and sometimes ironic, narratives on the action through music is familiar to us from film. Lou Reed's 'Perfect Day', thought to have been inspired by a heroin trip, plays while Renton takes a heroin overdose in Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996), contrasting the apparent gentle lyricism of the song with the desperation of the act. The jaunty 'Stuck in the Middle with You', by Gerry Rafferty's *Stealers Wheel*, plays while Mr. Blonde cuts off officer Martin Nash's ear in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), asking the audience to question their emotional response to the cruelty, as they find themselves – at least partly – seduced by the light-heartedness of the song. This contrast of the visual and the musical in film goes back to the Russian director, Sergei Eisenstein, whose thinking, like Barthes' and Brecht's, was influenced by the aesthetics of oriental theatre. In 1928, in a 'A Statement on Sound', he wrote: 'The first experiments in sound [in film] must aim at a sharp discord with the visual images' (Eisenstein, 1928, quoted in Ross, 2008, p.224). Opera cannot be envisaged without the paradox that this 'total theatre' form depends on a

separation of musical and verbal texts and their simultaneous presentation in performance. Further separated 'texts' may be found in movement, design and lighting, all of which spring from the libretto and the music. Once we examine the nature of operatic form, though its ambition might be the desire for a unified dramatic spectacle, we see that the spectacle is ever divided, and this is an essential part of the experience of the audience member, as director Robert Carsen explains:

> You've got orchestral playing, solo singing, ensemble singing, pure dance, you've even got speech (...) It's created from an alchemical synthesis of the abstract and the concrete, the emotional and the intellectual (...) The most satisfying thing is that it fulfills all your expectations – the numinous, the incomprehensible, the emotional – yet it can be extremely challenging intellectually.
>
> (Interview transcribed in Jampol, 2010, p.19).

This is 'the strange reflection of life that opera presents' (Sutcliffe, 1996, p.51). The strangeness of this multi-layered 'total theatre' is at the heart of its attraction for a writer such as myself who desires new formal possibilities to express the complexity of experiencing extreme events that can become obscured by an all-engulfing preponderance of fleeting images and sound bites.

Writing contemporary opera based on real experiences of the extreme is a stubborn, marginal activity, perhaps suited to the 'outlier' or outsider since 'opera enthusiasts live in the past not in the present: there is no consensus about how to write opera today (...) no generally accepted musical style with lyrical effect and expressive declamatory function' (Sutcliffe, 1996, p.39). Despite still being subsidised to a level that most performance companies working in other genres can only dream of, the 'extremes' that main house opera companies in the UK tend to veer towards are those found in the surprisingly anodyne world of celebrity-myth and its associations (Adès' & Hensher's *Powder her Face*, Turnage's & Thomas' *Anna Nicole*, Sawyer's &

Iannucci's *Skin Deep*), the Wagnerian seam of myth re-imagined (Birtwistle's *The Minotaur*), adaptations of other works that are already famous in their own right (Maw's *Sophie's Choice* and Adès' & Oakes' *The Tempest*), or adaptations of familiar literature for a child or family audience like Dove's & Middleton's *Pinocchio* and Wallen's & Furtado's *Cautionary Tales* for Opera North. Addressing content with any political controversy head on, as in John Adam's *The Death of Klinghoffer* (the political furore surrounding which led to Goodman, the librettist, permanently withdrawing from the world of opera) is almost unheard of. This is despite the directorial and theoretical influence of Brecht who has been so crucial to the evolution of contemporary spoken drama and who wrote extensively on the nature of opera. He was drawn to opera because of its long tradition of epic properties and its possibilities as the optimum place to find the required effects for gestus and estrangement in order to develop critical detachment in the members of the audience. Brecht's searing ambition was 'to make the audience think, to force it to face unpleasant truths and takes sides' (Smith, 1971, p.392). But Mozart, the nineteenth-century and a handful of early and mid twentieth-century composers remain the core of the repertoire, since 'a public faced with the brutalities of 20th-century life reflected in modern art [prefers] to escape to the remoter past' (Sutcliffe, 1996, p.72), though directors within subsidised opera often challenge this remoteness through their radical reinterpretations and reimaginings of operas from previous centuries.

In the past fifty years, Janáček and Britten, both championed by Opera North, have become attractive to audiences, perhaps because though they offer a complexity of musical language and deep emotion, the 'serious lyrical capacity' that Sutcliffe finds missing from 'contemporary avant-garde musical language' (Sutcliffe, 1996, p.65) is very much present, together with stories rooted in the specific cultural and natural landscapes they inhabited. And whether in *Katya Kabanova, From the House of the Dead*, *Peter Grimes* or *Curlew River*, they were committed to the exploration of the extreme on which the form of non-comedic opera insists.

Both Britten and Janáček were also profoundly influenced by the extreme in folk song. Though Britten appeared to reject folk-song and pastoralism in his

1941 essay, 'England and the folk-art problem', contributed to the American journal *Modern Music* in 1941, even at that time he professed his liking for the unadorned, unarranged folk song and went on to complete seven volumes of folk-song arrangements. The Grainger scholar Graham Freeman writes that 'Britten used folk song as a means of both resisting pastoralism and embracing it in order to effect radical change' (Freeman, 2012, p.44). Folk ballads not only offer beautiful melodies but re-enact brutal violence and sexual misconduct: forbidden sex, incest, kidnapping, child murder and the intervention of the supernatural are regular subjects. The respective influences of Moravian folk culture and English folk song helped each composer achieve a delicate balance of the local and the 'national', and their affinity with the ballad is reflected in the clarity of their storytelling and the lyrical, rhythmic drive that permeates much of their operatic work. Birtwistle too has drawn on the English folk tradition, both structurally and as a source for content, notably in *Bow Down*, *Down by the Greenwood Side* and *Yan Tan Tethera*. As a librettist responsible for the construction of narrative, I have found the structure of folk lyrics and their handling of emotional content through imagery and rhythm generated by the natural landscape an invaluable key to the concretisation of feelings experienced by my protagonists:

> When I'm putting the extreme emotions on the page and imagining them being sung then it is that – it's trying to find… also always finding concrete imagery and, in this case, concrete imagery from nature to go with the emotions so the emotions never exist on their own – they're always connected with a concrete image.
>
> (Redhead and Strickson, 2011, 31 March).

Hans Keller, exploring Schiller's thesis 'On Naive and Sentimental Poetry' in relation to Britten, describes the composer as being 'in tune with nature', 'a seer whose harmonic stability is in place from the early works' (Keller, 1989, p.xxii), accommodating his double 'striving' to serve his own ethical ideals and ideal or 'idealised' literature, culminating in *Death in Venice*. By his

second opera, *Peter Grimes* (1945), Britten's use of the rhythmic imagery of nature to reflect his protagonist's turmoil and his complex grappling with ethical issues are already at the heart of his work. The reason for my own engagement with opera is my attendance at Opera North's 'grim, gripping and glorious' (Christiansen, 2008, p.1) 2006 production of *Peter Grimes*, directed by Phyllida Lloyd.

When Britten's friend and collaborator E.M. Forster described how he would have written a libretto based on George Crabbe's story of Peter Grimes, he astutely pointed out the difference between Britten's Purcellian approach and that of the many opera composers and librettists who have chosen a melodramatic depiction of the extreme:

> I should certainly have murdered apprentices. I should have introduced their ghosts in the last scene, rising out of the estuary, on either side of the vengeful greybeard, blood and fire would have been thrown in the tenor's face, hell would have opened, on a mixture of *Don Juan* and the *Freischütz* I should have lowered my final curtain (...) For what in the actual opera have we? No ghosts, no father, no murders, no crime on Peter's part except for what is caused by the far greater crimes committed against him by society. (...) He is an interesting person, he is a bundle of musical possibilities.
>
> (Forster, 1948, p.20).

Looking beyond Purcell for further clues about Britten's aesthetics of the extreme demands an examination of the attitude to the violent events in two operas that had a profound effect on the composer: Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925) and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk* (1934). What both these operas and *Grimes* share – and what separates them from nearly all operas prior to their composition – is a concern with the effects of an unjust society on a proletarian individual, and the underlying thesis that violence and poverty breed violence. Britten bought the score of *Wozzeck* in 1934 when he was 19 and listened to the radio broadcast of the whole opera and, though he found it difficult at this time, he found some of the music

'extremely exciting' (Britten, quoted in Bridcut, 2012, p. 213). Both Berg's and Shostakovich's operas are political projects by composers who perhaps, like Britten, were 'sickened by the cheapness and emptiness' of Puccini's *Tosca* (Britten, in *Opera* magazine, February 1951, quoted in Christiansen, 2014, p.230). *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk* tells the story of Katerina, a lonely woman married to a boorish provincial flour merchant, who murders her father-in-law after he discovers her in a compromising position with her lover. Shostakovich wrote in the programme notes: 'her crimes are a protest against the tenor of life she is forced to live, against the dark and suffocating atmosphere of the merchant class' (Quoted in Conlon, 1994, no pagination). Britten attended a concert performance of this opera in 1935 and the effect on him was so great that the opera, with its orchestral interludes like *Wozzeck*, may well have influenced *Peter Grimes*, also a depiction of an isolated individual driven to extreme actions. Shostakovich's opera was condemned by Stalin as contrary to the 'socialist' aesthetic and the composer was forced to remove his critical stance in subsequent works. Britten too, held beliefs contrary to the establishment, being a left-wing pacifist collaborating with committed Communists like Montagu Slater, his librettist for *Grimes*. He worked with Slater on many occasions in the second half of the 1930s, writing incidental music for *Stay Down Miner* (1935), a protest against the conditions in the pre-war mining industry, for Left Revue shows, for an anti-imperialist, anti-war pageant and for the radical puppet plays, *The Seven Ages of Man* and *Old Spain* (performed by the Binyon Puppets at the Mercury Theatre, London, 1938). Through this collaboration, and work with Auden and other left wing artists, Britten adopted realism as a style, becoming committed to a realistic theatre of social conscience, where – if people are driven to extreme actions – then the societal causes for this must be shown. While Britten's compositional approach to the extreme in *Peter Grimes* may be compared to the underlying power in the rhythms and accents of ordinary speech of *Pélleas et Mélisande* (Debussy/Maeterlinck, 1902) or the ringing clarity of Purcell, it was also – at least in his work of the 1930s and 40s – the project of a 'musical pacifist', as Hans Keller described him (Keller, 1952, p.351) who assertively renounced the decorative virtuosity of the *coloratura* soprano and the highly charged passion of the heroic tenor,

demanding an exploration of the reasons for extreme behaviour in the form and content of his operatic and theatre works, seeking 'the beauty of truth' where the ugly extremes of emotion – for instance, in the growing vigilantism of the chorus in Grimes – are made beautiful through the act of musical composition, and therefore available for the audience's contemplation and informed understanding.

Grimes has immediate and continuing resonances in the contemporary, especially at the time of the first Opera North revival of Phyllida Lloyd's production in 2008, when child killers and child abuse were in the news. A vindictive small town community was vividly brought to life in this production, with a subtle reference to the contemporary in the 'modern' dress of the characters, including an anorak wearing Bob Boles. And as in *Wozzeck*, where both music and words subtly conjure up the natural landscape surrounding Wozzeck and Andres when they cut rushes in the open country, reflecting the protagonist's tentative psychological hold on reality, the Aldeburgh sea is carefully evoked in Britten's music, and could be said to be a central 'character' of the piece, reflecting and interacting with Grimes' emotions.

Figure 2: Opera North, 2013, Peter Grimes. Grimes and his apprentice. Photo ©Malcolm Johnson.

Nature as a central character – the river of *Sumidagawa* and the sea of *Hagoromo* – is central to the Nō aesthetic too, with the plays often using heightened poetic quotations to emphasise the relationship between the characters' emotions and the landscape. The stories of Nō plays are grounded in an animistic understanding of nature. In ecological philosopher Gregory Bateson's understanding 'thinking in terms of stories does not isolate human beings as something separate from the starfish and the sea anemones (...). Rather, if the world be connected, if I am at all fundamentally right in what I am saying, then *thinking in terms of stories* must be shared by all mind or minds, whether ours or those of redwood forests and sea anemones' (Bateson, 1979, p.13, original italics). The patterns of the 'mind' of nature, whether in the cedar tree or the transformations in the narratives of the *Ballad of Tam Lyn* or *The Two Sisters* (Birtwistle's source for *Bow Down*), do not re-enact the binary morality of mainstream Christianity and do not lead to a linear understanding of human interaction but instead to a dance of interacting parts, the spiral rather than the line. In the embryology of *Peter Grimes*, through Britten's processes of thought, this was translated into the protagonist's unfolding and twisting story, mirrored in the patterns of the seawater element in which he lives and in his obsession with astronomy.

Though written many years before Barthes' literary aesthetics, Britten's depiction of Grimes may be said to conform to the 'complexity and ambiguity' (Barthes,1953, quoted in Sontag, 1993, p.xix) the philosopher demands when a work has an ethical imperative. Anticipating Barthes' 'morality of form' (Barthes, 1953, quoted in Sontag, 1993, p.xix), and not choosing between good and bad, Britten contrasts the 'pleasure' of the music with the action, as in Grimes' lyrical, introspective singing of 'Now the Great Bear and Pleiades', when he is already suspected of causing his apprentice's death, in the midst of the busy drunken pub where the storm enters each time the door is opened. The reading of the semiotics of the storm is not the simplistic formula 'storm = Grimes' inner turmoil', or 'storm = the gathering resentment of the townspeople', or 'storm = uncontrollable nature', or 'storm = the wrath of God'. The complexity of the score and its relationship with the libretto refuse to reduce the storm to a straightforward signifier. To apply Barthes' understanding of the complex, ambiguous, 'moral' image, 'its form is empty

but present, its meaning absent but full' (Barthes, 1957, quoted in Sontag, 1993, p.xxiv). The form invites us into a discourse, 'endorsing a profusion of meaning' (Sontag, 1993,, p.xxiv). This pointing of ambiguity, the shocking contrast between the poetic aspect of Grimes and the ugliness of child abuse is analogous to Masumura's achievement of moral complexity in the loving, 'pure' protagonist of *Red Angel*, who offers sexual relief to an injured soldier. In Crabbe's poem, Grimes himself was an abused child and Britten's refusal to condemn and portray him as simply evil is surely rooted both in the original source and in his own passions and morality.

**Figure 3: Opera North, 2013, Peter Grimes. Grimes and the dead apprentice.
Photo ©Malcolm Johnson.**

The impressionistic 'sea interludes' of *Peter Grimes* can often be heard in concerts as a separate work of c.17 minutes in duration and in TV adverts or as incidental music, but in the opera itself they have the function of slowing the action down, freezing it for periods of contemplation, as if we are simply being with the landscape. The first, 'Dawn', after the prologue, and the third, 'Moonlight', which introduces Act 3, show the sea at peace; the first might be

said to be analogous to the section of a Nō play before the entrance of the *shite* (the lead or 'solo' actor) and after the *waki* (the *shite's* foil) introduces the story, when audience and actors prepare themselves to enter the contemplative emotional space of the protagonist in action, signalled by the slow walk of the *shite* down the *hashi-gakari* (the narrow bridge at stage right that the principal actors use to enter the stage). The interludes of *Peter Grimes* suspend narrative time, and suggest periods for internal discourse on the part of the listener. Opera, like the Nō, has the ability to slow down narrative, with what Kierkegaard, in his essay 'The Musical Erotic', describes as 'a certain lingering movement, a certain diffusion of itself in time and space' (Kierkegaard, 1843, quoted in Lindenberger, 1984, p.40).

In addition to this possibility of shaping time, what *Grimes* offered as an example to inform my own libretti was the lyrical married with the extreme, a physical theatre experience of continuing political and moral relevance set within a community, and the patterns of nature reflected in the passionate story of the characters and in aspects of the structural approach. My operas *Red Angel* and *Green Angel*, the dramatic cantata *Sailing to the Marvellous*, and especially the opera *Flight Paths*, adhere closely to this model, and they all tell the story of a young woman's difficult journey in a hostile world but, as Harrison Birtwistle said, when interviewed by the poet Fiona Sampson, 'Every artist that's worth anything consistently returns to [the same] subject' (Birtwistle and Harsent, 2013). The operas are also rooted in Japanese models of narrative and action, prefigured by aspects of my experience of *Grimes*, and it is the relationship of Britten, Plomer and myself to Japanese aesthetics and theatre that I shall now explore.

Chapter 3

Drawing on Japanese aesthetics and sources.

> Japan – my what an odd country! A country in transition. Vanishing traditions. Enduring traditions. Essential verities. Seasons in. Myopia of the Japanese. Love of detail of. Dexterity. Self-sufficiency of. Childishness of. Inscrutability of.
>
> (De Waal, 2011, p.321).

Like many authors writing about Japan, and profoundly influenced by Japan, I have never been there. Similarly,the potter and author, Edmund de Waal, was apprenticed to 'an austere man, a devotee of the potter Bernard Leach':

> He had never been to Japan, but had shelves of books on Japanese pots; we would discuss the merits of particular tea-bowls over our mugs of milky mid-morning coffee. Be careful, he would say, of the unwarranted gesture: less is more.
>
> (De Waal, 2011, p.2).

Ruth Benedict, the American ethnographer who wrote *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*: *Patterns of Japanese Culture*, had never visited the country either and yet, in the opinion of the post-war Japanese, her book came closest to understanding them. Ruth Benedict clubs were formed all over Japan after it was translated in 1948. It is my perception that there has always been a 'Japan of the mind' for Whistler, Manet, Degas, Zola, Yeats, Pound and a thousand others, which springs from the attractions of an intoxicating, mesmerising 'Japonisme' but takes each artist on a journey of meaning in their own work well beyond this. The influence of Japan is not,

for many writers, artists and directors, a matter of surface decoration, but of new strategies and structures that can enlarge their possibilities for shaping content. The American critic, Earl Miner, was the first to analyse the importance of this aspect of the Japanese literary tradition:

> Japan could not affect our drama in any significant way until it was used as Japanese poetry had been used – as a source for form and technique.
>
> (Miner, 1958, p. 214).

The 'Japan of the mind' is whole and untouched; it is not of course the 'real' Japan. The real Japan of the 1950s, when Britten and Pears visited, was very much at a point of transition, struggling to assimilate the influence of the West, which had been kept out of the country for so long:

> Writing about Japan *(in the 50s)* means that you have to show a visceral dislike of (Western) lipstick smeared across a beautiful (oriental) cheek, the ways in which modernisation disfigures the country.
>
> (De Waal, 2011, p.322, original italics).

It also meant that the tourist was taken on a predetermined route of Japanese culture. Writing about the visit of his grandmother, Elisabeth, to his great-uncle Iggie in Japan in 1960, De Waal wrote:

> How often can you bear Kabuki? Or worse, three hours of the Noh? How often do you go to an *onsen*, the hot-water springs, before the prospect of relaxing chest-high in a pool comes to be one of horror?
>
> (De Waal, 2011: 320).

Britten did not even want to visit Japan, as he acknowledged to Imogen Holst, 'but it shouldn't be too bad, if I can get over my antipathy to the place & the people' (Britten to Holst, 8 February 1956, in Reed, 2008, p. 400). He had a disagreement with the Japanese government in 1940, when they dropped the performance of *Sinfonia da Requiem*, the piece they had commissioned to celebrate the 2,600th anniversary of the Japanese Empire, since it was not the 'friendly nation felicitations expressed in musical form' they had expected (Prince Konoye. 1940. *Letter to Director of the Cultural Bureau, Japanese Foreign Office*, quoted in Kildea, 2013, p.170). Britten's reluctance to visit Japan is also understandable given the experience of the British soldiers who had been Japanese prisoners of war only eleven years before, and the antipathy this had led to. Japanese men have a historical reputation for being warlike and cruel, though pacifism has – since World War II – been written into the constitution. While Zen Buddhism might seem to be inherently pacifist, some Zen masters supported Japan's military exploits during the 1930s and 1940s. Like all nation states, Japan has a history of competing factions who have used different belief systems and philosophies for their own ends. In the Japanese context, this is exemplified in the rise of the samurai class and their nationalistic Shintoism in the Meiji era and the transformation of the relatively pacifist *bushidō* ideals into aggressive militarism before and during World War II, when war was presented as purifying, death as a duty to the nation and the ultimate honour for a soldier to bloom as a flower of death, sometimes through *seppuku* or ritual suicide.

What the artist takes from Japan is selective and, in the West, often begins with a seduction by frugality and exactitude, as the French travel writer Nicholas Bouvier observes:

> Frugality is the essence (...) Here, anyone who doesn't serve an apprenticeship to frugality is definitely wasting his time.
>
> (Bouvier, 1992, p.29).

And De Waal writes of the 'small, tough explosion of exactitude' found in netsuke, 'that deserves this kind of exactitude in return' (De Waal, 2011, p.16). The carving of the netsuke and the training for the Nō demand 'a persevering dexterity, a sacrifice of time' (De Waal, p.53) that we in the West can rarely find the patience for.

The original director of *Curlew River*, Colin Graham, described the opera as 'introvert in the Zen sense' (Graham, 1989, p.49). In my approach to writing libretti of the extreme, I draw on the aesthetic of Zen Buddhism seen through the eyes of Zeami, a fourteenth-century dramatic theorist of the Nō, and the Zen spirit of Bashō, a poet; the structural model for the adaptive palimpsest is the intertextual, 'frugal' Nō play. My Japanese sources have been 'medieval' Nō plays (in particular *Hagoromo*, or 'The Feather Mantle', in the 1978 translation by Royall Tyler, for *Amy's Last Dive*) and *Red Angel* (1966), Masumura's war film profoundly influenced by traditional Japanese theatre, for my opera of the same name. The borrowing is both direct and consistently mediated by the transcultural model of adaptation from the Nō that is Britten's and Plomer's *Curlew River*, first investigated in depth by Mervyn Cooke in *Britten and the Far East* (1998). The influence of haiku and Nō has been widespread in poetry and drama since Arthur Waley's translations, Fenollosa, Pound and Yeats, but then, as Komparu writes, the Nō is the very essence of 'the Japanese soul' and the stillness of Bashō's haiku is 'a jet black iron ball speeding through the dark night' (unnamed Zen master quoted by Merwin in his Foreword to Aitken, 1978, p. xiv). Both haiku and Nō appear to be elusively beautiful and timeless, though they were already highly developed in the fifteenth century; to the composers and dramatists who first engaged with the Nō in the early twentieth century, its aesthetics of silence, space and time might have seemed more 'modern' than the modernity for which they had been striving. The role of Japanese traditional music in shaping the American modernism of composers like Henry Eicheim (1870–1942) and Claude Lapham (1890–1957) has been examined by W. Anthony Sheppard in his 2010 lecture, *Japanese Influences in 20th Century American Music.*

Even after enthusing about Japanese theatre in a letter to Roger Duncan, written after his return to Britain, Britten wrote 'I felt rather uncomfortable there, as if, in spite of their exquisite manners & lovely things, one didn't know quite what they were thinking, nor quite trust them' (Britten, B. 1956. *Letter to Roger Duncan*, 21 February, Reed et al, 2008, p.410). And in the same letter, written after his visit, when he encountered great courtesy and kindness, he wrote 'It is by far the strangest country we have yet been to; like in a way, going to a country inhabited by a very intelligent kind of insect. Very industrious, very clever, but very different from us, very odd' (Reed et al, 2008, p.408, original underline). It is precisely this strangeness that offers us the provocative 'discomfort' of such different models and untranslatable Buddhist concepts as *wabi sabi* that attracts the Western artist trying to enlarge the possibilities of form in relation to content. *Wabi* originally referred to the separation of living in nature and *sabi* meant 'lean' or 'withered'. In my understanding, discussed with the contemporary composer Ryoko Akama (Akama, 2013), the concept has connotations of an ancient beauty of loneliness, sadness and an understated elegance, like a bough fallen from the tree eaten by beetles and covered in lichen. It is the Japanese word used to describe the basic principle of the tea ceremony:

> Usually one gives an example of 'a temple set down quietly in the Japanese garden' but I am not even sure of it. The word has been permeated so deeply in my life that I cannot describe it or even think of trying to do so.
>
> (Koto player, quoted on Akamara, 2013).

And we experience, especially as *gaijin* or 'foreigners', not only this tentativeness in the face of the initial meaning, but how one Japanese concept always seems to connect, like so many overlapping circles, with another. Consider this haiku about the tea ceremony for example:

saying nothing

> the guest, the host
>
> the white chrysanthemum
>
> (Ryota Oshima (1718–1787), quoted in Donegan, 2008, p.47).

Sen no Riyuku, the famous Japanese sixteenth-century tea master who founded the art of tea, in which silence plays such an important part, coined the phrase *ichi-go, ichi-ge*, meaning 'one time, one meeting'. Somehow, if we add this savouring of silence to our understanding of *wabi sabi*, it enlarges and deepens our understanding of the first concept.

It is this multi-layered meaning, and the gulf between meanings, that Barthes sought to bridge in *Empire of Signs*, his reflections on the nature of Japanese culture, where everything he sees becomes a metaphor for a state of mind:

> Japan has offered him [Barthes] a situation of writing. This situation is the very one in which a certain disturbance of the person occurs, a subversion of earlier readings, a shock of meaning lacerated, extenuated to the point of its irreplaceable void, without the object's ever ceasing to be significant, desirable.
>
> (Barthes,1983, p.4).

Barthes solves the paradox of the elusive concepts of Japanese aesthetics by a lucid understanding of Zen as the action in the present moment denying prevarication, an emptiness of meaning which is also an emptiness of language that constitutes writing, but 'it is from this emptiness that derive all the features with which Zen (...) writes gardens, gestures, houses, flower arrangements, faces, violence' (Barthes, 1983, p.4). The mask of the Nō is a face that is not a face, an 'emptiness' with none of the 'fetish' aspects of an object that mimics the human. In his writing here, Barthes is attempting to approach the concept of *mu* or 'nothingness' best expressed in the character drawn in ink, without hesitation, by the flowing brush. He prints this character

next to his explanation, recognising that his own analysis will only ever be a poor approximation of the meaning he is seeking to define. In his understanding, *satori* becomes not the sudden illumination so often cited via Jack Kerouac but an equally sudden 'loss of meaning', so that in the moment we inhabit the frisson of a vibrant visual uncertainty or dislocation, to see as if for the first time, almost in a primordial sense. Faces and violence are no longer seen as 'living things' but as de-animated objects. When a story is told in the Japanese language, the verb 'to be' (as in 'Once upon a time there was a king') assumes the inanimate form so that the being becomes a quality or 'product' to be walked around rather than identified with. So in the Nō, the fifty-year-old man playing a young woman in a mask is not concerned with imitation or 'reality'; the mask and the stylised, frugal movement detach the performance from the signified – 'femininity is presented to read, not to see' (Barthes, 1983, p.53).

This 'sudden loss of meaning' has been described by Patricia Donegan as 'haiku mind', and she uses as an example 'seeing an orange' for the first time, in sunlight on the kitchen table, when she came home tired and hungry after finishing a retreat with the poet Robert Aitken:

> The light was golden and the orange perfectly round. All was perfect as it was in its nakedness without my overlay of thoughts or opinions, and tears rolled down my face. I had seen the orange clearly – as if for the first time.
>
> (Donegan, 2010, p.xii).

Every Zen haiku is a question and the contemplation of that question results in a 'turn' of experience. Bashō's mature haiku have nothing to do with quietism, which is something all the great teachers warn of. You cannot stay under the bodhi tree, and must emerge into the dynamic world of reality with a greater understanding. This is the 'kdang!' or 'plop!' at the end of his most infamous haiku:

> Still pond
>
> Frog jumps
>
> Kdang!
>
> (Bond, 1968, p.7).

In pure action, the self drops away and we become 'weightless' or 'empty', in the moment of clarity. This is the way or practice of *mu*, the 'letter' whose meaning Barthes struggles to approach. This practice is constant, subtle and ordinary or 'everyday', like the 'haiku mind'. The haiku master, Seiki Yamaguchi, speaks of finding the ordinary mind. The ordinariness of seeing things without the 'overlay of thoughts and opinions' when you see them as they are is the practice of haiku, even in our busy world. 'Haiku awareness', a pause of body and mind, is a slowing down to trust the emptiness of the moment that is complete in itself. When we remember that the word 'is' comes from *as*, the Aryan root word meaning 'to breathe', then we might describe this practice as 'breathing into the pause', which is why Zen practice, and the Nō actor's training, place so much emphasis on an awareness of the deep, slowed down diaphragmatically controlled breath to shape both perception and performance.

The slowing down of time, in order to be aware – as if for the first time – of content without judgment informs the practice and theory of Nō. Nō is sometimes called the art of *ma*, Kunio Komparu tells us. *Ma* may be translated as 'pause' or 'opening':

> silence/space ; 間(*ma)* (間 is a Kanji character for both space and silence)
>
> (Akama, 2013, personal communication).

Ma is a unique Japanese conceptual term that combines 'space', 'time' and 'silence', referring to an emptiness; the moment where you refrain from saying or doing anything. The Japanese koto player Satsuki Odamura

defines *ma* as 'a negative space filled by imagination which contains a whole wealth of emotion' that 'illuminates a positive space by its existence' (Odamura, quoted in Morishito, 2011, p.11). In April 2013, I led a workshop introducing the Nō to young dancers, emphasising the concept of *ma*. In order for them to understand *ma* in action, as they were performing gestures I walked through the 'openings' between them, indicating the vibrant space-time-silence which gives life to their gestures, and which both performers and audience experience.

In the Nō, the absence of activity is used as a ‘still frame’ for highlighting important moments of emotional intensity, though this stillness may occur simultaneously with rapid movement. This is something theatre director Robert Wilson and composer Philip Glass have learnt from, with their quickened sense of small-scale motion (unnaturally rapid hand movements, the obsessive semi-quaver) while change at its broadest level slows right down or stops; the rapid use of the small-scale motion draws attention to the absence of activity. The director developed a formal movement vocabulary based on Japanese traditional theatre through his work on *The Knee Plays* in the 1980s with the Japanese choreographer, Suzushi Hanayagi, who trained in Kabuki and Nō as well as postmodern American dance. *Ma* allows the presentation of an action attuned to the infinitely slow and steady processes of nature, like the apparent stillness in the opening of a flower which, as we see in a speeded-up film of the process, is unfolding continuously with a relentless exactitude. If we can bear to stay with the slowness (and some unprepared spectators of Wilson's and Glass's work and the Nō find this impossible), the quality of our attention to the drama and its emotions is dramatically improved. Gideon Poppel, the contemporary film maker, sought to do this in *sleep furiously*, his evocation of the Welsh village of his childhood. Philip Pothen, talking about the film, writes:

> In a number of memorable scenes the camera watches as a person or van or herd of sheep moves silently across the screen, its gaze – and ours – kept so still that it's as if it's the passing of time that becomes the thing being watched.
>
> (Pothen, 2009, p.175).

Ma indicates why the unpainted part of the ink paintings of Seshu command the greatest interest and why the *i-guse* is often the high point of a Nō play; this is when the main performer sits centre stage, still as a rock, 'dancing only with his heart, going beyond the visual to attain infinite expression' (Komparu 1983, p.73), though this stillness of the *shite* may exist simultaneously with the punctuation of chanting from the chorus. In an analogous strategy, Poppel's camera has picked up the movement of the sheep's feet as they move, even if this is not apparent to the viewer. This is expression through *ma* ('immeasurable space-time-silence') that is not *mu* ('nothingness') but *kū* ('emptiness'), the ultimate expression of the Nō.

Ma is an expression of unity beyond the particulars of history and the self, found in the space-time-silence between things, as in this haiku by Bashō:

> Summer grasses!
>
> warriors
>
> dreams remain
>
> (Bashō (1644–1694), quoted in Aitken, 1978, p.122).

Bashō was responding to his visit to a site where a great battle was fought and General Yoshitune committed suicide after killing his wife and children. Yet Basho suggests that the consequence of these terrible events is the grasses. In *ma*, in the space-time between the form of battle and the form of grasses, he lets the reader find the meaning. The extremes of battle flow into the grasses rustling in a warm breeze, and all things are one in the experience of the poem. An illuminating comparison may be made with the

empty areas architect Daniel Libeskind calls 'voids', similarly defined by 'space-time-silence', at the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

Figure 4: Jewish Museum interior detail, a section of the Void. Photo ©Carlos Neto, deposit photos File ID: 15467219

The word 'void' is sometimes used to describe the print of an absent, 'disappeared' body in Holocaust memorials, like the spaces in Karol Broniatowski's concrete sculpture on the ramp to the freight yard at platform 17, the deportation area at Grunewald Station. Libeskind takes the concept further at the Jewish Museum through the creation of spaces of bare concrete, not heated or air-conditioned, without artificial light, separated from the rest of the building, and it is these spaces that define the experience of the whole building, existing between his architectural lines of German Berliners and the now largely invisible Jews of the city. Libeskind characterized the voids as the 'central structure in the building' and the

'emblem where the not visible has made itself apparent' (Libeskind, 1998, quoted in Dogan and Nersessian, 2012, p.5).

Figure 5: Jewish Museum interior, *Shalechet* (Fallen leaves) in a section of the Void.
Photo ©Carlos Neto, depositphotos File ID: 15467219

This concept of void in relation to our perception of meaning surfaces in art critic and philosopher Nicolas Bourriaud's reflections on Barthes' *Empire of Signs*, when he translates the author's understanding as 'the signs that structure Japanese culture stand out against an empty background, in a pure organisation of signifiers installed on nothingness' (Bourriaud, 2009, p.75). When Bourriaud watches a long tracking-shot of a Kyoto river with the soundtrack of a banal conversation in *Riyo* (2004), a video by Gonzalez-Foerster, he finds meaning in the void between the two, describing this gap as 'a concrete image of that void, which is the condition of any encounter' (Bourriaud, 2009, p.76). So the spectator-participant must experience meaning between the lines, or in the 'concrete' gap between image and

sound, just as the reader of Bashō's haiku finds meaning in the whiteness of the space-time-silence between the warriors and the grasses, a broken line and a line that continues indefinitely. The librettist, composer and performers offer up this meaning from their shaping of the 'solid' experience of the extreme, and it is this solid (whether ancient Japanese battles, the Sudanese Civil War or the destruction of the Twin Towers) that is 'a condition of enquiry into the void' (Penone, 1974). Like a sculptor, they use their bodies and tools, to 'exert pressure that produces volumes' (1974).

The Zen of haiku and the Zen of the Nō may be considered as a strategy or practice (rather than a philosophy) for an *écriture*, a chosen writing that is free of the stereotype or 'an ideally complex form of consciousness' as Susan Sontag construes Barthes' idea of writing (Sontag, 1993, pp.xvii–xviii). The Zen writing of the Nō is truly an *écriture* inscribed on the body, a score demanding certain positions, breathing patterns and intonations which remain 'slippery' in the mutual dependence of the excessive, symbolic non-reality of the actor and the reality of the audience. Gradually, the dramatic incidents allow the spectator to participate in the creation of the play by individual 'free' association with the signs presented by the protagonist. When the *shite* playing the Madwoman in *Sumidagawa* presents the sign of weeping by raising his lower arm and hand to his face, with the palm facing inwards, each member of the audience has the possibility of being able to relate this to their own experience of grief, and perhaps actor and spectator may be united in seeing with the detached view inherent in the form. The experience of the Nō is therefore different spatially from most other forms of theatre. Komparu writes that it can 'be said to be the path traced by the movement of the shared minds of actor and audience, themselves the foci of a self-other relationship bound by the thread of the story, and the oval described, the shape produced when those two circular spaces merge, [that] is the Nō' (Komparu, 1983, p.18). He uses the inadequate word 'surrealistic' in his struggle to describe this shared experience but Nō is perhaps more an *écriture*, a chosen inscription of the body on language, than most other dramatic texts. It defies summary and has no singular, stable meaning, and the 'written' score prefigures the shared experience explicitly.

Ryōan-ji, the famous Zen Buddhist temple known as 'The Temple of the Dragon of Peace' in Kyoto, is designed to inspire meditation. Fifteen stones carefully composed in five groups are surrounded by white gravel. Moss grows around the stones.

Figure 6: Sand Garden – Ryoan-Ji, Kyoto.
Photo ©imagex depositphotos File ID: 12462872

Usually full of tourists on the viewing platform, when William Plomer visited it with Laurens van der Post it was silent and empty except for an attendant raking the gravel. It led Plomer to think 'surprising' thoughts:

> 'You know Lorenzo,' he said with a smile, after standing long in silence, 'this garden makes me think of what Eliot said about Webster':
>
> Webster was much possessed by death
> and saw the skull beneath the skin;
> And breastless creatures under ground
> Leaned backwards with a lipless grin
>
> (Alexander, 1989, p.126).

In a consideration of dramatists of the extreme, Webster has to be considered in the same company as Aeschylus and Marlowe, yet Plomer smiled as he thought of Webster's lurid deaths when contemplating a Zen garden. The simultaneous 'lightness' and the reference to something that is clearly not present but is somehow made present in the experience is analogous to the presentation of brutal violence without violence in the Nō; that is, by not presenting violence but recounting the feelings it causes – or by presenting violence with paradoxically slow, minimal, beautiful movement – we are able to contemplate violence. If we try and think of the opposite spectator experience of violence within a theatrical setting, then the most extreme example is probably the gladiatorial combats of ancient Rome at the Coliseum, designed to simulate the experience of the battlefield for the spectators, with real human and animal death cries, and a crowd often whipped into hysteria by demagogues and provocateurs; nothing was present as Barthes' 'matter for reading'.

In the arrangement of pieces for the day (*ban-gumi*), the second Nō play is the battle-piece or Shura to defeat and banish the devils; as Pound rightly comments this is 'sympathetic magic' in a form which, the further we move away from the aesthetics of Zeami, has more of Shinto than Zen. This is followed by Kazura, the wig piece for females, 'for after the battle comes peace, or *yū-gen*, mysterious calm, and in time of peace love may come to pass' (Pound, 1971, p.10). In the battle-pieces, the *shite* is always a male character, a recognition within the structure of a Nō programme that the violence to which men are prone must be balanced and transcended by the feminine principle.

Like Zen, the Nō is a way not a technique, and was open to misinterpretation and misuse without an understanding of the philosophy it embodies. This is why Zeami's books on 'the secrets of the Nō' became a series of strategies for the awareness of existence and non-existence, rather than instructions on particular movement sequences or breathing patterns. The idea of 'Just do it' is deeply inscribed in the relationship between master and teacher in Japanese arts, whether you are studying to be a Nō actor or learning the

shakuhachi (wooden flute). Again and again, the master will say 'Just walk across the stage' or 'Don't think, just play the note', stressing grace in accomplishment without logic or reason. The student is not concerned with self-expression but with liberation from the self; the master is the master until death so your goal is how much you can be the master, even with your own sense of *ma* achieved through walking or creating sound. This attitude to practice in music is crystallised in *Ichi-on Jobutsu*, usually translated as 'enlightenment in a single sound'. In *sui-zen* or, 'blowing zen', the shakuhachi player plays one note repeatedly because 'in a single sound there is [already] enlightenment' (Richardson, 2013, p.1) just as there is in a single walk across the Nō stage. Partly because of the growing interest in Zen Buddhism among musicians in the 1950s and early 1960s in the U.S.A., compositions related to meditative practices began to be made. One such piece, by La Monte Young, who was associated with the Fluxus group in New York, was *Composition 1960 #7*, which consists of a B and F#, with the direction 'to be held for a long time'. This may have influenced Stockhausen who, in his quest to evoke the rhythms of 'cosmic consciousness', has postulated a similar practice in 'Right Durations', the first piece composed as part of *From the Seven Days* (1968), which takes as its theme the duration of single sounds: 'Play a sound/play it for so long/until you feel/that you should stop' (quoted in Bergstrøm-Nielsen, 2006, p.1). In *Sui-zen* the outer breath gradually lengthens and, through long practice, the sound of the note on the flute deepens until eventually it seems to happen by itself. In the vibration of the sound and its circular journey from mind to flute to mind, the player experiences *ma.* This happens across generations of teachers and students. The famous poem, *Tetteki Tosui* ('Blowing the iron flute') about *sui-zen* below takes us back to the delicate interaction between detachment and deep emotion:

> The moon floats above the pines
> And the ancient veranda is cold
> As the ancient clear sounds come to your fingertips
> The old melody usually makes the listeners weep
> But Zen music is without sentiment

> Do not play again until the great sound of Lao Tzu accompanies you
>
> (Hsueh-Tou (980–1052), quoted by Richardson, 2013, p.1).

The iron flute player is without sentiment in his total concentration on the sound and yet the spectator weeps at the sentiment of the old melody, though perhaps not without some awareness of the detachment required to deliver this. Similarly, when the writer, musician or actor-dancer presents the consequences of extreme violence in the Nō play, the absolute concentration and the frugality of form and technique mean that sorrow or hate are portrayed with *hana* (flower) or 'a diligent investigation of the true nature of beauty' (Komparu, 1983, p.11), the word most often used by Zeami. This practice, combined with the conventions of design and staging, means that extreme emotion is presented in a tranquil atmosphere, about as far away from the hysteria of the Coliseum in ancient Rome as it is possible to get and analogous to the *sui-zen* note on the shakuhachi or Plomer in the Zen garden at Ryōan-ji. This tranquillity is achieved through another paradox, an 'almost violent conjunction of storytelling with graphic, calligraphic clarity' (De Waal, 2011, p.290).

Paul Claudel famously observed that 'in tragedy something happens, in Nō something appears' (Bouvier, 2008, p.54). The tranquillity of attention exists because the tragedy has happened before the beginning of the action – the opposite of what we might consider as 'dramatic'. We would only see the tragic heroine, like Princess Diana, or Amy Johnson in my opera *Amy's Last Dive* (structurally a companion piece to *Green Angel*), after her death, when quiet reflection is possible because she describes or re-enacts the traumatic events in the present. In *Green Angel*, we see Ash after the apocalyptic event (9/11, though this is never stated by Alice Hoffman or by me) has happened and we witness her healing. In the Nō, the character of the *shite,* he/she whose story will be told, wears a mask and a huge, geometrical costume whose lines are not those of the human body. This character's approach is signalled by a special drum and the actor advances with incredible 'nightmare slowness' (Bouvier, p.54) in white slippers,

representing the 'other-worldliness' of the Nō. The human character waiting on stage is the *waki*, unmasked, who explains the story and prepares the audience for the apparition for whom he represents deliverance. Once the story is told, there is the possibility of deliverance for the *shite*, and by implication the audience, from being 'caught within the experience' (surely related to suicidal depression, and an inability to process events so that we can get on with life). The waiting of the *waki* and the audience is highly charged and from the moment the *shite* arrives, the denouement can begin and the Nō will 'unravel'; 'it is a means of liberation' (Bouvier, p.54), a possibility of finding peace by walking slowly around the tragedy and the subsequent experience of uncontrollable grief.

Japanese art is constantly renewing itself by returning to the ancient, and this idea of its practice as 'a means of liberation' for artist and viewer remains potent. Mariko Mori, whose 'Rebirth' exhibition was presented at the Royal Academy in 2013, has made the journey from a quirkily critical engagement with the popular Japanese culture manifestations of *shojū* (adolescent girls' costume and props), *idoru*, from the world of J-Pop and *anime* or digital gaming to a profound Buddhist engagement with time and space, permeated by her fascination with the prehistoric Jōmon civilisation whose lives were ruled entirely by the cycles of nature. In her return to ancient time, like the British sculptor William Turnbull, her intention is to place the work out of time, to transcend time.

Figure 7: Mariko Mori, 'Primal Memory', 2004. Photo©Richard Learoyd.

Once again, we are sitting with the stones of the garden in 'The Temple of the Dragon of Peace' in Kyoto. Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form, or 'its form is empty but present, its meaning absent but full' (Barthes, 1982, p.110). Mori's recent work demonstrates that she has reached the depths of deep meditation where identity dissolves in nature, the Sanskrit *shunyata* or 'emptiness', complementary to the Buddhist concept of *anattā* or 'not-self' and analogous to the *kū* of Nō:

> Every summer, she goes to Okinawa island, where it gets too hot to work but, early and late, she draws by the ocean – a meditation: 'I am liberated from myself.'
>
> (Kellaway, 2012, no pagination).

This 'liberation from self' is applicable to the writer, the spectator, the performer, and, as we shall discover, to the *waki* and *shite* characters of a reinvented Nō, whether the Traveller and the Madwoman in *Curlew River*, or the Old Woman and Ash in *Green Angel.*

Chapter 4

Curlew River, a transcultural collaborative exemplum.

The influence of the Nō on the theatre and on literature has tended to be based not on profound knowledge of the form but on the idea of a theatre that is almost impossibly slow, beautiful, coded and filled with deep meaning, paradoxically because, like the haiku, it is 'empty' of meaning. Our Western desire for the 'fullness' of symbolic plenitude in writing leads us to read haiku accordingly, but in Barthes' 'Japan of the mind', the meaning of the haiku remains 'empty'. If a Nō actor is asked what his motivation is when crossing the stage, then the answer is 'I am crossing the stage', meaning that he is immersed in the perfection of the act of walking:

> Art is not a realm of appearance apart from and above life, it is the perfection of them – through the artist, who has supreme control of technique and is thereby liberated from it.
>
> (Herrigel, 1976, p.48).

When Britten visited Japan, he became deeply interested in the Nō theatre (after laughing like a 'silly schoolboy' at the first performance he saw) and in particular he was enchanted by ‘the curiously moving and disturbing story’ of *Sumidagawa* (Britten, B. 1957. *Letter to William Plomer*, 10 July, in Britten, 2010, ed. Reed et al, p. 532), which he determined to make into an opera. As Plomer wrote, in a reflection on their work together for the Edinburgh Festival, 'a drama with [a] theme of outraged innocence could not fail to move him' (Plomer, 1968, p.28). In *Sumidagawa,* a woman whose son has been kidnapped goes mad, and her love for her child spurs her to undertake a journey of search from Kyoto to Azuma in the East. The play is from the

second subordinate group of the fourth or *Aisho* classification of Nō plays. These are the most dramatic of the plays, because many of the main characters are distraught for emotional and psychological reasons. The most common name for this group is *Kurui*, which literally means madness. In the second subordinate group, madness caused by unrequited love is the theme. The characters played by the *shite* eventually find solace in the wisdom conveyed by the words of the Buddha, suggesting that wisdom is only obtained by giving up earthly delusions and accepting that this life is a manifestation of deeds in a previous life. In these plays, the characters behave in a heightened, intense manner, quoting elegiac lyrical poetry. When Plomer came to adapt *Sumidagawa*, he initially included many lines from the translation made by the Japanese Classics Translation Committee, published in Tokyo in 1945. This extensive use of quotation aids the feeling of lightness or 'spiritualization' that Barthes was looking for in a signified work, like that he found in the new Citroën of 1957, 'less bulky, less incisive, more relaxed than that which one found in the first periods of this fashion. (...) This spiritualization can be seen in the extent, the quality and the material of the glass-work. (...) the exaltation of glass' (Barthes, 2009, p.102).

During the first two years of discussions about the collaboration with Plomer, Britten too was anxious to retain as much as possible of the Japanese atmosphere:

> The more I think of it, the more I feel we should stick as far as possible to the original style & look of it – but oh, to find some equivalent to those extraordinary noises the Japanese musicians made!
>
> (Britten, B. 1958. *Letter to William Plomer*,16 November, in Britten, 2010, ed. Reed et al, p.87).

Prior to his visit in 1956 with Pears, there is no discernible, significant influence of Japan in Britten's work. In 1938, he had provided a gong-playing percussionist for an experiment in reconstructing the atmosphere of the Nō

that Ezra Pound instigated with the dancer Suria Magito. Pound recited his translations while she danced, but since there are neither female dancers nor gongs in the Nō, this must have been of limited value.

How could the work be of meaning to Britten's audience if it was not of meaning for him? His gradual adaptive process with *Sumidagawa* certainly conforms to Hutcheon's description of adaptation as 'an extended intertertextual engagement with the adapted work' (Hutcheon, 2006, p.8). For nearly three years he kept to his plan, seduced by the beauty of the original and determined to keep the sound of the Japanese, especially through the use of 'as many evocative Japanese names as possible!' (Britten, B. 1958. *Letter to William Plomer*, 8 October). Much later, he revealingly wrote:

> Thank you also for the lovely Japanese prints of the Nō. They are beauties – dangerously so, because it is risky that they may lead us <u>back</u> to Japan, already a strong influence (...).
>
> (Britten, B. 1964. *Letter to William Plomer*, 4 January).

In a letter to Britten about his first drafts of the libretto, in which the scenes were set out in the same order as the original source, Plomer writes of ‘the language assuming great simplicity – as in a fairy tale or legend and the rhythm of the language primitive or archaic’ (Plomer, W. 1958. *Letter to Benjamin Britten*, 21 October, quoted in Cooke, 1989, p.31). Britten shows his sensitivity to the collaborative process of two equal partners in his reply:

> I long to see what you’ve been doing over *Sumidagawa*, and to talk endlessly with you about it. I am more and more excited about it, and have to keep my ideas in chains in case they don’t run parallel to yours.
>
> (Britten, B. 1958. *Letter to William Plomer*, 29 October).

As Mervyn Cooke writes, Britten's respect for Plomer's feelings 'is slightly unusual in the context of a librettist-composer relationship of this kind, and is indicative of the librettist's importance in shaping the work from its inception' (Cooke, 1989, p.32). Plomer had spent two and a half years in Japan, and had a far deeper knowledge of Japanese culture than Britten:

> I think in a sort of aesthetic way I learnt a tremendous lot – I mean I profited a great deal by the order, the clarity, the method, the composition, the delicacy, the reticence, the – all those things in Japanese art, and then, Japanese literature, interested me very much (...).
>
> (Blacker, C. 1959. *Interview with William Plomer*, June).

Plomer had also learnt an important lesson from Pound, himself profoundly influenced by Chinese and Japanese literature, which was to affect all his poetic writing, perhaps especially the libretti for the three Church Parables:

> When I was no more than eight years old, Ezra Pound was forecasting that twentieth century poetry would 'move against poppycock' and be 'harder and saner' (...). For himself, he wrote, he wanted to be 'austere, direct, free from emotional slither'. Even in poetry, there are always new kinds of poppycock to move against. In doing so, I have aimed at clarity and hope I have avoided 'emotional slither'.
>
> (Plomer, 1972, p.55).

When Plomer enthusiastically attended the Nō, he was impressed with 'the gravity of the audience' (Plomer, 1967, p.8). As it did for Barthes, Japan offered new possibilities for looking at the world for Plomer, allowing him to 'read' England with a considered perceptive distance.

> I was being changed from a spasmodic improviser into a shaper. I was learning to think as well as feel, and was acquiring a viewpoint which would enable me to see distant England and English civilisation through Japanese eyes, as well as in a new perspective through my own. (...) Japan strengthened in me a natural tendency towards detachment.
>
> (Plomer, 1967, p.9).

Sumidagawa has the severity and simplicity that Plomer valued in the Nō and he kept this to the fore in his first drafts of *Curlew River*. But, as Britten eventually discovered through his own process of creative thinking, when making an adaptation of this original work from another culture, it was necessary for the collaborators to discover their own meaning and to find a re-birth of the material rooted in their own beliefs and experience, secure in the conviction that 'the story is one which stands strongly wherever it is placed' (Britten, B. 1959. *Letter to William Plomer*, 15 April, in Britten, 2010, Reed et al, p.130).

Though both Plomer and Britten possessed some kind of Christian belief, the opera was not – in their initial and lengthy cogitations – conceived as an explicitly Christian one. Following the performance of *Noye's Fludde* at Orford Church in 1959, however, Britten decided that this would be the venue for the opera, and – in a long, firm but slightly tentative letter – asked Plomer to begin working on an English equivalent of *Sumidagawa* rooted in the Christian tradition to be performed in a Suffolk church:

> Artistic (reasons) include placing of orchestra, long entrances, beauty of sound (if in Orford Church) & contact with audience. This led us to the idea of making it a Christian work (Here you can stop reading & have another sip of coffee to give you courage to proceed…)
>
> (Britten, B. 1959. *Letter to William Plomer*, 15 April, in Britten, 2010, Reed et al, p.130).

After this breakthrough in his creative thinking, Britten drew on the landscape he lived in, his non church-based Christian faith and the mystery of monastic chant for inspiration. In this tentative paragraph to Plomer, he opened up the possibility of an experience that would be able to sit within his contemporary context and not be found wanting.

Plomer responded two days later to Britten's very detailed letter giving the pros and cons for the change. His reaction seems, at least partly, to have been one of relief:

> I have felt all along that the problems & difficulties were formidable, & with anybody but you I would have thought them from the first insuperable. (...) I can't say that I'm astonished at your – I won't say throwing up the sponge, but setting fire to your – and indeed my – kimono.
>
> (Britten, B. 1959. *Letter to William Plomer*, 17 April, in Britten, 2010, Reed et al, p.132).

Though the radical shift of context and the introduction of the possibility of redemption through faith for the Madwoman clearly came as a shock, Plomer did not resist the change at all, perhaps because the ground had actually been prepared by his own experience of living in Japan:

> It (...) confirmed the Christian teaching one had absorbed when young, about the maintenance of hope by faith, and of both by prayer. I had come full circle and one can only do that by a roundabout way.
>
> (Plomer, 1967, p.9).

But it did mark a decisive break from Britten's original intention of creating a 'Japanese' opera from the Nō play. His decision to change the context demanded a leap into a personal and topographical meaning which Plomer willingly found his own way into since 'by devising a parable for church

performance it was possible to present the work in an atmosphere fitting its religious, legendary nature' (Foreword by Plomer to *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, in Herbert, 1959, p.297). In the move to an English liturgical context, and at Britten's prompting, the didactic role of the chorus was much expanded, recalling the medieval religious drama rather than the Nō; this quality of the chorus is a significant difference from the more open address of the Nō.

Plomer, in his collaborations with Britten, always had the conviction that the composer must necessarily have the last word and, as Cooke writes, this spared them 'much of the anguish that had coloured Britten's collaborations with more ambitious librettists such as Auden, Slater and Duncan' (Cooke, 1989, p.115). This model for the librettist has something of the nature of the ego-less Nō performance, where the actor is required to serve the story with the anonymity of precise, coded gestures while wearing a wooden mask, not seeking personal adulation or fame.

There were, as often in these apparent aesthetic decisions, financial considerations underpinning the thinking. A performance in a church is a lot cheaper than a performance in a theatre. In contemporary theatre parlance, *Curlew River* became 'site-specific', written for a particular architecture set in a specific landscape. The action of the opera takes place in the rush-edged riverscape just beyond the church walls. Just as *Sumidagawa* is full of precise geographical references recognisable to the Japanese audience, so Britten and Plomer define their location as a familiar, if always mysterious, world.

Sumidagawa begins:

> *Place*
>
> Sumida River, Musashi Province
>
> *Season*

> Spring
>
> *Stage-attendants place a framework mound covered with willow branches in front of the Orchestra, inside which the ghost-child is hidden.*
>
> (Nihon Gakujitsu Shinkokai, 1955, p.147).

Then the Ferryman enters: 'he who rows the ferry across the Sumida in the province of Musashi'.

Curlew River begins:

> The scene is set in a church by a Fenland river
> in early medieval times.
>
> *(The* Abbot *and his company of* MONKS, ACOLYTES *and* INSTRUMENTALISTS *walk singing in procession to the acting area.)*
>
> (Plomer, 1964, p.9).

Landscapes carry strong emotional connotations and the flat, mist-wreathed river banks of the Suffolk fens come already furnished with ghosts and the 'flower' of exquisite sadness, the *yūgen* of Nō. James Kirkup writes that the simplicity of the proper name *Curlew River*, evokes ‘a plaintive, melancholy, poetic resonance in the mind which reproduces charmingly the Japanese feeling for *yūgen*’ (Kirkup, 1964, p.7). The 'curlew' sign of a flying bird over a note or rest in Britten's score became an indication for the musician to sustain and repeat notes, or listen and wait, until the other performers reach a meeting-point. This is both an explicit indication of the Japanese influence from Nō and Gagaku, and analogous to the movement of a flock of birds that land one after the other before they take off again together. For most of the time Britten and Plomer had been working on the opera, the 'curlew' had been 'gull' or simply 'bird'; 'curlew' arrived only in the last moments of writing. The word 'curlew' not only offers a more complex sound to the composer, with the long vowel sound in the second syllable, but also, as the Suffolk

writer Ronald Blythe writes, brings to mind the flocks of curlews that fly over Aldeburgh with their evocative 'Cur-leeek-leek, curr-leek-leek, cu-r-r-r-r-leek' calls, rooting the opera in that particular landscape. Blythe writes that the curlews are 'shy and mysterious', and that they seem to be 'carrying on a system of exchange in the marshes up and down the coast' (Blythe, 2013, pp. 32–33).

The Suffolk marshes around Aldeburgh, and their history, are the landscape in which Britten chose to situate himself. In the nineteenth century, child chimney sweeps walked through the marshes on their way to Iken and pregnant serving maids from the big houses drowned themselves in their muddy waters. Britten was so attached to them that he wanted his grave to be made in the reeds, but of course there was too much water. His grave was lined with rushes by Bob and Doris Ling, 'caretakers at the Maltings, and before that gravediggers' (Blythe, 2013, p.94). Blythe, who worked as an assistant on the Aldeburgh Festival in the 1950s, also writes that, more than once, when he met Britten out walking, the composer asked ' "Are you happy, Ronnie?" He let off steam with strange war whoops. "Middle class, Ronnie; middle class!" And, "I'm thirteen!" ' (Blythe, p.84). The double poignancy of Britten thinking of himself as a thirteen year old and the burial of the child in a mound among the marshes in *Curlew River* gives a personal edge to his feeling for the story of the opera.

When I was growing up in a small Cotswold village in the 1960s, there were still half-hidden individuals driven ‘mad’ by grief, the loss of a child or spouse in a farm or car accident. When one of our schoolmates at the village school died unexpectedly from an asthma attack aged seven, his parents put up a bird bath as a memorial in the churchyard next door to us, which we passed every day on the way to school. For the first few years, looking at the stone and water allowed us to imagine what he had looked like, before his image gradually faded from our consciousness. His memorial was a kind of shrine. The most startling ‘mythic’ mounds in Suffolk are those at the burial ground of Sutton Hoo, above the pine woods, and above the river. The atmosphere is of a quiet, sad place above the river mists, to which many must have travelled, and made the final crossing. Is it too much to speculate that the local excavations during and after the Second World War had entered

Britten's and Plomer's consciousness? The Anglo-Saxon king's war helmet is essentially a mask and he was buried in his wooden boat, and an Anglo-Saxon king or *cyning,* was defined as the child, not the father, of his people, with the word related to *cynn* (modern English 'kin') (Partridge, 1966, p.329).

The spring of *Sumidagawa* has been changed to the autumn of *Curlew River*, with the melancholic connotations of that season. In the Nō, autumn is an atmosphere associated with the third category of Nō plays, *kazura-mono* or 'wig plays' which portray tragic love (like Zeami's *Rembo*), compared by Zeami to maple leaves:

> Coloured maple leaves personify the ideal way of acting the lead in the plays of this group, the essence of which is illustrated in the following poem; *Shitamomiji Katsuchiruyamano Yūshiigure Nureteyashikano Hitorinakuran* (At the end of Autumn, in the deep mountains, maple leaves begin to fall and wintry rain drizzles in the evening. A lonely deer is crying woefully as if he was missing his mate). The coloured maples create a sad autumnal atmosphere which is reminiscent of the lamentation of a lover.
>
> (Sekine,1985, p.5).

The description of the deer crying could almost be an intimation of the repeated falling tones and extended vowels of the Madwoman's 'Let me i-in! Let me o-out' as she repeatedly tries to board the Ferryman's boat (Plomer, 1964, p.14).

It was at Britten's instigation that, at the very beginning of *Curlew River*, the monks sing 'Te lucis ante terminum', the ancient Compline hymn for the close of day, dating from the seventh century, thereby preceding the 'ancient' music of the Nō by some eight centuries, detailed in a letter to Plomer from Palazzo Mocegino, Venice (Britten B. 1964. *Letter to William Plomer*, 15 Feb, in Reed et al. 2008, p.559). The language is vowel heavy, demanding a stretched, slow singing and a measured walk, perhaps an echo of the *shite's* slow walk along the bridgeway of the Nō stage. The formality of

plainsong and the slow discipline of the monks' walk on a cold stone floor is a salutary reminder that we have our own sacred performance traditions to draw on which, for a believer, are no more 'dead' than the repetition of the Nō through the ages is to a Zen Buddhist. By his choice of location and the words of this announcement hymn, Britten signals that we are not to be drawn into a dry research exercise, with exotic accompaniment – 'a sham, imitative Oriental bric-a-brac' as Debussy described Delibes' *Lakmé* (Cooke, 1998, p.4) – but a precisely structured exploration of sound and faith rooted in the Suffolk landscape, which will take from the Japanese only what is needed to fulfil this ambition.

Plomer's first words in the libretto, sung by the Abbot, root the adaptation in the tradition of the Medieval English religious play:

> Good souls, I would have you know
>
> The brothers have come today
>
> To show you a mystery…
>
> (Plomer, 1964, p.9).

However, the idea of a mystery or the mysterious, a world which is almost evanescent, is also a key characteristic of the Nō, where the aesthetics of writing and performance suggest a floating world, a fleeting beauty that we will never quite grasp. And because we will never be able to reach out and touch it, it is all the more beautiful and precious.

The English word 'mystery', when it is used to describe Mystery Plays, means 'trade' or 'craft' as well as a religious ritual. These words coalesce in the Masonic world, which developed out of the trade guilds. In medieval times, apprentices were initiated into the 'secrets' of being a silversmith or dyer and swore to keep the secrets of this profession. Just as in Nō training, they spent a period of years rigorously training under the tutelage of their master. Zeami, the famous fourteenth-century writer of Nō plays and the author of *The Secret Traditions of the Nō*, chose to keep his writings on the ideals and practice of the theatre secret; trade skills and aesthetics were

only to be passed on to the son and heir. When his son died before him, he was in a great quandary about whether he should pass on the secrets at all.

After his introduction of the 'mystery', the next line of the Abbot's signals a stylistic decision of Plomer's:

> How in sad mischance
> A sign was given of God's grace.
>
> (Plomer, 1964, p.9).

The word 'mischance' is not in everyday usage and gives an archaic feel to the phrase. This use of archaism throughout *Curlew River* may be seen not only as a producer of atmosphere but as a strategy of detachment. When the musical undercurrent of the chamber organ is added, the sense of medieval rite is completed and yet the spectators, 'reading' the separated texts of the performance, are aware that this rite is for our own time.

Zeami wrote that 'a successful play of the first rank is based on an authentic source, reveals something unusual in aesthetic qualities, has an appropriate climax and shows "grace" ' (Zeami, 1984, p.44). Of course the word 'grace' is a translation of an untranslatable Japanese concept (it is sometimes interchangeable with *yū-gen* in translation), but this description seems equally appropriate to *Curlew River*, with Britten's musical attentiveness to the word 'Grace'. 'Grace' is in fact the only syllable Britten gives two notes to in the address of the Abbot to the congregation, signifying its importance. For Britten, this is the grace of God and for Motomasa, the author of *Sumidagawa*, it is the grace of the unknown, 'empty' world. The beauty of Plomer and Britten's experiment derived from the Nō is that they combine the plenitude and the emptiness.

A fascinating insight from the collaborative work on the libretto, also affecting the sense of detachment felt by the audience, is the subtle diminution of the importance of 'tears', both as word and action, in successive drafts. In Plomer's early draft from 1959, the libretto ends with these words from the Chorus:

> Lament for a woman so bereaved,
>
> And give her the only thing we can: our tears.
>
> (Plomer, 1959, p. 28).

In the final version the Abbot has the last words:

> In hope, in peace, ends our mystery.
>
> (Plomer, 1964, p. 41).

Even though we have witnessed 'a woman with grief distraught' (Plomer, 1964, p.40), we are asked to have something of the calmness the Nō audience of *Sumidagawa* would feel with the conclusion of a Buddhist prayer. The message is clearly that the appropriate response of the audience is meditative attention and slow consideration of the Madwoman's plight, rather than a total submergence in emotion.

In the original production, based on my close observation of Zoe Dominic's and Clive Strutt's production photographs (Dominic, Z. and Strutt, C. 1964) and the excerpts on film available from the Holland Festival performances in Amsterdam (directed by Graham, Westkerk, 7 July 1964), this aesthetic of detachment appears to extend to the masks designed by Colin Graham, which were not in themselves expressive; they possess a kind of clarity of neutralisation, reinforcing the aesthetic of the form. It can also be found in the symbolic gestures for expressing emotion that Colin Graham devised in his role as director, drawing on the movement language of the Nō, like the back of the right hand resting on the head whenever the Madwoman is missing her child. But in the first production, as shown in the film, the symbolic detached gesturing drawn from the Nō is subtly subverted by the fact that the distinctive eyes and mouth of Peter Pears' Madwoman can clearly be seen. This is very different to my experience of the Nō in the production of *Sumidagawa* by Tokyo University of the Arts in September 2012:

> Two other surprises; for some moments, the chorus DID sound like plainchant, the soft resonance of trained voices, manly but unhurried and full; the small amount of mask seen, even though I was only in the third row. Really, I only saw the mask full on when the Madwoman danced her grief on arrival at the grave. Under the hat, which is where it is until she gets on the boat, it is two thirds shadow. (...) In profile we see a sliver, a readable sliver but ACTUALLY for much of the time, the performer was so still that any expression in the mask is a matter of individual reading for each member of the audience.
>
> (Strickson, 2012, 8 September).

A seasoned attendee of the Nō in Japan would be able to perceive more subtleties but the 'emptiness' of this mask that is almost not a mask is clearly a very different experience to the fullness of facial expression visible through the eyes and lower face in the first production of *Curlew River*. For other collaborations, we might dismiss such considerations as the director's or designer's inventions, but Britten worked closely with Colin Graham, the director and designer of the set for the first production, whilst he was working on the music in Venice, and he insisted that Graham should not go to Japan or watch a film of the Nō before the work on the production had been completed. He asked Graham to make a model of the set before he even started composing so that at all times he could have a visual picture of the world of the action before him in order to work out the dynamics and balances of the music. They attended mass together in the chapel of the monks of San Giorgio Maggiore and were so impressed by the ritual robing of the Brother of the Day – 'the robes were unfolded from a linen chest with extreme delicacy and reverence' (Graham, 1989, p.48) – that they introduced the robing ceremony at the beginning and end of *Curlew River*, so vital for the sense of ceremony. They discussed the staging of the action before and after Britten wrote each section and the movement for the opera was also defined in Venice, with Graham demonstrating 'the kind of movement (...) envisaged for each episode' (Britten, 1964, quoted in

Carpenter, 1992, p.425) after Britten played what he had just written. Graham wrote that Britten would then 'build the strengths and softness into that day's music'. This close attention to relationship between precise gestures of the actor and the music is something Britten brought back from Japan:

> a style of movement had to be devised – by a director who, perhaps fortunately, had never seen a Nō play in the flesh – a style which, like the music, retained the distilled intensity of the original without attempting to copy it.
>
> (Graham, 1989, p.49).

Graham later became not only Britten's most trusted directorial collaborator but one of his librettists, and during their work together in Venice while Britten was writing the music, he was so involved in the process that he contributed to major decisions about Plomer's libretto using the existing text as a source for new sections demanded by the action:

> I have had to concoct a big ensemble after her revelation – page 17 – which I've done with Colin's help, working from phrases used elsewhere. Similarly I have concocted a big really crazy scene for the Madwoman on top of 18 – but used nothing, I think, which hasn't appeared before, except one idea pinched from the Nō.
>
> (Britten, B. 1964. *Letter to William Plomer*, 15 February, in Reed et al. 2008, p.559).

Away from any major collaborative dialogue with Plomer, and with only Britten's brief experience of Japan as an influence, Graham and Britten defined the performance style of control, clarity and concentration but did not lose the Western performer's more naked emotional involvement in a role. Pears may have been a highly trained singer but this was in a tradition that allows the individual emotional voice to be heard. And without the years of

training of the body, his movement – though precisely choreographed by Graham – had far more of the psychological gesture and his own idiosyncrasies than the gestures of the *shite* in the Nō. However, Pears' achievement in this deeply collaborative process was to integrate gesture and voice, defining a new kind of 'acting' with both voice and body. Commenting on Pears' performance in the title role of Mozart's *Idomeneo* at the 1970 Aldeburgh Festival, the critic Donald Mitchell wrote:

> P.P. is a conspicuously gifted actor in the conventional sense of the word. (...) Stage gestures and musical gestures were precisely dovetailed; and it is surely this synthesis which is a major contribution P.P. has made to the musical theatre in our day.
>
> (Mitchell, quoted in Headington, 1992, p.241).

When I interviewed my father, John Strickson, a musician and choral conductor who attended a performance of the first production of *Curlew River*, he also tried to define Pears' new kind of performance, but by referring to the relationship between his singing voice and the dramatic nature of the opera:

> I never have felt that Peter Pears was one of the world's great voices. I think he was one of the world's great singers. (...) He was expressing faultlessly in the style of production and his singing the emotion of the Madwoman. He wasn't just singing very well; in fact, in some ways, he was not singing very well. He never had the exquisite beauty of tone of many of the world's best singers but he had a vocal technique equal to the very best in the world.
>
> (Strickson, J., 2012,13 July).[1]

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[1] When referencing the interview with John Strickson, I use his initial 'J.', as above, in order to distinguish him from the author.

With his voice, Pears gives the extended woe of prolonged vowels and the anger of consonants in the role of the Madwoman distinctive, individualised shapes full of emotional power, so that the different qualities of attention demanded by this integration of Japanese aesthetics and Western techniques mean the spectator is drawn in and out of the protagonist's passion:

> The emotional impact of it was greater than almost anything that I have seen in the theatre. It was so acute that it verged on total loss of control and yet in fact everything was superbly controlled by the actor, who was Peter Pears. I didn't realise the emotional impact that could be created behind a mask. Peter Pears, who was fully in control of what he was doing, produced the most wonderful re-creation of madness. He was expressing faultlessly in his voice production and his style of singing the emotion of the madwoman.
>
> (Strickson, J., 2012, 13 July).

As a member of the audience, what my father is describing here is the 'double' experience of grief promulgated by Barthes' in his *Mourning Diary*, where the spectator is moving between the committed emotion of grief and a 'lightness' stemming from an awareness of the use of technique to produce this affect. In the audiences' experience of *Sumidagawa* and *Curlew River*, as Brecht proposed, the respective performance forms 'call attention to the way meaning is produced' (Culler, 1983, p.41). They both contain the possibility of exploring the extreme with the light touch proposed by Barthes. When Nicholas Bouvier attended a Nō performance in 1964, he felt this light touch in the response of the audience:

> All murmur in low voices and follow the programme that they hold open on their knees. The hum responds to the actors, accompanies them, and links the scene to the room in the same way that the

> 'response' links the Catholic priest to his flock. Here, no stiffness, no constraint (...).
>
> (Bouvier, 2008, p.53).

The cool detachment the audience may experience at the Nō, a theatre of 'situation and surfaces' (Culler, 1983, p.41), is apparently not the same as my father's deeply emotional experience of *Curlew River* and yet his emotional response and his simultaneous intellectual understanding of what he was experiencing contain Barthes' 'commitment' and 'lightness':

> I was so totally wrapped up by the tragedy that was being acted on the stage and its application to the years through which we had lived.
>
> (Strickson, J., 2012, 13 July).

Bouvier went reluctantly to the Nō, convinced that he would not get anything from the spectacle, provoked by connoisseurs who told him that in his ignorance of the form, he was likely to be bored. In the event, like Britten at *Sumidagawa* and my father at *Curlew River*, he was 'carried away by the power' (Bouvier, 1992, p.54) of the experience. The accounts of Bouvier and of my father show both of them clearly moving between an examination of the content of the performance as a 'matter for reading' and total immersion in the emotional experience. The outcome of this is not catharsis but a sense of knowing, surrogate identification:

> It was a profoundly spiritual experience. One aspect of it was that it was about someone who had lost their child but you felt you'd lost your own child while you were watching it. You totally identified with the Madwoman's profound grief. Just as she was relieved by the outcome of the spiritual journey she had experienced, so were we in the audience.
>
> (Strickson, J., 2012, 13 July).

> Theatrically and spiritually, the Nō unravels. It is a means of liberation (...).
>
> (Bouvier, 2008, p.53).

The new form that Britten and Plomer invented provided an effective ceremony devised, from the moment of Britten's decision about the 'medieval' nature of the adaptation, for a specific place. In contrast, when there is no tradition of ceremony associated with a performance location, the task of composer and librettist is much more problematic. The composition of *Curlew River* overlapped with that of the *War Requiem*, written for the opening of Coventry Cathedral. Theatre director Peter Brook, though not involved with this project, astutely commented on the difficulties of the relationship between form and place when creating new rituals for the building:

> The new place [Coventry Cathedral] cries out for a new ceremony, but of course it is the new ceremony that should come first – it is the ceremony in all its meanings that should have dictated the shape of the place. Goodwill, sincerity, reverence, belief in culture are not quite enough: the outer form can only take on real authority if the ceremony has equal authority – and who today can possibly call the tune?
>
> (Brook, 1972, p.51).

In the smaller church of Orford, with its long history of ceremony and by drawing on the conventions of Christian worship, Britten and Plomer were truly able to call the tune.

Peter Brook's constant exemplum is Shakespeare, 'whose aim is continually holy, metaphysical, yet he never makes the mistake of staying too long on the highest plane' (Brook, 1972, p.69). With Britten's admiration for Berg's *Wozzeck*, the example of Stravinsky ('At this time (1937) he believed only in Berg, Mahler and Stravinsky' (Duncan, 1964, pp.131–132) and the reaction against the vaunting myths of Wagner after World War II, intimate intensity rooted in the local was something he aspired to. And in *Curlew River*, Britten and Plomer do not stay too long on the highest plane; the brusqueness of the ferryman's prose speech and the mocking of the Madwoman bring to life something of the real ferries that still travel across the rivers of Suffolk. In the figure of the Madwoman, there was much of 'real life' and its extremes of experience for the audience to relate to:

> I've had no grief in my life commensurate with the grief of the Madwoman in that work but the whole concept of it is closely related to the history of people in my lifetime.
>
> (Strickson, J., 2012, 13 July).

Like the plays of Shakespeare, *Curlew River* contains the possibility of surface re-invention in the time of each new production, as in Graham Vick's beautifully sung 2004 modern-dress production with Birmingham Opera and Birmingham Contemporary Music Group for the BBC Proms when the unmasked Madwoman, wearing a headscarf, entered through the audience, pushing an empty pram from which her child might have been snatched and the monks' chorus became policemen, in an oblique reference to the Soham murders. In Sebastian Harcombe's staging at St Stephen's, London, in May 2009, the Madwoman was a blonde Boden-clad woman clutching a soft toy, an obvious reference to Kate McCann (Picard, 2009, no pagination). In the production by Tokyo University of the Arts, directed by David Edwards, that I

saw in 2012 (preceded by a Nō performance of *Sumidagawa*), the members of the chorus were dressed as generalised refugees with a sprinkling of Palestinian scarves and the boat was a ferry of assembled vegetable oil drums amidst a cluttered set made of plastic rubbish amongst which the musicians were cramped:

> Understanding of the work demands spareness, it doesn't ask for it! So did the story still shine through? Is it possible to destroy the genius of the work? The answer is almost but not quite. (...) In most ways, the Nō seemed more of a rite because of the scored care rather than the clumsy efforts to find the contemporary relevance in *Curlew River.* (...) All the effort to interpret the piece visually, and clumsily, in a contemporary way, ignoring nearly all the stage directions in the libretto stopped me seeing the Curlew River, the Suffolk river, in my imagination, which – in some way – would have expanded my horizon to everywhere.
>
> (Strickson, 2012, 8 September).

This particular 'single' reading, with little of the formality and frugality Britten, Plomer and Graham devised, seemed to diminish the power of the experience of *Curlew River* by not allowing the audience to read the story for themselves. When I attended the production at the Theatre des Celestins by Opéra de Lyon in 2008, directed by Oliver Py, the impact of the opera was much greater:

> To remember: the twisted hand gesture above the head of the mad woman; an étude, a studied and precise expression, repeated many times – something scored. It stays this way until her final pleas when one hand becomes two and the light shines only on her head, while the flautist sits in front of her, perched on the edge of the stage, looking out towards some far horizon:

> *Tell me does the one I love*
>
> *In this world still live?*

> Eventually, after she hears her child's disembodied voice repeatedly, the grave slides open, a narrow entrance mid-stage and the king-child steps out.
>
> The steel shimmers with light, like astonishing rippling water, and as he takes a step towards his mother, the light comes straight for us, dazzling our eyes.
>
> At the conclusion, we are alive with the sheer intensity of the performance in this 'non-sacred' space made sacred. The interminable applause of an opera performance is, for once, a relief as we clap a more everyday energy gradually back into our bodies. But part of us wants the performers to disappear, instanter, like ciphers into the night, up the steps and away.
>
> (Strickson, 2008 4, 6 March).

And yet even this powerful production had some of those trappings of modern directorial experiments that have become clichés:

> The monks process in, bare chested, with heavy black coats, solid shoes, black trousers. One wears glasses. They could be Polish. Theatregoers are familiar with this mixture of low light, heavy cloth, cold flesh and hints of Catholic gravitas in physical theatre from Grotowski to Gardzienice.
>
> (Strickson, 2008 4, 6 March).

But 'Catholic gravitas' is exactly what that great product of collaboration, *Curlew River*, possesses, in the sense of meaning fully alive for the audience, whether in a theatre or church. In its ability to offer up an 'empty'

rite, open to those with faith and those without, as a 'matter for reading' in which each member of the cast and the audience can consider their own predicament and the extreme suffering of individuals in the socio-political context of their own time, the opera truly conforms to Brook's definition of the 'true drama' that has the possibility of leaving something with each member of the audience for the rest of their lives:

> When emotion and argument are harnessed to a wish from the audience to see more clearly into itself – then something in the mind burns. The event scorches on to the memory an outline, a taste, a smell – a picture. It's the play's central image that remains (...) a kernel engraved on my memory (...) from the kernel I can reconstruct a set of meanings.
>
> (Brook, 1972, p.152).

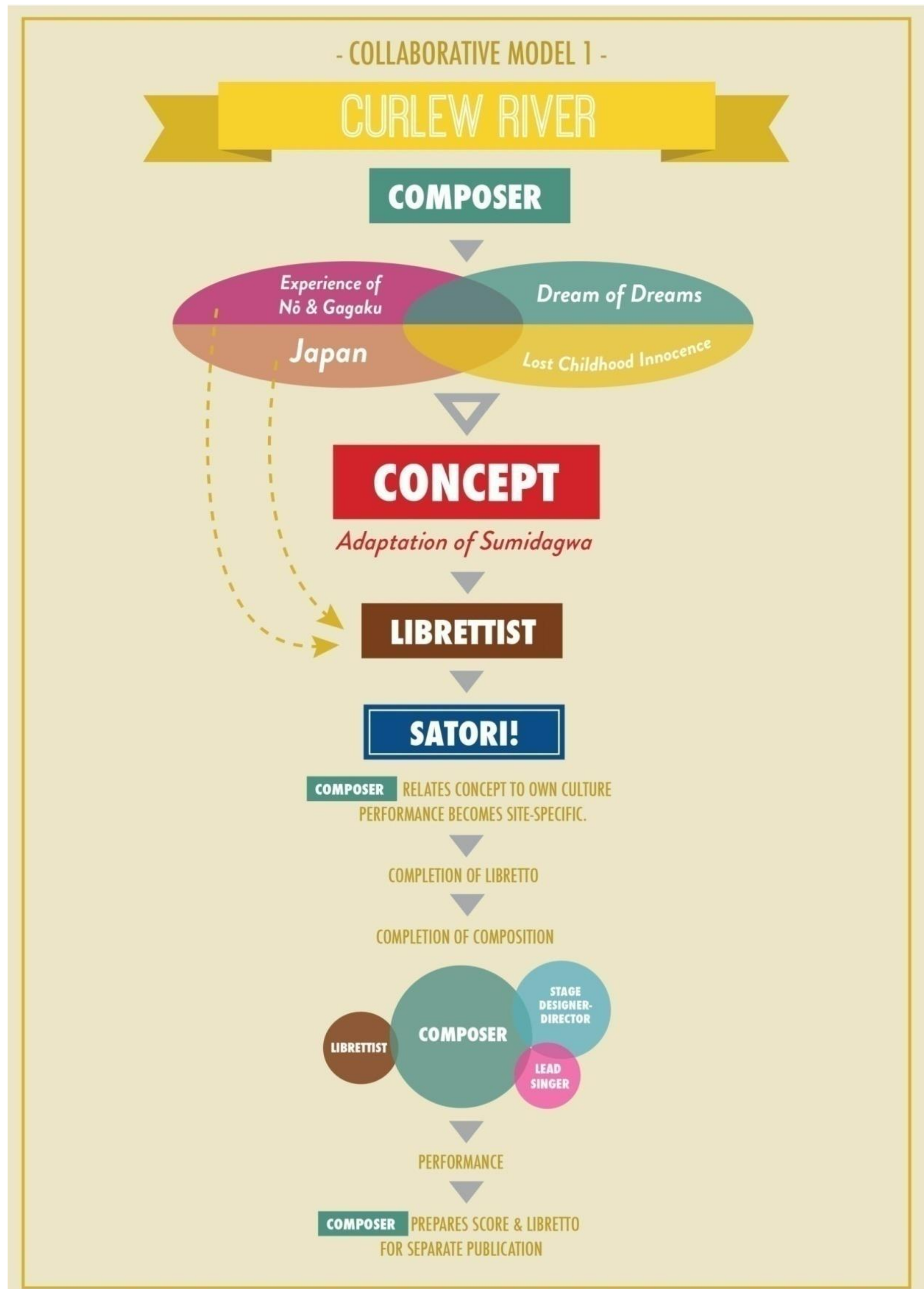
So what is the 'image that remains'? For me, it is a Madwoman in a boat singing the sliding notes that express her grief at losing her son. This image would not be engraved on my mind without the collaborative effect of Plomer's frugal 'poetry' of libretto, Graham's precise understanding of theatre gesture and Britten's vision, which transformed a fourteenth-century Japanese play into a new form of opera. The Madwoman of *Curlew River* has, for me, become Sophie, the nurse who loses everything in the civil war in Sudan in *Red Angel*; Ash who has lost her parents in 9/11 in *Green Angel*; the suicidal Erin who fears she is about to lose her own mother in *Flight Paths* and Amy Johnson ecstatically flying across the Pacific in *Amy's Last Dive*. The trope of the Madwoman has given me the possibility of reconstructing the fullness of the collaborative process exemplified in the creation of *Curlew River*, and the strategy for achieving the 'lightness' and commitment of her extreme suffering so powerfully embodied by Peter Pears.

The nature of the successful close collaboration between Britten and Plomer has also provided me with an exemplary model that I can consider in relation to my own work as a librettist working closely with composers. In order for

the reader to compare and contrast my own collaborations with the exemplum of *Curlew River*, I follow this paragraph with a succinct description and an illustrative diagram of Plomer and Britten's collaborative model. For my own operatic collaborations, I will follow the same pattern with descriptions and diagrams summarising the collaborative compositional processes of *Green Angel* and *Red Angel* at the end of the respective chapters. For the film collaboration *I am the ferryman*, the description and diagram will be presented at the beginning of the chapter, since the discursive writing on that collaboration is intentionally more fragmentary. The summaries of these three models include brief comparative introductions, looking at the similarities and differences to the exemplum of *Curlew River,* and to the other pieces created for the PhD. The reader may refer to the collaborative models for clarification of the chronological progression of each collaboration at any time during the reading of the commentary.

Curlew River: the collaborative model

The composer experiences a musical form (Gagaku) and a moving story about the loss of a young child told in a music-theatre form (Nō) from another culture. He responds to both form and content of the play, which relates closely to his 'dream of dreams', the destruction of innocence. Over a period of six years, he mulls over this material, intermittently corresponding with the librettist he has chosen to shape it. The librettist has lived within this other culture and brings a deeper knowledge of the Nō theatre form to the collaboration. During this time, the composer is involved with other works, in particular the *War Requiem*, his large-scale public statement about the pain of war and his attitude to war. Following this work, he changes course, and returns to the Japanese theatre experience, wishing to create a more intimate, sparer form informed by this aesthetic to bring to life the story he feels so close to. The librettist begins work, sticking closely to the form and feel of the Japanese source. In a moment of *satori*, the composer realises that this overly respectful attitude to creating a transcultural work will never connect sufficiently with the cultural context in which he is situated and suggests a transfer to his own English landscape in Suffolk, to medieval times and to the performance context of a village church. The librettist, who readily agrees to this, completes his work and the composer, after initial sketches, meets the director (who is also the designer) to explore the staging, a fresh invention based on Japanese performance, conventions of which the director has no experience. After composer and director have 'blocked out' the actions of the opera, rigorously formalising the gestural language, the composer continues work, all the time considering the lead performer, whose voice and presence is in the forefront of his mind. During this process of composition, the composer closely consults with the director in person. Since the librettist is busy and not present, the composer makes many changes in the libretto, introducing new actions and using existing material to create new meanings through re-ordering. The composer prepares the libretto, as well as the score, for publication.



- COLLABORATIVE MODEL 1 -
CURLEW RIVER
COMPOSER
Experience of Nō & Gagaku
Dream of Dreams
Japan
Lost Childhood Innocence
CONCEPT
Adaptation of Sumidagwa
LIBRETTIST
SATORI!
COMPOSER RELATES CONCEPT TO OWN CULTURE
PERFORMANCE BECOMES SITE-SPECIFIC.
COMPLETION OF LIBRETTO
COMPLETION OF COMPOSITION
LIBRETTIST
COMPOSER
STAGE DESIGNER-DIRECTOR
LEAD SINGER
PERFORMANCE
COMPOSER PREPARES SCORE & LIBRETTO
FOR SEPARATE PUBLICATION

Chapter 5

Green Angel

Green Angel is an adaptation of American novelist Alice Hoffman's haunting novella for teenagers, written in the year after 9/11. In the novel, Hoffman responds to that event and her own experience of a life threatening illness. A fifteen year old girl struggles to survive after her family dies in a terrible fire in the city. She retreats into the ruins of the family's market garden where she tattoos herself with black roses, inking darkness into her skin. Then she dances through a journey of mysterious encounters and self-healing that eventually allows her to move forward with her life. While dealing with extreme personal grief and a response to the destruction of the Twin Towers, *Green Angel* is a journey of healing through the seasons set in one outdoor location. When I first read it, I noticed that it had strong affinities with the stories of Nō plays, often journeys of gradual enlightenment set in a particular season reflecting the emotional state of the main character. An operatic adaptation of the novella *Green Angel* would also allow me to experiment with my understanding of the Japanese concept of *ma*, exploring the time-space-silence between the content of the novella and the structural aesthetics of the Nō:

> I actually looked around for a source that I thought had a Japanese feel to it. So the story by Alice Hoffman, the 'Green Angel' story, I deliberately chose from lots of reading that I was not necessarily doing consciously because it had that strong emotional centre, a relationship to the seasons and to nature, a single figure at its heart, quite a simple narrative and really it's all to do with an inner emotional journey, which is what came from the Nō and what I wanted to put across.
>
> (Redhead and Strickson, 2010, 20 May).

During the discussion and composition of the opera, and in her subsequent analysis for her PhD, the composer Lauren Redhead drew on the theories of Nicholas Bourriaud, and introduced me to his ideas. He is much concerned with the nature of the contemporary artist's response to cultural diversity and in *The Radicant* (2009) seemed to offer some guidelines towards navigation through the complexity of our USA-Japan-UK transcultural encounter. That Ash, the fifteen-year-old girl who is the protagonist of *Green Angel*, recovers her sanity through responding to the patterns of nature in the shadow of a burnt-out megacity places her, and by implication Hoffman and the adaptive project of the opera, in opposition to what Bourriaud calls 'the era of the art of the *metapolis*', an urban, standardised, globalised culture 'linked up to the capitalist matrix' (Bourriaud, 2009, p.12, original italics). As artistic collaborators on the adaptation of a story which could feasibly be set on a patch of ground outside a city in the USA, Japan or the UK, we let our bodies wander, flowing between influences and cultures, semionauts, those 'inventors of pathways within the cultural landscape, nomadic sign-gatherers' (Bourriaud, 2009, p.39), the beginner-organisers of an exodus from the *metapolis* through our exemplum.

Unlike the subject matter of *Red Angel* (the Sudanese Civil War of 1991–92), the destruction of the Twin Towers in 2001, the extreme event that provided the impetus for Hoffman's writing, had an unprecedented global impact due to the mediatisation of the event, and the way in which the terrorists exploited this, through instant world-wide transmission. We all retain these images, like the images that remain with us following great theatrical experiences that Brook writes about in *The Empty Space*. The sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard believes the use of the image in media coverage is both a diversion and a neutralisation 'in the sense that it absorbs [the event] and offers it for consumption' (Baudrillard, 2012, p.21). He argues that 9/11 has such a symbolic hold on the popular imagination because it combined our 'two elements of fascination (...): the white magic of the cinema and the black light of terrorism' (Baudrillard, 2012, p.23). His theory is that 9/11 has provided a type of 'wound' that the U.S.A. has not had since Pearl Harbour, allowing it to become a victim, and giving it permission to 'exert its power in all good conscience' (Baudrillard, 2012, p.48). The

creative artist, in this scenario, must find a way of bringing up the wound from the unconscious, personalising it in order to re-define the human scale of the tragedy, and finding possibilities for non-violent, healing action by the vulnerable individuals affected. The history of the U.S.A., post colonisation, is a history of people from other continents finding new hopes in a new home and building a 'new world'. On 9/11, through an attack in the heart of the most iconic American city, an invader broke the walls of this 'home' for the first time; home, as the Romanian anthropologist Mircea Eliade demonstrated is at 'the heart of the real' (quoted in Berger, 1984, p.56), a place from which the world can be founded. In order to re-make sense of the real after 9/11, it is necessary for the protagonist of *Green Angel,* Ash, a fifteen-year-old girl, to make a new kind of home to create a new kind of world.

Green Angel begins with Ash alone in an ashy garden next to the ruins of her home after losing all her family in a fire on the other side of the river, where they had gone to sell the produce from their market garden. In the opera, the neighbour becomes the *waki* of the Nō play and tells the audience the sad story of the place she is standing in:

Old woman:

This half burnt house was full of life   these broken walls held

a strong whistling father   who grew hot chillies in his greenhouse

a mother who collected magpie feathers   and planted when the moon waned

two girls   a moody, dark weed   and her moonlit sister

I am an old woman   a neighbour   a survivor

I knew a girl   a moody, dark weed

My feet stick in the ashy clods   my heart is an empty seed head

(*Green Angel*, 2010, pp.8–9).

Hoffman wrote *Green Angel*, in the year after 9/11, while she was being treated for breast cancer. She wrote in the 'void' between two oppositions, the impossibility of writing after the collapse of the Twin Towers and the impossibility of not writing as she stared her own death in the face:

> I could lie on a table during a bone scan and yet slip into the river where water lilies floated downstream, feet sinking into the soft mud. (...) What I was looking for during ten months of radiation was a way to make sense of sorrow and loss.
>
> (Hoffman, 2002, no pagination).

The year after 9/11 was a particular time in the lives of creative artists who lived or worked in New York, with the eruption of feelings similar to Adorno's who famously wrote 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric', though his thought was more complex than the famous quotation:

> It is a misunderstanding of philosophy, resulting from its growing closeness to all-powerful scientific tendencies, to take such a statement at face value and say: 'He wrote that after Auschwitz one cannot write any more poems; so either one really cannot write them, and would be a rogue or a cold-hearted person if one did write them, or he is wrong, and has said something which should not be said.' Well, I would say that philosophical reflection really consists precisely in the gap, or, in Kantian terms, in the vibration, between these two otherwise so flatly opposed possibilities. I would readily concede that, just as I said that after Auschwitz one could not write poems – by which I meant to point to the hollowness of the

> resurrected culture of that time – it could equally well be said, on the other hand, that one must write poems, in keeping with Hegel's statement in his *Aesthetics* that as long as there is an awareness of suffering among human beings there must also be art as the objective form of that awareness.
>
> (Adorno, 2002, p.110).

Adorno's 'precisely in the gap' takes us back to the void, and the greatest physical void left in mainstream Western consciousness in recent times is that created by the collapse of the Twin Towers:

Figure 8: 13 September 2001, 'A New York City fire fighter looks up at what remains of the World Trade Center after its collapse during the September 11 terrorist attack.'

U.S. Navy Photo by Photographer's Mate 2nd Class, Jim Watson. (released through Wikimedia Commons).

Twelve years on, the architects' design, which has now begun to grow, places oak trees between the footprints of the buildings, like the moss between the stones in the Zen garden.

**Figure 9: 27 August 2013, 'Waterfall 9/11 memorial plaza'.
Photo ©cjpfigueiredo depositphotos File ID: 26672757**

If we follow Adorno's logic, the philosophical reflection of poetry, and the possibility of opera, exist between the battle and the grass, and between the footprints and the oak trees. The space-time-silence of *ma*, remains a possibility – even an inevitability – for Adorno. But when disaster appears to touch so many people personally, and the whole culture in which they thought they existed, the general feeling of impotence is acute for the artist when the culture they have been totally involved in appears too 'hollow' to resurrect. The conductor Seiji Ozawa said:

> Before 9/11, I thought music was very strong. But at that moment, I thought, 'Ah! a musician cannot do anything. We cannot help the world.' I really thought so. It was terrible especially in America.
>
> (Interviewed in Jampol, 2010, p.256).

In the shadow of the extreme, the unprecedented impact of image-events in the daily news, we find ourselves disempowered, either existing in a state of numb despair or caught in a violent rage, an equally destructive mode that can lead to self-destruction.

> Extremes (...) insulate us from the intensity of life. And extremes – whether of dullness or fury – successfully prevent feeling. (...) It takes courage to feel the feeling.
>
> (Winterson, 2012, pp.169–170).

But Ozawa conducted Berlioz's *Requiem* one month after 9/11 and, though people cried, he felt they 'came out of the hall with more energy' and that 'only music can do that' (quoted in Jampol, p.257). Through experiencing the piece, they were able to process their grief, and began to understand it as the singer Joyce Donato articulated:

> after 9/11 I thought, 'How can I be an opera singer when the world is crumbling?' But people turn to music to understand, to grieve.
>
> (Interviewed in Jampol, 2010, p.111).

What Berlioz, Alice Hoffman, and the Nō achieve, is the beautification of sorrow so that it may be contemplated:

> You can try to take sorrow and make it into something enduring, meaningful and beautiful. I always feel guilty that this is my job, that I get to do this.
>
> (Hoffman, 2009, no pagination).

By dwelling intensely on the experience of sorrow, the reader and the spectator feel able to go out into the world renewed and 'lighter'. This is

exactly what the Nō offers in the possibilities of a form for a beautiful enactment of the protagonist's grief and renewal and why Hoffman's novella was such a suitable choice for exploring these in a chamber opera depicting the extreme.

W. Anthony Sheppard suggests that the use of oriental form ‘deflects attention away from the performer’ and hence towards the content (quoted in Cooke, 2005, p.236). The *waki* of the Nō does not so much tell a story as explain the essence of a story, preparing the way for the appearance of the *shite*, who will not tell the story but dance, precisely and slowly, the feelings that the essence of the story induces. It is as if, rather than offering us the whole plot and sub-plot that is Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, the dramatist had introduced the frozen statue of Hermione, then brought her to life and allowed her to express the emotions of her story in a choreography of words, music and gesture. In Hoffman's *Green Angel*, just as in the Nō, all experience is processed through the experiences and dreams of one character (Ash) and her dead family exist only in her:

> The people you know who are gone, are still with you, still affecting you like ghosts.
>
> (Hoffman, 2007, p.1).

We can detect a sharpened sense of death and dying in Hoffman's work since 9/11 that emerges in her trance-like writing. Aware that in the libretto, I had ruthlessly pared back the already lucid sparseness of Hoffman, I asked the audience of the opera *Green Angel*:

> **Do the characters and/or the story relate to anything that has happened in your own life? If this is the case, please briefly tell us about the connection**

Answers included:

> I could relate to the sense of loss after death or illness in a loved one and the feeling of renewal with the help of other people.
>
> Losing my dad. Really connected with the feeling of loss/grief.
>
> Definitely the memories of 9/11. The survivor with photo looking for his mother brought back memories of people who had losses among the victims of the towers' destruction.
>
> Story of disaster; fire, as I used to live in Saudi Arabia and my school got bombed.
>
> (Audience comments, 2011,1 April).

I observed that discussion, and often writing quite detailed comments in response to open questions, continued for up to forty-five minutes after the performance, perhaps indicating both the nature of the material and the form chosen to engage with it, encouraging Bourriaud's binomial exchange where someone shows something to someone else who returns it as he or she sees fit. This invitation to dialogue is inherent in the act of performing the character of Ash/Green; she is in the position of the audience, working out her relationship to the traumatic event through a journey of incrementally healing coherence within the same compressed period of performance time.

Hoffman's ability to create a universal parable that each reader, or audience member, is able to experience individually takes us back to James Kirkup's experience of the Nō play *Sumidagawa*, after the discovery of the body of the dead boy who had been kidnapped. But the individual grief of the protagonist of the novella *Green Angel*, set in a market garden devastated by a man-made disaster, also signifies our despair in the face of what is happening to the ecology of the planet, an undercurrent of dread that permeates all our lives and was not part of general awareness when Kirkup or Plomer were writing. In her novel *Flight Behaviour*, about the demise of the Monarch butterfly, Barbara Kingsolver describes this feeling through the characters of a group of biologists, led by a professor called Ovid, and the farming family who live where they are temporarily based in Tennessee:

> In the lab Dellarobia listened to Ovid and Pete speaking hopelessly about so many things. The elephants in drought-stricken Africa, the

> polar bears on the melting ice, were 'good as gone', they said (...). *Gone*, as if those elephants on the sun-bleached plane were merely slogging out the last leg of a tired journey. The final stages of grief.
>
> (Kingsolver, 2012, p. 341, original italics).

Both the Nō, Hoffman and the adaptive opera that is shaped by the wander between source and structural aesthetics by librettist and composer bring the image of grief (grief for a lost family and, in Hoffman and the opera, grief for the loss of nature) into the experience of the body in nature, so much more immediate and extended or 'longer' (in the sense of time) than the media experience of the images of terrorism castigated by Baudrillard:

> The body can cross the distance that separates it from the stage, or from the mirror – this is what keeps it human and allows it to partake in exchange. But the screen is merely virtual, and hence unbridgeable.
>
> (Baudrillard, 1993, p.62).

The use of repetitive choreographed gestures in the production of *Green Angel*, like the slow raising of the hand to the face and away again, adapted from the Nō, which accompanies Ash's lament of 'He-u me, he-u me', is a device which deliberately draws attention to the physical presence of the body expressing the extreme, in a similar way to Colin Graham's scored choreography for the original production of *Curlew River*. The Nō takes this slowing down, this extension of time, from an observation of the processes of nature, like the opening of the petals of a flower.

In a time when Baudrillard writes that the image of the Twin Towers 'committing suicide' has a universal attraction 'on a par with pornography' (Baudrillard, 2012, p.3) and when, as Redhead writes, 'it seems as a society, and often as individuals, our relationship with nature is impotent' (Redhead, 2011, p.21), the decision to place the healing of a young woman's extreme

trauma through a 'process of unruly becoming, virtually a coming to new birth' (Rudkin, 2007, no pagination) by her interaction with the desolate and then recovering, nurtured nature with which she co-exists, situates the opera *Green Angel* firmly in a transcultural dialogue with the aesthetic of the Nō, in the renewal of meaning that can be found in the design for the site of the Twin Towers, in Hoffman's understanding of the relationship between humans and nature, and in opposition to the prevailing values promulgated in the UK and the USA. It is deliberately oppositional; mind and nature are inseparable parts of the same pattern. The healing of Ash in *Green Angel* is only possible through her collaboration with the ruined nature in which she is situated.

Hoffman's sequel to *Green Angel* is called *Green Witch* and, as in the Nō, a sense of the active supernatural is central to her work, out of kilter with our dominant matrix of knowledge but ever more present in popular culture, especially that directed towards young people. The importance of the supernatural in the Nō, and for Hoffman, is related to the view expressed in Atran and Medin's *The Native Mind and the Cultural Construction of Nature* (summarised by Enfield, 2009) that truly sustainable knowledge about how to work with nature may exist primarily in those societies that know nature as a sentient being and whose world view is infused with the superstitious. In re-growing the garden and in naming the plants aloud, in constructing her own rituals, Ash recovers knowledge, a knowledge which becomes ever more important as cities burn. The problem is not that we don't need this knowledge but that we don't think we need it: it is what Atran and Medin call 'the extinction of experience'. These anthropologists examined Guatemala and rural Wisconsin, both cases of 'the tragedy of the commons' when an expanding population is exploiting a finite resource until it is exhausted. When they compared the Itza' Maya, Q'eqchi Maya immigrants and Spanish-speaking Ladino immigrants, the Itza' showed the most sustainable practice. Atran's and Medin's argument is that this is not because of any ideology or taught practice but 'by means of one of the fundamental orientations of human cognition: the tendency to believe in supernatural entities' (Enfield, 2009, p.10). Forest resources are treated like friends or enemies: the spirits of the forest have supernatural knowledge, just as they

do in folk song and fairy tales. Villagers risk being punished if they do not respect this reciprocal ‘human’ relationship. This is therefore not about individuals and institutions but the commons as a player with a stake in its own future. Suddenly the ‘primitive’ relationship of the characters and the performers of the Nō with nature, in English Mummers' plays, and in Hoffman's trope of a supernatural relationship with nature seem a matter of modern urgency, a necessary way of thinking and operating that needs to be recovered.

A pine tree is always painted on the back wall of the Nō stage and a bamboo on the side wall at upstage left.

Figure 10: 'Twisted pine tree in Japanese Zen garden, Kyoto.' Photo ©smithmore depositphotos File ID: 13374920

The pine may be a remembrance of outdoor Nō or it may represent the famous Yōgō pine at the Kasuga shrine in Nara, where Nō has been performed for centuries. Either or both of these may be true but the pine is primarily a structural and metaphorical statement of the relationship of the Nō performance to the processes of nature. The metaphor of nature in

relation to the construction of form continues to have resonance, even in contemporary opera. For example, David Beard writes that Harrison Birtwistle compares his compositional processes as a composer to the workings of the natural world in 'geological strata (...), and the turning of the seasons' (Beard, 2012, p.11). As for the bamboo, there is a saying expressing the essence of Zen painting, which recalls the practice of one-note flute:

> Paint bamboo. Devote yourself only to painting bamboo, until you become bamboo yourself. Then forget you are the bamboo.
>
> (Komparu, 1983, p.116).

When the small curtain at the end of the entrance bridge is lifted, and the Nō actor-dancer prepares to enter, the first thing he sees is the image of the bamboo. In the opera *Green Angel*, the actor brings in a branch from a dead tree and holds it up high for everyone to see, casting the shadow on the back wall:

Figure 11: Ash (ensemble singer) holds up the branch.
Photo ©Malcolm Johnson

This contrasting image to the flourishing pine and bamboo of the Nō places the death of nature in the shadow of the Twin Towers, which is what the actor obliquely refers to:

<u>Actor *(All the actor's words in the prologue are spoken)*</u>

He rests the burnt branch on the palms of his hands, in front of him.

What's left after fire is black   black that marks your fingers

But what remained was white   white ash   white dust

He rubs ashes into his face as he speaks -

A dancer   stood in the white ash

in a coat of black rags   like a ragged city crow

<u>Ensemble singer</u>

Like grief

(*Green Angel*, 2010, pp.5–6).

Ash, the young woman 'hero' of the piece, can only start to live again as 'Green', her original identity prior to trauma, through connecting with the processes of nature (nature is defined as 'what happens between things' by Gregory Bateson), the time-space-silence of *ma* that connects her humanness to the earth on which she stands. It is through her co-relationship with the unruly, half-wild market garden in which she is situated, as well as through encounters with other people, that she and it recover, and this co-relationship is seasonal, cyclical and rhythmic.

When the Nō actor-dancer looks at the painting of bamboo, he sees living growth in *ma* between the action of the brush and the drawing, created by rhythm. The perpetual flow of this rhythm of creation or *jo-ha-kyu*, is perhaps the most important part of the aesthetic of the Nō. *Jo-ha-kyu* is a dynamic

and continuous process (Redhead calls it the ur-Nō behind the music, words, action and audience relationship of *Green Angel*), like the growing of a flower from seed to bloom. The translation of the concept I have found most useful is:

PRELUDE – BREAKING – RAPID

If we think of Zeami's constant metaphor of the flower of Nō, the beginning is the seed; breaking is the transformation of the seed into a plant that emerges above the ground and rapid is the final climactic unfolding of the bloom before decay and the beginning of the cycle once more. Each moment of the cycle, structurally, contains every moment of the cycle that has ever existed, exists and will exist.

Every moment of *jo* contains *jo-ha-kyu* infinitely; it is the life cycle, making love to the point of orgasm, and what happens naturally when we clap in a group. Zeami wrote:

> all things in the universe, good and bad, large and small, with life and without, all partake of the process of *jo*, *ha*, and *kyu*. From the chirp of the birds to the buzzing of the insects, all sing to an appointed order, and this order consists of *jo*, *ha*, and *kyu*.
>
> (Zeami, 1984, p.137).

In order to practise Nō, or to write it, we must become like the bird, the insect and the flower, we must become part of the process of nature but as individuals, and as a society, we are largely dissociated from this process, physically and aesthetically. This is the *koan*, or problem of writing a contemporary Nō play, though Zeami implicitly allowed this possibility, believing that the Nō itself is constantly moving through a cycle of life, death and renewal. He wrote:

> There is no flower that remains and whose petals do not scatter. And just because the petals scatter, then, when the flower blooms again, it will seem fresh and novel (...).
>
> (Zeami, 1984, p.52).

Jo-ha-kyu is the principle which I have used to plan and structure the opera *Green Angel* and the reason why the main performer needs to be a singer-dancer with the ability to express emotion through a series of flowing, precise movements. It is clearly at work in *Curlew River*, and the structural closeness of the text to the principles of *jo-ha-kyu* exemplified in the Nō play *Sumidagawa*, as well as in Britten's music, has been analysed by Jean Hodgins in her 1981 MA dissertation, 'Orientalism in Britten's *Curlew River'*. Her close mapping of the *jo-ha-kyu* structure onto *Curlew River* is fascinating but there is no evidence that either Britten or Plomer were acutely aware of the intricacies of the structure, and the opera seems to owe this characteristic mainly to Plomer's adherence to the pattern present in the translation of the Nō play he used.

Unlike Britten and Plomer, I did not have the advantage of beginning with a Nō play structured according to the principles of *jo-ha-kyu*; my work on the opera began with re-structuring Hoffman's novella into a dramatic piece based on my understanding of these principles. I made use of knowledge drawn from my own experience of working with this concept as a theatre director through the exploration of transformational physical gestures based on principles learned from Nō practitioners at Dartington College of Arts when I was an undergraduate student, from my reading of Nō plays and from the exposition of the concept in Komparu's *The Noh Theater* (1983).

Stockhausen's seven-day opera cycle, *Licht: Die Sieben Tage der Wache*, composed between 1977 and 2003, originally titled *Hikari* (光, Japanese for light), originated with a piece for dancers and Gagaku orchestra commissioned by the National Theatre in Tokyo, and was much influenced by the Japanese attitude to time, exemplified in the incredible slowness of *jo*, and the rapidity of *kyu.* In his 1966 lecture on his work *Telemusik*, he said, 'In Europe we always live (...) in a middle time range, in which everything

takes place somewhere between slow and fast, and in Japan these extremes are much further apart' (TELEMUSIK, text CD 16, Lecture, 1966). Stockhausen attended Nō plays over thirty times in Japan and Jonathan Harvey writes that when the Japanese heard *Telemusik*, they commented that 'he had re-created Noh-time' (Harvey, 1975, p.100). The close relationship between the time of nature and that found in Nō performance confirmed Stockhausen's own belief that 'everything in the cosmos is rhythmically organised' (Peters, 2003, p.229), and therefore we may see the twenty minutes it takes for the *shite* actor in the Nō to move from one side of the stage to the other as part of the same pattern as the unfolding of the bloom of the flower. In the performance of *Green Angel*, this was made explicit by showing a slow-motion film of the unfolding of a bloom in the foyer before the audience entered, preparing them for the slowing down of time they would experience in the *jo* sections of the performance.

To live and work in the process of nature or working *sur le motif*, as the Impressionists did, is *altermodern*, the wandering in search of an alternative solution to the meaning of the artwork, by 'entering the motif itself and moving according to its rhythms' (Bourriaud, 2009, p.96), or learning to live and breathe in the *jo-ha-kyu.* The writing of a Nō play is a walk in nature and the singularity of writing it now is in 'the initiation of an aesthetic event, accomplished through an individual's encounter with forms' (Bourriaud, 2009, pp.72–73). Bourriaud calls such an event the production of 'a new fold', generating an irregularity in contemporary culture, a discontinuity in the smoothness of the present. To write Nō today is a deliberately awkward act – the black boxes offered for small-scale theatre are window-less, plant-less and a long conceptual distance from the riverbeds of Japan or even the miniaturised cosmos of the Globe. This is the context in which we often make theatre, shutting the processes of nature out. *Green Angel* presents an audience with a seemingly insoluble *koan* by situating the process of nature within the black-box. They must negotiate this, as Redhead writes, through approaching the problem of intertextuality which is at the heart of the protagonist's dilemma:

> Ash struggles to read the multiple texts presented to her situation within the story in order to find the message in the jumble of their referents. She is, in effect, in the position of the audience who are watching this (or, indeed, any) work.
>
> (Redhead, 2011, p.61).

In Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, which provides the framework for Redhead's thoughts here, the physical context in which the performance takes place is one of these texts. Wood ash spread on the floor, burnt logs, stones, feathers and bent branches from trees are part of the set, serving to dislocate performers and audience from the blandness of the black painted floor and walls, with Ash/Green creating zig zags, swirls, throws of seeds, clouds of dust and falls of feathers in the air with her movements, drawing attention to the processes of nature through her actions as well as in her words and the underlying form of the piece. The Old Woman, or *waki*, invites Ash to describe her situation and feelings, almost like a therapist, allowing her to escape from her own silence. Ash turns everything inwards, struggling to make her body signify, to transform it into a site of meaningful representation. This is epitomised by her self-tattooing, when she literally makes a text of her body, trying to force her flesh back into meaning. Her encounter with Diamond, a mute who has suffered a similar trauma, challenges her to enlarge her thoughts beyond her own predicament into the wider world, and to relate to other people and the earth at her feet again.

The Sweeper of the prelude and interlude is an explicit reference to the English Mummers' or fertility plays that took place on the village green or in the fields, a signifier for our lost relationship with nature who brushes and dances chthonic meaning back into the performance space, his expenditure of energy forever inadequate for the task. The performer's body is a fragmented, broken line attempting to piece itself together through a renewal of our relationship with nature, just as Ash attempts to re-find herself through the painful act of tattooing roses and leaves on her arms with thorns dipped in black ink. In Ash, as in the Mummers' plays, death and the possibility of resurrection are always present. The decision to make conscious use of this

trope, within the context of the theatre space, may also be connected to the 'Mystery' Britten sought to evoke in the confines of Orford Church with *Curlew River*, when Donald Mitchell stated 'we become the very congregation before which a Mystery is to be enacted, a decisive change in status' (quoted in Kennedy, 1981, p.235). The actor who plays the Sweeper in *Green Angel* also plays Diamond, the mute Ash encounters in the HA section, so he is not only desperately trying to make a ritual space in the black-box, but himself 'dressing up' and enacting the tale just as the 'monk' becomes the Madwoman in *Curlew River*. As in Orford Church, where the reality was that the audience, however subtly manipulated, held no common faith and no shared sense of Christian communion, so in *Green Angel* the manufacture of ritual is doomed to be fragmentary, theatrical, the promise of a possibility rather than the authentic shared ceremonies of the Itza' Maya.

Ash/Green is also fragmented, broken in two, her role shared between a dancer-singer and a singer in the ensemble. This fragmentation exists not only in the sharing of the protagonist's role but in the librettist's 'sampling' of different languages to express Ash's emotion and in the composer's attitude to the vocal line. The use of medieval English, with the extended vowels of 'He-u me, he-u me', rather than the shorter 'Alas me, alas me' embodies grief as an extended sound. The lengthening of vowels, and the use of language not immediately familiar to the audience for the bodily intensification of emotion, points towards Sondheim's view of the ideal language for opera. He writes that Philip Glass's *Satyagraha*:

> has the two necessary qualities: it utilizes predominantly open vowel sounds (listen to the title), and it doesn't invite you to try to understand the language (...) With Sanskrit, you are relieved of every bit of concentration except where it counts: on the music and the singing.
>
> (Sondheim, 2011, no pagination).

In Redhead's scoring of *Green Angel*, at extreme moments of emotion, the register of the two singers playing Ash is pushed beyond their natural ranges, a deliberate act on the part of the composer. In one of our interviews facilitated by Kara McKechnie, she said:

> I don't think I necessarily need to have a lot of notes but looking at something that is sort of on the edge is a lot more interesting to me than to stay in the middle and the safe ground. We're talking about how high the singers are pitching, not so they could actually get a clear note but how they would produce the sound of really reaching for that register.
>
> (Redhead and Strickson, 2010, 20 May).

The moment where words become expressive sound without literality is when music takes over the narration, 'the undefeated voice speaking against the crushing plot' (Abbate, 1991, p.x) as in the JO section of *Green Angel,* when Ash (dancer-singer) referring to her former self, sings 'I knew she was not coming back' and Ash (ensemble) simultaneously sings 'So far away   so far away', each singer reaching beyond their range, each repeating one extremely high note. By drawing attention to the act of singing, the audience is immersed in the sheer sound produced by the anguished body at the point where technique is on the edge of falling apart. The sound of the singing voice as 'voice-object' necessarily brings the performer, rather than the role, to the foreground, as in the Queen of the Night's second aria in *Die Zauberflöte* and the use of portamento in the Madwoman's 'i-in' and 'ou-out of 'Let me in! Let me out!' when she approaches the ferry in *Curlew River*. Abbate posits that the 'destruction' of language in moments such as this draw attention to Barthes' 'body in the voice as it sings' (Barthes, 1977, p.188), the body vibrating with musical sound. This strategy 'draws attention to the presence of the moment' as in the Man's final lament in Birtwistle's *The Corridor*, when the final strained B flat of the repeated long vowel sound Eu-Eu-Eu-Eu-Eu 'pushes the tenor out of his comfort zone' (Beard, 2012, p.354).

Not only does the music of *Green Angel* intensify the individual 'body' experience through drawing attention to the sonorous qualities of the voice but, following Hoffman, the body is awkwardly placed in a space of destroyed nature, and this displacement is mirrored in the loss of conventional articulacy and the breaking up of the voice. In the interplay between the natural and the human world, just as in the Nō, the possibility of renewal, which seems invisible in real time but in the compaction of Nō time (which both extends and compacts time) is visibly revealed to the spectator through a progression of physical and vocal gestures. The fragmentation of language and voice is resolved in the joyous energy of spring, the KYU section of the opera, a compacted celebration of renewed growth, both external and internal.

Ash re-finds herself, and the audience must gradually re-find her, in the void between the dancer-singer and the ensemble singer, two interweaving and overlapping manifestations of her inner and outer journey. She enters into a questioning dialogue with herself, similar to the convention of the Nō where the seated chorus can elaborate the *shite's* thoughts without breaking the flow of the action, providing two simultaneous, interweaving 'matters for reading' without the banality of one actor speaking another's thoughts. Through her own intertextual actions Ash becomes Green again, the person she always was; two 'Ashes' become two 'Greens'. But at the conclusion of the opera we are left only with the Green of the ensemble, one person reconciled with nature and able to move forward beyond her grief, an exemplum for each audience member. The dancer-singer leaves the stage with the shout of self-discovery, 'My name is Green!' but her remaining, re-made, one self sings. This 'rite of spring' ends in a healing:

Green (ensemble) – *softly*

I once believed that life was a gift   that birds always sang

The future was a book   I could write to suit myself

before my eyes burned   and I smelt   like smoke

but stories unfold   like white flowers   petal by petal

petal by petal   petal by petal   petal by petal

(*Green Angel*, 2010, p.37).

Figure 12: The ensemble singer ('Green') at the conclusion of the opera. Photo ©Malcolm Johnson

Green Angel: the collaborative model

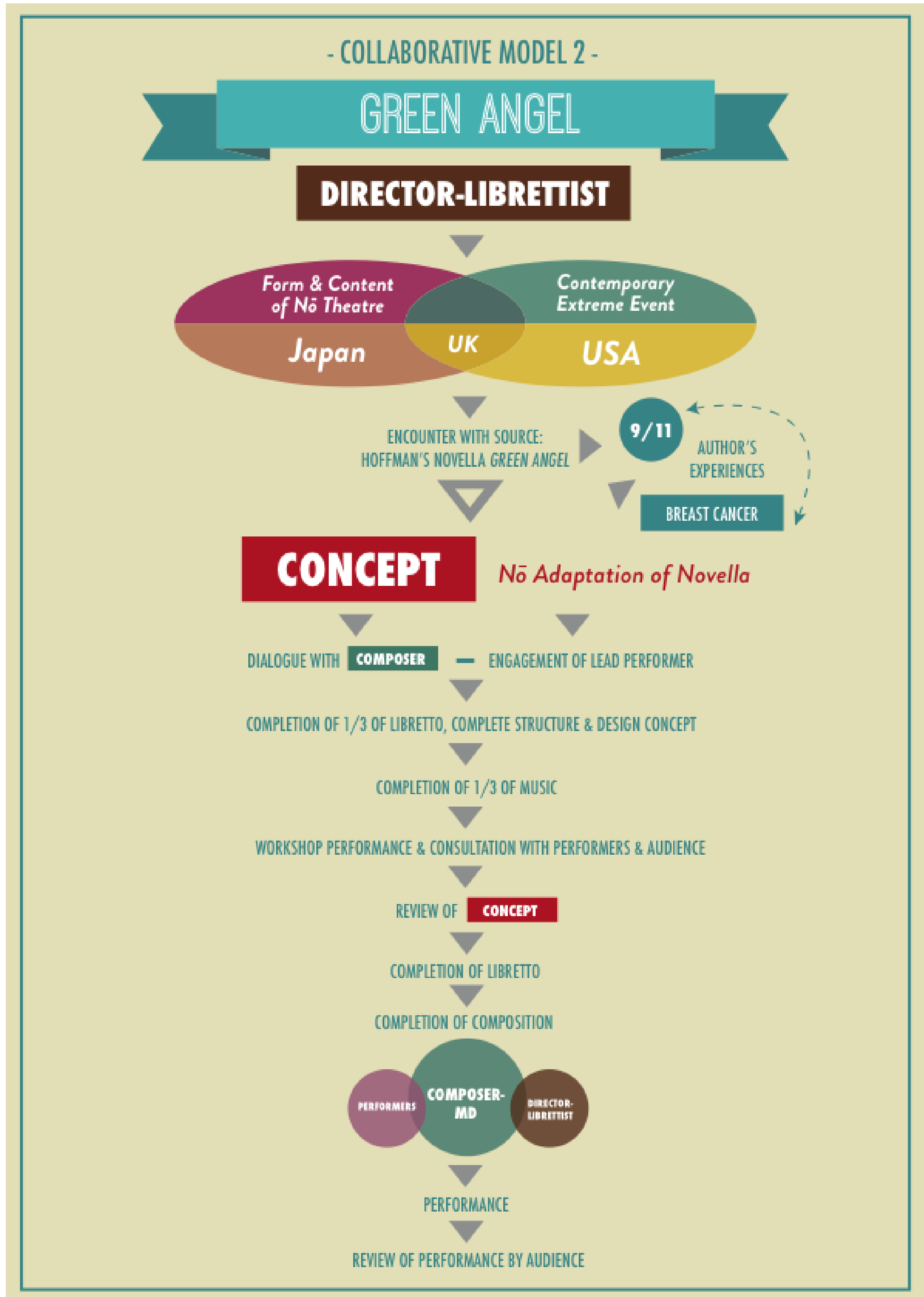
Introduction

This model differs in some essential ways to Britten and Plomer's collaboration on *Curlew River*. Though there was a close collaboration between librettist and composer, the librettist was the initiator of the project, and chose the source to be adapted. The use of an American source, related to 9/11, brought a third transcultural dimension to the project, in addition to Japan and the UK. Like Britten, I had a main performer in mind and, since she is a singer and dancer, wrote the libretto with the possibility of integrating movement and sung sound in mind, not unrelated to Colin Graham's work on the precise choreography for the first production of *Curlew River*. Like Britten, I was mainly responsible for creating a collaborative team for the first production, exerting directorial control on the process from first idea to first production. The possibility of premiering a section of the opera, as we did, during an early stage in the process of composition, before completing the full work, is more usual now than it was in Britten's time; sections of new operas are regularly open to invited audiences at Opera North, followed by a discussion with composer, librettist, director and performers. Once the libretto for *Green Angel* was finished, there was little discussion with the composer during the process of musical composition and only very minor changes made. This contrasts with Britten, who made significant changes to Plomer's libretto and made the decision to set the story in medieval times. My decision to remove the 'orientalism' present in the design when we presented the first section of *Green Angel* from the production of the complete work might also be said to spring from a similar need to Britten's, who wanted to reject a false 'Japonisme' by relocating the location of his opera to Suffolk.

The model

The librettist wishes to explore a contemporary event using Japanese aesthetics and forms, especially those found in the Nō theatre, as an experiment in the possibilities of shaping extreme, painful material through transcultural dialogue. He reads widely, to find a source that relates to the Nō in both content and form. The source must be related to a contemporary extreme event; it must be rooted in the experience of nature; it must possess a passionate, reflective central character and have the sparseness of an extended lyric poem or short story. The novella chosen, by Alice Hoffman, is set in a ruined market garden, relates to 9/11 and the author's experience of breast cancer. The choice of source, rooted in the American experience, adds another layer to the transcultural complexity of the project. After receiving her permission for the adaptation, the librettist approaches a composer, with whose work he is familiar, to collaborate. In initial discussions, the librettist and composer agree the ground for the project: a Nō *jo-ha-kyu* structure; separated 'texts' of music, words and action; the use of musical and literary quotation, and the voices and the instruments chosen for cast and ensemble. They also discuss the lead performer; the librettist has written this part with a particular performer, who is both a singer and a dancer, in mind. The composer agrees to this choice. The composer and librettist both suggest musicians for the ensemble, in particular the bass clarinettist, percussionist and accordion player, whom the composer consults during the compositional process. The librettist, who is also the director and initial designer, then 'blocks out' the complete opera, constructs a detailed scenario and writes one third of the libretto, before showing it to the composer. The composer writes the music for this section of the opera. The composer, who is also the musical director, and the librettist/director, then cast the opera and begin rehearsals of the first third of the work. This is presented as a workshop performance before an audience. After consultations with audience and performers, the librettist delivers the rest of the libretto in two more sections, and the composer then writes the complete score. There is little consultation with the librettist while the composer works on the music. Ten months after the workshop, the opera is given a full

production, with substantially the same cast and ensemble; the action is directed by the librettist and the music by the composer. The design is changed to avoid a suggestion of 'orientalism' and a set/lighting designer and costume designer are added to the team. An advisory director and choreographer also contribute to the staging. After the performance, the audience are invited to explore their reactions to the form and content of the opera through writing.



- COLLABORATIVE MODEL 2 -
GREEN ANGEL
DIRECTOR-LIBRETTIST
Form & Content of Nō Theatre
Contemporary Extreme Event
Japan
UK
USA
ENCOUNTER WITH SOURCE: HOFFMAN'S NOVELLA GREEN ANGEL
9/11
AUTHOR'S EXPERIENCES
BREAST CANCER
CONCEPT
Nō Adaptation of Novella
DIALOGUE WITH COMPOSER
ENGAGEMENT OF LEAD PERFORMER
COMPLETION OF 1/3 OF LIBRETTO, COMPLETE STRUCTURE & DESIGN CONCEPT
COMPLETION OF 1/3 OF MUSIC
WORKSHOP PERFORMANCE & CONSULTATION WITH PERFORMERS & AUDIENCE
REVIEW OF CONCEPT
COMPLETION OF LIBRETTO
COMPLETION OF COMPOSITION
PERFORMERS
COMPOSER-MD
DIRECTOR-LIBRETTIST
PERFORMANCE
REVIEW OF PERFORMANCE BY AUDIENCE

Chapter 6

Red Angel

The very least we can do is honour those individuals whose lives have been sufficiently difficult that they are teaching all the rest of us a lesson in life.

(Theatre director, Peter Sellars, speaking in the film *Nocturne*, Palmer, 2013).

In her introduction to a selection of commissioned artists' diaries, Siân Ede, who was Arts Director of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, wrote: 'Not one can be described simply as a *British artist* (…) an engagement with other cultures is the lifespring of their work; they appropriate, they collaborate, they synthesise. Through them none of us can any longer regard ourselves as the isolated inhabitants of one nation state' (Allen, 2001, p.2, original italics). Linda Hutcheon describes this process of synthesis or adaptation as transculturation (Hutcheon, 2006, p. xvi), borrowing a term originated by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1947 to describe the phenomenon of merging and converging cultures. In *Red Angel*, the narrative and aesthetics of a 1966 Japanese film are used to shape a story drawing on the Acholi, Dinka and Nuer tribal cultures of Southern Sudan, the dominant Arab culture exemplified by the government of the country, and the sensibilities of English and Belgian medical staff. Just as in the operatic adaptation of *Green Angel*, cultures from three continents converge.

The journey of the composition of the opera began with my encounter with Dili Diey, a black Christian refugee and ex-child-soldier from Southern Sudan, and a need to understand more about the world he had escaped in order to find some personal connection with what seemed a profoundly alien world of experience. Alien, yet familiar because we have so many images of Africa in our heads and hearts from the media: starving children, pits of bodies, boy soldiers, weeping mothers, drought; an endless list of suffering. We know, intellectually, that this seemingly unmoveable myth of Africa is

pessimistic, incorrect and untenable, but we also know that it remains a true part of the picture. The myth becomes a background noise of epic, a violent media story which drags on without specific characters.

The sounds and story of the opera *Red Angel* are not a myth. They are an imaginative katabasis, a going down, a descent into the very real screaming world which Dili Diey, the refugee I met, had fled from. That katabasis was the hell of civil war in Southern Sudan, which was at its most hellish in the early 1990s, and it was to those years that I returned for the history and eye-witness accounts I drew on in creating a full length contemporary opera, *Red Angel.*

The beginning of the process of adaptation was the construction of a devised performance based on Dili Diey's life story – one of seven stories in *The Cage*, commissioned by Aimhigher Humber for the 200th anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery in 2005, involving groups of students from schools and colleges. The main purpose of the project was to engage the students in the exploration of a contemporary issue they had little experience of (the parallel lives of young people close to their age living in the UK who have been child slaves) while gaining experience in combining live and recorded media in performance. There was a strongly documentary feel to each story, reflecting our aim of involving the participants in close encounters with each ex child slave's life:

Excerpt from *The Cage* performance script: *Dili's Story* (devised with BTEC students from North Lindsey College, Scunthorpe)

At the beginning, the whole group of performers is trapped in a steel cage:

Figure 13: 'Trapped'
Photo ©Dave Cowan

FILM

We see Dili on screen, initially in still photos showing the bullet holes in his shoulder. In front of the screen, some of the actors take on the role of children and play.

Figure 14: 'Dili Diey shows his bullet wounds.'
Still from film: ©Mandeep Samra

AUDIO

As the audio below is broadcast, the actors play a game covering and uncovering eyes, like Blind Man's Bluff.

Dili: From when I can remember Sudan, for those who don't know, is a war torn country and it's on the eastern part of Africa. I was born in a small town called Juba. Now in Juba, ever since I can remember we used to have raids… we've always been attacked by the Government, been shot, women have been raped, girls have been raped, children killed, doesn't really matter.

Adam: And you saw this from an early age.

Dili: Yes, it's something I've seen with my own eyes.

(Strickson, 2007, p.4).

This treatment of Dili's story was a first attempt at contextualisation. Still working directly from a transcription of Dili Diey's interview, I then composed a series of short poems, self-reflective fragments which were a diary of the distance between us that begin with imagining Dili's voice in the present:

Inertia

Every hour of every day you say:

'They will come for me. They know who I am

and they will come for me. I will be one more

lost thing, and only the eye of the wind will see.'

It's been one of those days –

I’m having them at the moment –

suddenly I freeze for no reason at all;

my hands stiffen like tentative claws.

I can’t do anything, I can’t…

and then I think of you, and me,

of how I’ve lost hardly anything

while you’ve lost most things

that can be named

and I still can’t do anything.

Last night we had structural damage:

a 60mph wind blew render off the wall.

Precise language, like ‘collateral damage’:

sweep up your friends and bury them

if there’s time, and motivation.

(Strickson, 2008 1).

I chose five of these short poems to be alternated with music, a recognition that this verbal intensity needed space around it, that serious words need to be placed sparely on ‘white walls’ to be seen clearly. The gentle, quietly virtuosic percussion-piece for marimba, xylophone, cymbals and steel cage provided by composer Emma Nenadic for a performance at Huddersfield Town Hall in January 2008 fulfilled this function. The next writing was a poetic attempt to construct a narrative where Dili’s experience of war and the murder of his mother were transferred to West Yorkshire’s Colne Valley, where I live:

My mum heard the mortars, told me to hide.

No time, so I jumped in the wheelie bin,

shut the lid, stayed until the noise died down.

She was lying in our front room, naked
with blood running down her legs, one shoe on.
That is a sight I will never forget.
I'd never seen my mum naked – you don't.
And her bra was lying on TV Quick.

(Strickson, 2008 2).

This is indigenisation, taking material from another culture and resituating it within your own. But when I looked at this writing, it seemed a cheapening of the authenticity of Dili's story. With each step came the paradoxical conclusion that I needed to get further away from the original story in order to get closer to its truth, to find appropriate points of resistance for it to work against.

The next stage was a return to clarification, engaging in a narrative poem-prose dialogue with Dili's story, interspersing a chronological telling of events with the reflections of the 'bone-digger', a persona I took on referring to the archaeologist's distance from the lives of those whose life stories he is uncovering, and attempting to decipher:

These eyes

This interviewer's become a bone digger,
He rakes over your story for months after,
hopes to unlock himself with your journey.
He wants to find a way in, to feel desert
run between his fingers, to lick ugali
pounded from the fat grains of maize.
He wants to stand in the circle
of your home and greet your mother,
touch where you found rest at night.

(Strickson, 2008 3).

Two voices, the questioner and the questioned, owed something to the dialogues of metaphysical poetry between George Herbert and his God. This was the first intimation of a move towards fictional drama, the creation of a character who was both myself and not myself, adopting a more playful attitude to the material. To use the language of relational aesthetics, I was searching for a democratic form, one which would permit me to enter into constructive dialogue with Dili and his journey rather than being submerged in emotion. But in performance, this formal condensation of his experience became an emotionally raw, intense ten minutes. The almost embarrassing vulnerability I felt convinced me to finish with Dili's story as story, and with myself as the dialogic performer. The journey with the material was now going to take me to a very different exploration: writing the libretto of an opera set in the Southern Sudanese Civil War of the early 1990s.

When dealing with a story of shocking suffering like the Sudanese war, opera offers a medium of both distance and closeness. As Linda Hutcheon points out, the 'unrealistic conventions of music distance us (…) but music also counters this by provoking identification and a strong affective response' (Hutcheon, 2006, p.34). Clearly, in finding a genre and a form to hold the material, it was essential to think about how to involve the audience with material they were superficially familiar with from TV news broadcasts. To depict this hell of war, death, rape and passion on stage in a naturalistic manner might titillate, alienate or cause the audience to walk out. Opera, together with dance, is the dramatic genre that allows us to depict extremes of behaviour with the 'passive savagery' (Fish, 2009, p.5) resulting from the technical demands of singing and playing a multi-layered score. The performance of much opera demands a certain stillness and an economy of gesture; just as in the Nō, hysteria is shown through elegant technique. This is, of course, an aesthetic choice and, following Barthes' precept, I needed to 'empty out the subject' by engaging with the problems of language (the language of opera), in order to fill it up again.

I searched for an adaptive source which would, like Sarah Kane's plays, 'face something actual and true and ugly and painful' (Burden, quoted in Carlson, 2004, p.113) but with the contemplative mindfulness of a 'slow food' meal. I wanted closeness and distance, empathy and 'coolness', and the

surface to be as telling as the depth. This drew me to the split attentiveness found in Japanese traditional theatre forms where action, music and text become Barthes' separated 'texts', eschewing the 'sticky organicism' (Barthes, 1977, p.175) of naturalistic Western theatre for codes of expression that are detached from each other. 'What is expelled from the stage is hysteria, and what is put in its place is the action necessary for the production of the spectacle' (Barthes, 1977, pp.173–174). Opera, like Japanese traditional theatre forms, can allow simultaneous 'texts' to exist. This possibility for different 'texts' co-existing in the same time is what Barthes finds attractive about the Bunraku, 'a total spectacle, but divided' (1977, p.177). This is exactly what Brecht found of critical importance in oriental theatre and which crucially informed his idea of epic theatre, 'only conceivable as music-theatre' (Schumacher, quoted in Calico, 2008, pp.40–41), or as the 'opera-ticization' of the theatre, as Calico describes it, set forth in Brecht's 'Notes on the Opera *Mahagonny*'. What Brecht and Weill proposed was that the music should provide commentary and its own perspective on the text, just as the sung narration of the musicians does for the words and dance of the Nō *shite*. In other words, text and music should become separate matters for reading, together defining the gestus, as in the Panderer's Song in Brecht's and Eisler's *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*, where sentimental lines about love are juxtaposed with 'vulgar honky-tonk' (Calico, 2008, p.64) and crude lines about a cash transaction for sex by musical references to *Tristan und Isolde's* love-death motif. Brecht's engagement with opera was, to a large extent, a reactive dialogue with the ideas of Wagner, so it is no accident that some of his early work draws on the possibility of the complementary, and not mutually illustrative, musical and dramatic narratives of the Nō. One of Brecht's Lehrstücke (learning plays), *He Who Said Yes*, was based on the fifteenth-century Nō play *Taniko,* in a translation by Elizabeth Hauptmann from the English adaptation by Arthur Waley, and its companion piece *The Decision*, composed by Hans Eisler, also drew on Nō structure. *The Decision* is firmly set in the China of the late 1920s where the composer's brother had been working. This idea of setting action in the present day to address contemporary social and political issues was anathema to Wagner who used mythic narrative to allow the

audience to access the dionysiac through an intensification of 'feeling', aiming for an 'entirely toilless, emotional understanding' so that they are able to enjoy the work 'without the slightest effort of an art-intelligence' (Wagner in 'Opera and Drama', quoted in Symons, 1968, p.309). Wagner believed this direct appeal to the senses could only be found in a new creation of myth, denying the possibility of action set in the present, where the fundamental relations between earth, human beings and elemental forces can no longer be seen clearly, or the past, where they are only comprehensible through a detailed contextualisation. As a contemporary librettist with an acknowledged radical political intent, I am part of a continuous line of composers, writers and directors who have reacted against Wagner's 'timeless' theatricality. The strategies of Brecht and Barthes have provided me with a convincing reason to look towards Japanese theatre and film for principal adaptive sources when approaching the depiction of extremes of contemporary suffering.

As in the linked 'double' meaning of Brecht's 'gestus', the experiences I documented and the accounts I read about the Sudanese civil war were often unbearably painful while intermittently interwoven with small stories, images and sounds of great beauty. And it was while reflecting on this terrible beauty and the possible application of traditional Japanese theatre aesthetics that, by chance or happenstance, I came across a short description of Masumura’s *Red Angel* in *The Radio Times,* where the film was described as both shocking and beautiful with an accompanying picture of a nurse (with a beautiful, tranquil face) carrying a gun, surrounded by the smoky devastation of war:

**Figure 15: 'Sakura Nishi in the concluding scene of *Red Angel.*'
©2006 Yume Pictures Ltd.**

The words 'shocking and beautiful' resonated. Reading about Masumura, I discovered that underworlds of crime, passion, perversity, war and madness are the stuff of his films just as much as they are the stuff of tragic opera. So I bought the DVD of *Red Angel* and excitedly read the text on the case:

> Set against the Sino-Japanese war in 1939, a young angelic military nurse is raped by her patients and sent to the front line for daring to register a complaint. Posted to a rag-tag demoralised unit, she falls in love with a morphine-addicted surgeon. Together the pair seek solace in each other, as all around, disease, brutality and carnage threaten to sweep their humanity away.

After one viewing, I knew I had found my principal adaptive source. This was the plot of a tragic opera with Nurse Sakura Nishi and Doctor Okabe, two 'outliers' – the term meaning 'something that is situated away from or classed differently from a main or related body' and popularised by Malcolm Gladwell (Gladwell, 2008, p.3), at its heart. Their status resonated, for me, with the persecution of Grimes as an outsider, of someone who is 'different'.

Figure 16: 'Sakura Nishi and Doctor Okabe.'
©2006 Yume Pictures Ltd.

Red Angel is an anti-war film set in 1939, in the futile humiliation of the Sino-Japanese War and it is, some critics believe, Masumura’s exploration and expiation of his own experience of the War in the Pacific from 1944 to 1947. It is set in a war of unimaginable horror with an erotic and disturbing love story at its heart. The swift narrative is shown in a series of beautiful and terrible tableaux. Barthes, referring to the eighteenth-century philosopher Diderot, for whom the perfect play was a succession of tableaux, commented on the relationship between this form and the content of a drama, pointing out its kinship to Brecht's strategies for distanciation:

> the tableau is intellectual, it has something to say (something moral, social) but it also says that it knows how this must be done (…) [it is] impressive and reflexive, moving and conscious of the channels of emotion. The epic scene in Brecht, the shot in Eisenstein are so many tableaux; they are scenes which are *laid out* (in the sense in which one says *the table is laid*), which answer perfectly to that dramatic unity theorized by Diderot.

(Barthes, 1977, pp.70–71).

In the use of a series of defining tableaux, in the sense of a containing stylistic formality derived from Japanese theatre, in presenting the extremes of a real-life tragedy as ‘a matter for reading’ and in placing two flawed heroes at its centre, the opera libretto for *Red Angel* remains close to Masumura’s film. In my adaptation, the angelic Nurse Nishi becomes Sophie, an Acholi speaking nurse from Southern Sudan who lost her family at an early age and returns home to help her people at a field hospital near the town of Juba, and Doctor Okabe, the surgeon she falls in love with, becomes Ben, a pethidine-addicted doctor from Lincolnshire who has lost his wife and thrown himself into the apparent altruism of working for Médicins Sans Frontières. Though not based on any particular people, in my creation of Sophie and Ben I drew extensively on contemporary blogs of nurses and doctors working in Southern Sudan and the film, *Life in a Field Hospital* (1996), made by the International Red Cross.

Masumura described his goal as being 'to create an exaggerated depiction featuring only the ideas and passions of living human beings’ (Rosenbaum, 1998, p.5). In his journey towards this ‘exaggerated depiction’, he rejected an unimaginative social realism in favour of a stylized cinema with edgy characters in extreme situations. Like other Japanese directors of his era, he searched for a style beyond naturalism where ‘eroticism becomes an expression of political freedom’ (Rosenbaum, 1998, p.5). Rosenbaum writes that, for Masumura, social realism was as deadly as the colour green for Oshima, who excluded this colour from his *Cruel Story of Youth* (1960) since green signified the oppressiveness of the typical Japanese home and garden. It was Oshima who praised Masumura for rescuing Japanese cinema from its ‘foggy beauty and its stupid gardens’. But Oshima, Masumura and other innovative post war directors were nevertheless, according to Keiko McDonald in her book *Japanese Classical Theatre in Films*, looking for ‘an intricate synergy of theatrical formalism and filmic realism’ (McDonald, 1976, p.85). Later on in his career Masumura directed *Sonezaki Shinju (The Love Suicides at Sonezaki)* (1976), closely based on the Bunraku puppet play by Chikamatsu.

The post-war period saw a resurgence of formal interest in the traditional theatre when many Japanese film directors looked away from the West to

find living models of stylistic excellence able to contain the violent and erotic narratives they wished to explore. It is my perception, based on a knowledge of the Nō and Bunraku and a close examination of the film *Red Angel*, that Masumura drew on an aesthetics of formal composition derived from Japanese traditional theatre and other traditional arts in his search for something more true than social realism. From the Nō, Kabuki and Bunraku theatres, he may have learnt his precise attentiveness to the movements of the protagonist's face and body, his use of stillness and tableaux, his sudden changes of pace and formal possibilities for depicting the cruelly beautiful transience of human life. From the theatre, like Eisenstein and Kurosawa, he derived filmic and narrative techniques, and how to compact and extend time.

However much Masumura and Oshima might have wanted to get away from 'foggy beauty', in *Red Angel* there is a sense that the all-consuming war in the China of 1939 is the true Nō demon, the cannibalistic ghost, and the ungraspable antagonist at the heart of the narrative. At the beginning of the film, we are shown documentary photographs of corpses in the mud, piles of skulls and grave posts. The Witch of War, just like the witch in the Nō play *Kurozuka (Black Mound)*, feeds on human flesh while gunfire is accompanied by quiet cymbals and sustained strings. Around, beneath and behind the rotting flesh, mud, a ruined landscape, a pile of dead soldiers' tags and even a suggestion of fog show the impermanence of life or *mujo*, the mutability of all earthly things, which is at the heart of the Buddhist influenced Nō. In this monochromatic film, as in the Nō, deathly objects are bleached out, in grey and white. We are formally in a world beyond, a phenomenal world beyond the touchable everyday which hardly any of the audience will have experienced – either in 1966 or 2014 – a super-charged world of war where conventional morality and sexual mores are challenged and disrupted. Just as in the Nō, for the 95 minutes of the film the screen 'extends its vision into the world beyond; the empty space becomes a supra-real arena where the dead, the deranged, demons, gods and men come to commune, or else to combat, or at least make cathartic contact' (Horie-Webber, 1994, p.1).

The film is perhaps most notorious for the Sheshien field-hospital scene which has been praised for the apparent, and shocking, realism of the vivid cries and noises of amputation in a bloodbath of dying soldiers. But Masumura has carefully composed a series of repeating images, beginning with the considered entrance of a lorry full of nurses under a wooden entrance arch and their bumpy journey to the hospital buildings, analogous to the framed entry of the *shite*, or leading actor of a Nō play, followed by an infinitely slow walk along the *hashi-gakari* to the main stage. In the chaos of the hospital, we watch a hand emerge from the writhing horizontal flotsam of the dead and the nearly dead; it moves slowly, describing an agonized circle, like a slow-motion frame in the centre of frenzied activity, or perhaps like the quivering *mie* or ‘freeze’ used to accent an important moment in Kabuki, which – via Eisenstein – became the freeze frame of film. The repetitive cries of the injured mirror the abdominal, rhythmic grunts of the Nō actor used to intensify moments of great suffering. In the climax of the scene, Doctor Okabe, the surgeon, plunges his knife into a patient leading to a sustained cry accompanied by Sei Ikeno's film score of repeated low brass notes after minutes without music. But the most memorable sound in the scene, which is unaccompanied, is the stretched rasp of a saw cutting through bone. Just as in the Nō, there is also a ‘ritual’ sweeping of the floor after 3 days and 200 operations; we see only the careful motion of the broom as it gathers up the detritus of bandages and body fluids. There are no close-ups on faces for most of the scene and both surgeon and nurses are masked so the only expressions allowed to affect us are through their eyes. As in the use of the Nō mask, the angle of the head conveys the mood and the action rather than facial expression. This is surely realism informed by theatrical formalism, with a spare voice-over from Nurse Nishi adding another ‘text’ to the viewer’s perception, her profound compassion hopelessly at odds with the carnage which reaches every corner of the screen. When I came to adapt this scene, I kept both the horror and the formality, using freezes, slow motion and repetitive actions accompanied by rhythmic, alliterative language in a ‘Blood kenning’ derived from the Anglo-Saxon form. Like Masumura’s depiction of Sheshien field- hospital, the whole sung scene could be described as a collective aria of pain:

4. BLOOD AND THE DOCTOR.

Nurse (Sophie): I think I'm tough, I think I've done well
but two months later, they fly me to hell:
a mobile hospital on the frontline,
a sighing tent with a Red Cross sign.

Each night I cry. Each night I die.
Each night I cry. Each night I die.

Aywakga pile gotieno – too atẃagaa pile gotieno
(Acholi for 'Each night I cry. Each night I die')

Chaos. Vehicle engines. Projections to suggest large numbers of casualties. A sudden freeze of everything except the doctor and Sophie, who thread their way through the scene.

Doctor (Ben): Mid-tarsal amputation.

Sophie: We…we can't do that here.

Doctor: There are no evacuations.

Sophie: But we don't have –

Doctor: Dead.

Embedded shrapnel –
below knee amputation.

Soldier 1: Kill Me! Kill me!

'The hanging of the meat' – during each of three amputations a limb (wrapped white cotton, trailing red ribbons) is hung from the frame of the set, ceremonially. This contrasts with harsh music which could use harmonics – undertones and overtones.

The buzz of a small electric saw. A low ground beat; the action is in slow motion. It is important that the action is tense, and not farcical.

A soldier screams in pain. A pause, then he screams again. Each scream is much longer than we would expect. Over, and between the screams, words interweave and overlap from the following text, sung by the Chorus:

Blood kenning

Limb-pour

war-daub

floor-spatter

Heat-spurt

wound-weep

sheet-splash

Flesh-oozer

breath-choker

death-warner

Knife-dripper

strife-bringer

life-ender

Another soldier screams in pain. A pause, then he screams again. Each scream is much longer than we would expect.

Doctor: Morphine, give him some morphine.

Doctor & chorus:	Hold him down. Hold him down. Hold him down. Hold him down.

A third soldier screams in pain. A pause, then he screams again. The 'Blood kenning' words are still part of the texture.

Doctor:	We'll cut below the knee.
Chorus:	Hold him down. Hold him down. Hold him down. Hold him down.
Sophie:	Will he make it?
Doctor:	Maybe the plane will get here. Maybe. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the day after.

<u>Duet</u>

Sophie:	Twenty hours. Twenty hours without stop. We feel forgotten.
Doctor:	Twenty hours. Twenty hours without stop. We feel lost.
Sophie:	Each night I cry. Each night I die. Aywakga pile gotieno – too atẃagaa pile gotieno

(*Red Angel*, 2008, pp.14–17).

In the libretto for *Red Angel*, echoes of Troy, the Battle of Maldon, Vietnam, or even *Romeo and Juliet*, are inescapable. They are part of an ever accumulating family of war-love stories. The underlying 'myth' is heroic love in the face of war, but the nature of this 'heroism' is – so we might think – sullied. But is it? Heroes are usually heroes by accident, and circumstance, rather than plan. Part of Homer's genius is that he shows Odysseus as a flawed man. Sophie (and to a lesser extent Ben) are my flawed heroes, emotionally and ethically confused:

> Time and again, and across centuries if not millennia, the most compelling individual creations are the ethically confusing ones (…).
>
> (Dallimore, 2004, p. xxix).

Britten's gradual 'de-orientalisation' of *Curlew River,* confirmed my permission to shift the narrative of the film *Red Angel* to another country and another time. In the process of adaptation, the dialogue with the principal source becomes a way of shaping disparate ideas through an engagement with form, the point or 'matter of resistance', to borrow a concept from Charles Olson's poetics. The ground against which Olson, writing in the late 1940s, set his own poetry of resistance was those same death camps that forced Adorno to re-define his philosophy. Man had been 'reduced to so much fat for soap, superphosphate for soil, fillings & shoes for sale' (Olson, 1966, p.13) and this process had robbed language of a meaningful response. This demanded a new projective poetics, 'getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul (…) for man is himself an object (…) and he must give his work (…) a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature' (Olson, pp.24–25). So a work which seeks to re-enact the horrors of civil war needs to confront a source which has little to do with individual empathy or ego response (the process of my poetic 'meditations' on Dili's experience); it needs a film like *Red Angel*, an unsentimental look at historical reality coupled with a stubborn belief that the monstrous conformity

engendered by mass media, war and politics can be resisted by two apparently ‘crazy outliers’ who maintain their integrity.

Curlew River became the other principal influence on my adaptation of *Red Angel*, not in terms of content but in its formal aesthetics, the nature of its music and the spare ‘Japanese-ness’ of Plomer’s libretto. Unlike *Green Angel*, this influence was less to do with the structural principles of the Nō and more to do with an attitude to the depiction of extreme emotion, and the musical and poetic sparseness required to achieve this. While looking towards Plomer’s 'style-less' clarity, I also took much from Britten in my thinking about music and my search for a composer. As a librettist, I wanted the words to be heard clearly, with a spare musical accompaniment during solo sections. And as in *Curlew River*, I wanted a close spatial relationship between singers and musicians, with an almost improvisatory give and take between solo instruments and voice, like the dialogues between the flute and the Madwoman.

There are also specific motifs taken from Britten’s work which are given a contemporary twist. The three trebles of *Saint Nicholas* (1948) and three Israelites of *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966) become three child soldiers: Kur, Dur and Dut, who – echoing Britten’s use of a Latin hymn, *Te lucis ante terminum*, at the beginning and conclusion of *Curlew River* – sing John Bunyan’s *He who would valiant be*:

> I was looking for something that would bring the three boys of the early scenes together with the three ‘crucified’ boys of the last scene. Sophie has been brought up an Anglican too so I thought of this very famous hymn because of the ironic echo of 'follow the Master' in the remembered context of Colonel James' words 'I am a master fish spearer' and, mainly, because it is a wedding hymn.
>
> It joins Sophie’s Anglicanism with that of the boys at the beginning.
>
> (Strickson, 2009 1, pp.8–9).

For an adaptation to be successful, it must of course appeal to both ‘knowing’ and ‘unknowing’ audiences but this kind of reference to other works, which will only be picked up by some, 'appeals to the "intellectual and aesthetic pleasure" of understanding the interplay between works, of opening up a text’s possible meanings to intertextual echoing' (DuQuesnay, quoted in Hutcheon, p.117). While members of a conventional opera audience will not know Masumura’s *Red Angel*, many will be familiar with Britten’s use of the treble voice.

I eventually contracted Ayanna Witter-Johnson, a young composer who listed Britten among her many influences on MySpace, to write the music for the opera. Ayanna writes song lyrics and accompanies herself on the cello so she is acutely aware of the balance between voice and instrument. She is capable of playing and writing work of rhythmical complexity, sometimes using the cello as a percussion instrument during her own performances and contrasting rhythmic drive with the lyricism of her text. As she progressed with the composition, she became more involved with the subject matter, developing her own ideas about the relative importance of the different ingredients, and was able to add her own emphases, like the repeated use of the Dinka words as a layer underneath other sung sections as a continuous comment on the losses of war. This is part of the necessary progression in collaboration suggested by her mentor, the composer Errollyn Wallen:

> Get people to own the piece, composer and librettist equally, and to possess ‘the emotional core’ for themselves.
>
> (Wallen, 2009, 20 March).

Partly as a result of our discussions on the nature of the opera, Witter-Johnson made practical use of Brecht’s dictum that in ‘epic opera’, as opposed to dramatic opera, music must ‘take the text for granted and take up a position'. She was immediately interested in my use of ‘separated texts’, and of extending the notion of the libretto to include language as

semantic meaning and phonetic meaning, sometimes working in parallel, and sometimes against each other:

> In *Descent of Man*, Darwin wrote: 'Our cries of pain, fear, surprise, anger, together with the appropriate actions, are more expressive than any words.' This seems to be part of the ground of the piece and I can't 'write' all the sighs, tears, shouts, grunts, sobs, cackles, scrapes etc. but they seem to be very much part of the texture of the piece for me. I have put suggestions and indications but I see some of the SOUNDS from the written words being sung and/or played too.
>
> (Strickson, 2009 1, p.5).

The mother tongues of the Southern Sudanese characters became an essential part of getting closer to this imagined world:

> Which African languages? Sophie is clearly Sudanese Acholi, like Dili, but the SPLA was predominantly Dinka, and the Nuer people are very much part of Southern Sudan too. I've made the rebel soldier Isaac a Nuer, and I think the male 'chorus' voice should be Dinka, since this tribe made up most of the SPLA *(The Sudanese People's Liberation Army)*, when they need to sing in a language other than English. Why do we need this? I think it's more to do with layers of sound, and a topographic feel, rather than any documentary accuracy. It's also the idea of close but clashing meanings meeting in a conflict that is beyond any traditional tribal conflict or language groupings, where interests of race and natural resources bring people together, in a context beyond their specific tribal identity (though of course the Nuer Dinka rivalries exploded in the inter-tribal Bor massacre). Sounds emerge from landscapes so there must be something of the wetlands and bush in the phonetics of all these languages.
>
> (Strickson, 2009 1, p.1).

The other phonetic texture which became of importance in confronting the source material was Anglo-Saxon and Middle English, partly because of the possibilities offered by the muscularity of the language, often verging on the crude as in the ‘gob’ and ‘bum’ of the hospital chorus. This odd, almost archaic chant is loosely based on the great medieval poem of death found by Britten and used as the last piece in *Songs Sacred and Profane* (1975). It could be a riddle, if we didn’t know the context and answer: ‘a day in a field-hospital’.

Chorus:

Life to death   Death to life
Belly to knife   Knife to belly
Gob to spoon   Spoon to gob
Noon to night   Night to noon
Needle to bum   Bum to needle

Sun to moon   Moon to sun
and yet our work is never done.

Our hands shake, our eyes shut,
our feet stiffen, our tongues dry.

(*Red Angel*, 2008, pp.5–6).

The opera libretto of *Red Angel* focuses on the journey of two ‘heroes’, one self-destructive (Doctor Ben: grief, drug addiction) who is offered some sort of redemption by the other (Nurse Sophie: care, healing sex) but his death ends this possibility. They are subjected to a preventable force (perpetual civil war) rather than the gods, but this force is much larger than any individual’s resistive acts. The story ends in a *Liebestod*, a word referring to the theme of erotic death like the double suicide of the lovers in Chikamatsu’s Bunraku play, *Love Suicides*, or *Tristan und Isolde*. It can also

be one-sided as in Massenet's *Werther* and Sophie's collapse over the body of the Doctor at the end of *Red Angel.*

The use of this *Liebestod* is just one example of my libretto apparently following operatic conventions. What I am actually doing is nodding towards the form of grand opera through my use of heightened 'arias' for the heroine and love duets between hero and heroine while subverting its usual mythic or distant historical content by bringing in a messy contemporary war, some results of which can be seen on the streets of Huddersfield and Leeds today. Harrison Birtwistle usefully defines recitative as defining 'the movement of the narrative' and an aria as 'the music holding the stage singing about that moment' (Birtwistle and Harsent, 2013,1 August.). The choices of where to place arias, duets and recitative within the libretto were influenced mostly by the demands of the content. For Nurse Sophie, arias were used mostly for moments of quiet reflection and decision making, when she needed to 'talk to herself', rather like the traditional Shakespearean soliloquy. The use of the solo voice alone on the stage also heightens her loneliness and isolation in the field hospital. I also placed arias where I wished to make the connection between what was happening to nature in the war and the turmoil of her love for Doctor Ben, enlarging the context beyond the personal:

Sophie: Hey khwaja, my white man,
you sleep among crocodiles
and the river churns with blades.
The banks are collapsing
and the antelopes drown.

My love is a boat stranded in the war-storm;
rosy flamingos knock on the shell with their beaks.

(*Red Angel*, 2008, p.35).

In a similar way, when Peter Grimes, waiting for his apprentice, sings 'Now the great Bear and Pleiades', he gives his own condition a universal 'size' by placing it the context of the movements of the heavens above him:

Peter: Now the great Bear and Pleiades
where earth moves
Are drawing up the clouds
Of human grief
Breathing solemnity in the deep night.

(Slater, 1989, p.102).

Solo arias for both Ben and Sophie seemed to emerge with some fluency during the writing process, rather than duets, perhaps because of the strangely distant ‘love’ relationship they are embroiled in, where both are reluctant to offer commitment. The decision about where to include duets I found more problematic; they seemed most appropriate when a decision about either of their futures needed to be resolved through mutual dialogue, like the point where they are at the tent hospital. This duet is sung when Ben is posted to the frontline cholera outbreak close to the rebel army and does not wish Sophie to come with him because of the danger:

Duet

Ben and Sophie’s words overlap and interweave.

Sophie: Yes, I may die. I may die anyway.
I will come with you.

Ben: I am not worth this Sophie. I am not.

Sophie: I am afraid of one thing most of all.

Ben: I am afraid of everything, and nothing.

Sophie:	I am afraid of one thing most of all.
Ben:	I am afraid of everything, and nothing.
Sophie:	I am afraid I will die in a different place to you.
Ben:	I am not worth this. I am so different to you.
Sophie:	We are all different.
Ben:	I am so different to you.
Sophie:	What do you mean? What do you mean?
Ben:	Let's see shall we. Where shall I start? I'm English. I am white. I am a doctor. I am an addict. I don't believe in Jesus. I am not brave. Sacrifice is my escape route.
Sophie:	You are my –
Ben:	Sacrifice is my escape route but I cannot escape from myself.

Duet ends

(*Red Angel*, 2008, pp.41–42).

Related content, where a duet expresses distance between two people and the difficulty of mutual understanding, with one partner wishing to protect the other from opprobrium, is found in the duet between Ellen Orford, the

schoolteacher, and Peter in the Prologue of *Peter Grimes*. Ellen comforts Peter after Swallow, the lawyer, has told him not to hire another apprentice unless he can find a woman to look after the boy, but Peter says he does not want her to share 'the name/Of outlaw too' (Slater, 1989, p.92). In a beautiful musical evocation of the distance between them, at first they sing in different keys, but conclude in the same key in unison.

In the opera *Red Angel*, my concern with investigating a relationship to opera form combined with the formal aesthetics of Japanese theatre is both useful and a cunning strategy. Like Oscar Wilde's apparently decadent creed of art for art's sake, it is part of a determination to find a form which can incorporate a great deal of uncomfortable, 'illicit' content of a direct contemporary relevance rarely attempted in the opera house. Brecht would argue that this is a 'culinary' approach, offering the operagoer a pleasurable experience for easy digestion by paying homage to what he or she is already familiar with, tinkering with the content rather than challenging the assumptions of the genre. However, he adopted the same strategy in placing tragic material from a contemporary context within 'the senselessness of the operatic form' that his opera *Mahagonny* paid conscious tribute to (Brecht, 1930, pp.35–36). Paradoxically, playing with the 'senselessness' of the form is a way of putting morals and sentimentality on view rather than being moralising or sentimental. When, in the mainstream media coverage of contemporary war, the unthinkable has been normalised, we must find new and surprising ways of addressing the narrative:

> When I see violence or sex merely 'simulated' on the screen or space, it strikes me as simply wrong – not for any moral reasons, but *because it doesn't work*. With bald simulation, you're being blatantly told the actors are faking, so your responses are blocked (...). These things have to be staged, not necessarily in a highly formalized way, but in some intelligent non-faking way that draws the spectator's attention to the essential narrative of the act.
>
> (Rudkin, 2001, no pagination, original italics).

Similarly, the effect of ‘majestic sadness’ that Racine believed 'constitutes the whole pleasure of tragedy' (Preface to *Bérénice*, 1668, quoted in Leech, 1969, p.5) exemplified in the sudden twists in the libretto from horror to beauty, is both a distancing device and the only possibility of presenting the appalling experiences of civil war on stage. When a playwright can say ‘the narrative form is dying in our hands’ (Barker, 1989, p.13), a playful, subversive attitude to an existing genre offers a new possibility for presenting tragic content. Contemporary tragedy, as Howard Barker writes '[should] offend the sensibilities. It drags the unconscious into the public place… It dares to be beautiful. Who talks of beauty in the theatre anymore? They think it is to do with the costumes' (Barker, 1989, p.13). Just as in *Green Angel*, the 'Japanese' beauty being investigated in the opera *Red Angel* has nothing to do with the external appearance of costume, set or mask, or specific physical techniques or gestures, but with the exploration of an aesthetic strategy appropriate to the depiction of contemporary suffering.

The journey of adaptation, from meeting an illegal Asylum Seeker to the creation of a 'grand tragedy' has been an evolution, in the biological sense, a process of passing by degrees through different stages to a more mature stage. It is this Darwinian meaning of evolution, as well as the more general, that appeals to Linda Hutcheon when she is discussing the process of adaptation:

> I was struck by the rather obvious analogy to adaptation in the film (Spike Jonze’s *Adaptation*) by Darwin’s theory of evolution, where genetic adaptation is presented as the biological process by which something is fitted into a given environment. To think of narrative adaptation in terms of a story’s fit and its process of mutation and adjustment, through adaptation, to a particular cultural environment is something I find suggestive.
>
> (Hutcheon, 2006, p.31).

The process of adaptation of *Red Angel*, which went through an essential journey before I even saw the eponymous film, has been a process of

imaginatively playing with a range of documentary, literary and visual sources, eventually finding a suitable vehicle where incidents and stories springing from different cultural environments are able to meet in an autonomous and coherent tragic form. Perhaps the fittest stories, like the great epics of love and war, are those that survive from generation to generation, always mutating. The opera *Red Angel's* 'palimpsest' (this notion comes from the Scottish poet and scholar Michael Alexander's book on Ezra Pound, *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound* (1998); 'palimpsestuous' works are haunted at all times by their adapted texts, cited by Hutcheon, 2006, p.6) may be said to include many 'surviving texts' including conversations with Dili Diey, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Battle of Maldon*, Isaac Rosenberg's World War I poems, medieval mystery plays, Butoh, Nō, Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double*, Eggers' *What is the What*, *Peter Grimes, Curlew River* and blogs written by medical staff working in Southern Sudan. It conforms to Barthes' definition of 'text': 'a plural stereophony of echoes, citations, references' (Barthes, 1977, pp. 59–60). All are part of the sensuous 'thinking texture' behind this librettist's adaptation, the necessary ground for the favourable conditions which allow a story to migrate to a fresh genre, time and context.

Figure 17: Workshop rehearsal of *Red Angel* scenes for recording, 9 July 2009.
Photo ©Ben Schrecke.

Red Angel: the collaborative model

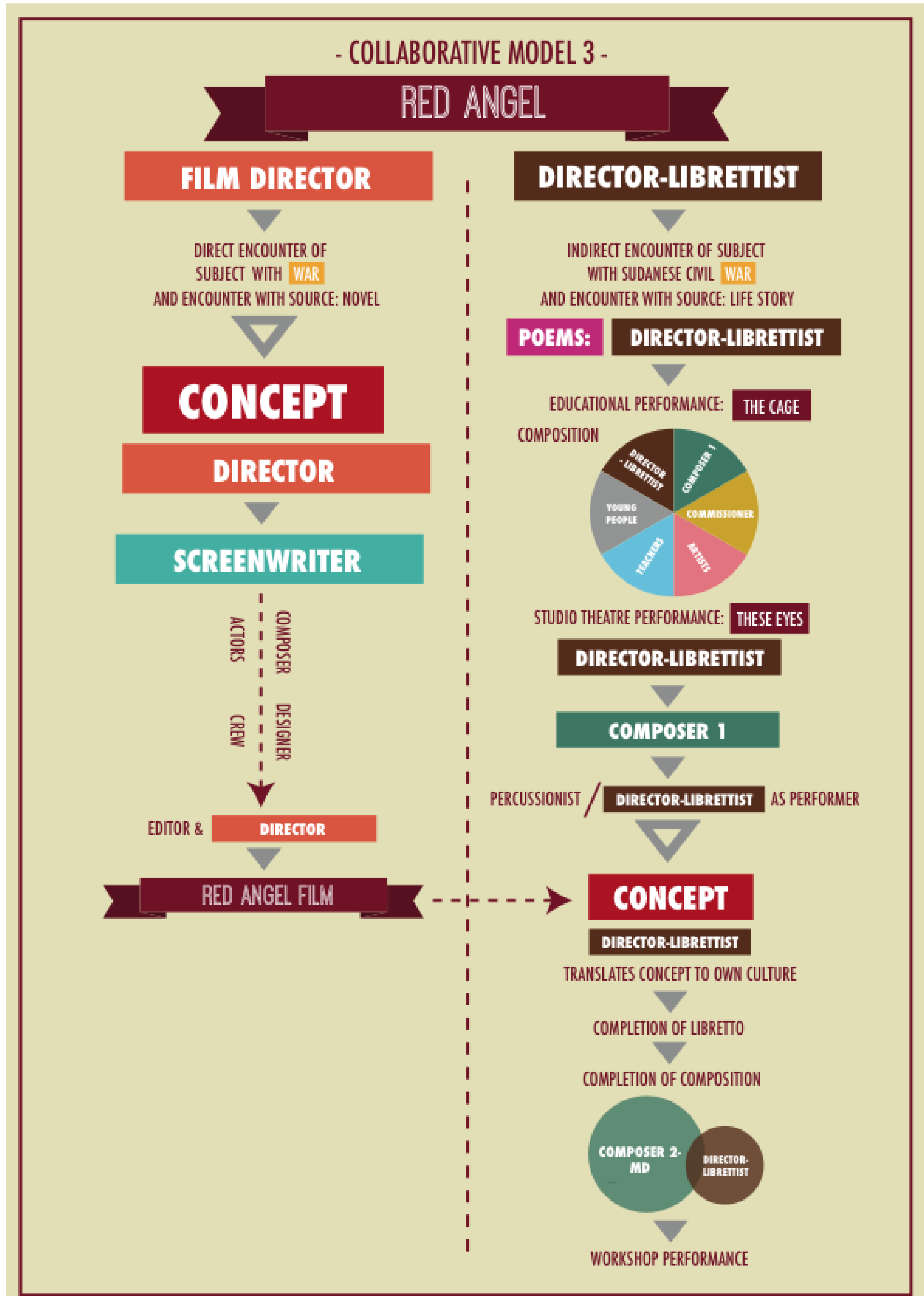
Introduction

Similarly to Britten's work with Plomer on *Curlew River*, my collaboration with composer Ayanna Witter-Johnson was carried out at a distance. Since she lives in London and I live in West Yorkshire, we relied on phone conversations and emails for collaborative dialogue as much as face to face meetings. As in the case of *Green Angel*, only minor changes were made by the composer to the libretto and most of the score was written on receiving the complete libretto without further consultation with the librettist. No particular performers were considered during the composition of the work so a large cast of singers and musicians was brought together to rehearse and record four scenes under the direction of the composer and librettist. A major difference with the other collaborations undertaken during the PhD, and with *Curlew River*, is that the opera developed out of a series of projects in other genres. These included a collaboration on a piece for spoken voice and percussion with composer Emma Nenadic, who was not involved with the opera. The transcultural nature of the collaboration was complex, working with a life story from Sudan (set within three different tribal and linguistic cultures), the influence of the Japan–UK *Curlew River*, a Japanese film source and a British African-Caribbean composer. The opera, like *Green Angel* and *Curlew River*, is multi-lingual, exploring Sudanese languages and French for both semantic and phonetic meaning.

The model

The process of creative writing, combined with informative reading, brings pressure on a true life encounter, to make sense of the subject's life. Through a series of active explorations over a period of two years, progressing from an interview with the subject to reflective poems, through to an educational performance and a short music-theatre piece, the writer's relationship to the material is investigated, and the necessary form of a full

length opera emerges from this journey of engagement with content. The writer, as librettist, then has to find a 'point of resistance' to work with: the main source for the adaptation. The film *Red Angel*, from another culture and another time, provides a narrative and emotional framework to explore the context responsible for the life journey of the original subject. This film is itself a screenwriter's adaptation of a novel based on real experiences of the Sino-Japanese War. Masumura, the director of the film, had also participated in war, and he used the shaping of the material as a film to investigate his own experiences and make sense of them. Taking his narrative structure from the film, the librettist then acquires some very basic knowledge of African languages, as well as history, to bring the emotional sound world of the story to life. Only after this already complex transcultural journey of attempting to make sense of the real experience of war, does the collaboration between librettist and composer begin. To this collaboration, and with the libretto completed, the composer brings her own experience of being a British African-Caribbean performer and composer, working across the fields of jazz and classical music. The to and fro of transcultural hybridity continues in her shaping of the work. Together, as director and conductor, librettist and composer explore part of their composition with performers, before the composer continues her work on the opera.


- COLLABORATIVE MODEL 3 -
RED ANGEL
FILM DIRECTOR
DIRECT ENCOUNTER OF
SUBJECT WITH WAR
AND ENCOUNTER WITH SOURCE: NOVEL
CONCEPT
DIRECTOR
SCREENWRITER
ACTORS
COMPOSER
CREW
DESIGNER
EDITOR &
DIRECTOR
RED ANGEL FILM
DIRECTOR-LIBRETTIST
INDIRECT ENCOUNTER OF SUBJECT
WITH SUDANESE CIVIL WAR
AND ENCOUNTER WITH SOURCE: LIFE STORY
POEMS:
DIRECTOR-LIBRETTIST
EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE:
THE CAGE
COMPOSITION
DIRECTOR - LIBRETTIST
COMPOSER 1
COMMISSIONER
ARTISTS
TEACHERS
YOUNG PEOPLE
STUDIO THEATRE PERFORMANCE:
THESE EYES
DIRECTOR-LIBRETTIST
COMPOSER 1
PERCUSSIONIST /
DIRECTOR-LIBRETTIST
AS PERFORMER
CONCEPT
DIRECTOR-LIBRETTIST
TRANSLATES CONCEPT TO OWN CULTURE
COMPLETION OF LIBRETTO
COMPLETION OF COMPOSITION
COMPOSER 2-
MD
DIRECTOR-
LIBRETTIST
WORKSHOP PERFORMANCE

Chapter 7

I am the ferryman

I am the ferryman: the collaborative model[2]

Introduction

This film-making collaboration, from inception to completion, only involved a small group of professional artists, who had worked together closely before and had an understanding of each other's work. Although the concept and choice of source material was initiated by the writer, the making of the film was a continuous, close collaboration between writer and film-maker, developing the dialogue between word and image together. This kind of relationship between the writer and his principal collaborator, and the consultation throughout the process of composition, is something that might fruitfully be developed with opera composers over a series of projects. The contemporary jazz musicians involved in *I am the ferryman* had undertaken improvised music/word collaborations with the writer before, presenting work as a trio for public performances. The music for the film was developed in conjunction with the writer, and there were no rehearsals only involving the musicians. This 'organic' collaborative process is clearly different to the more formal relationship between librettist and composer, where the nature of operatic production usually demands large teams of artists brought together to perform a completed work.

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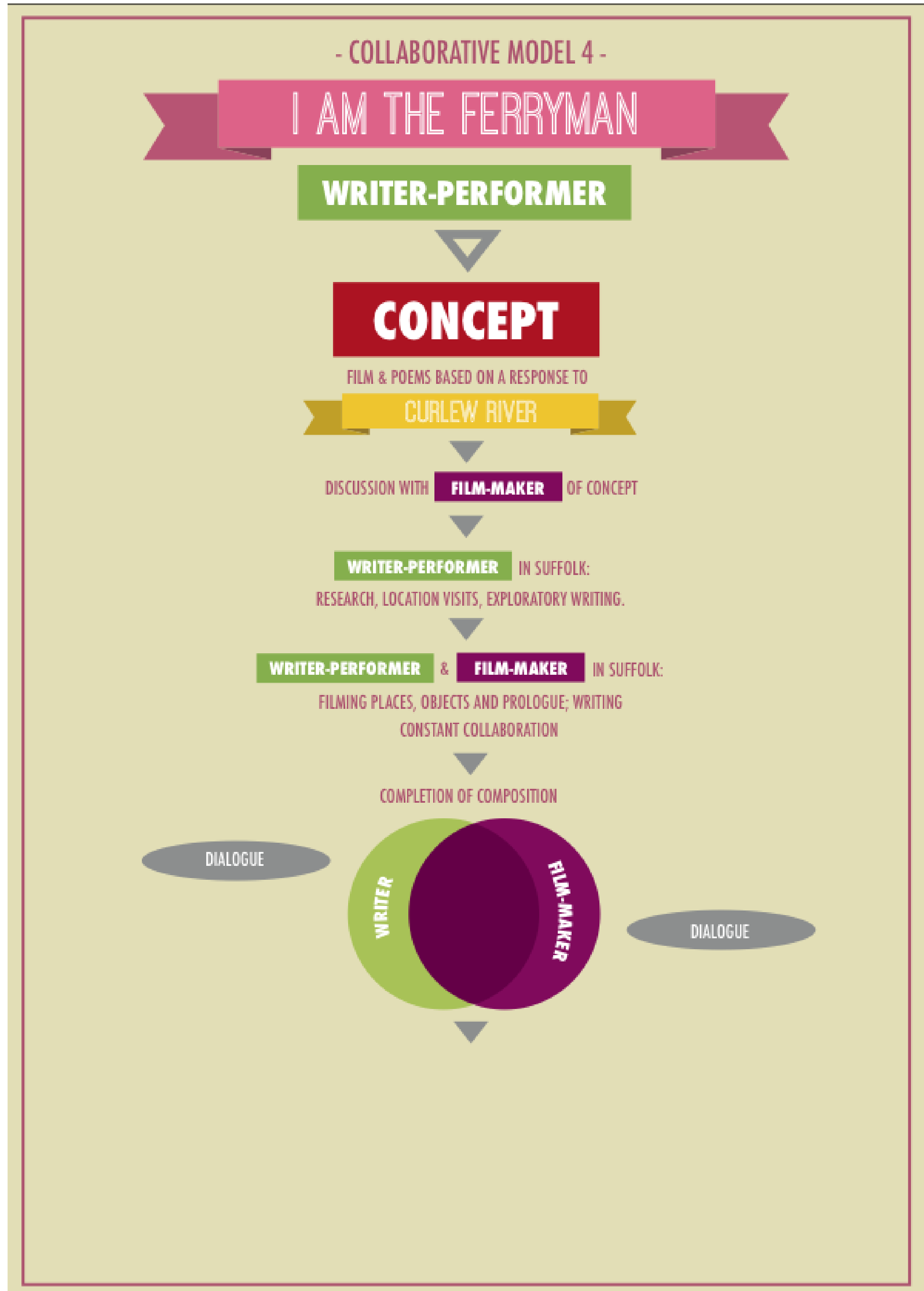
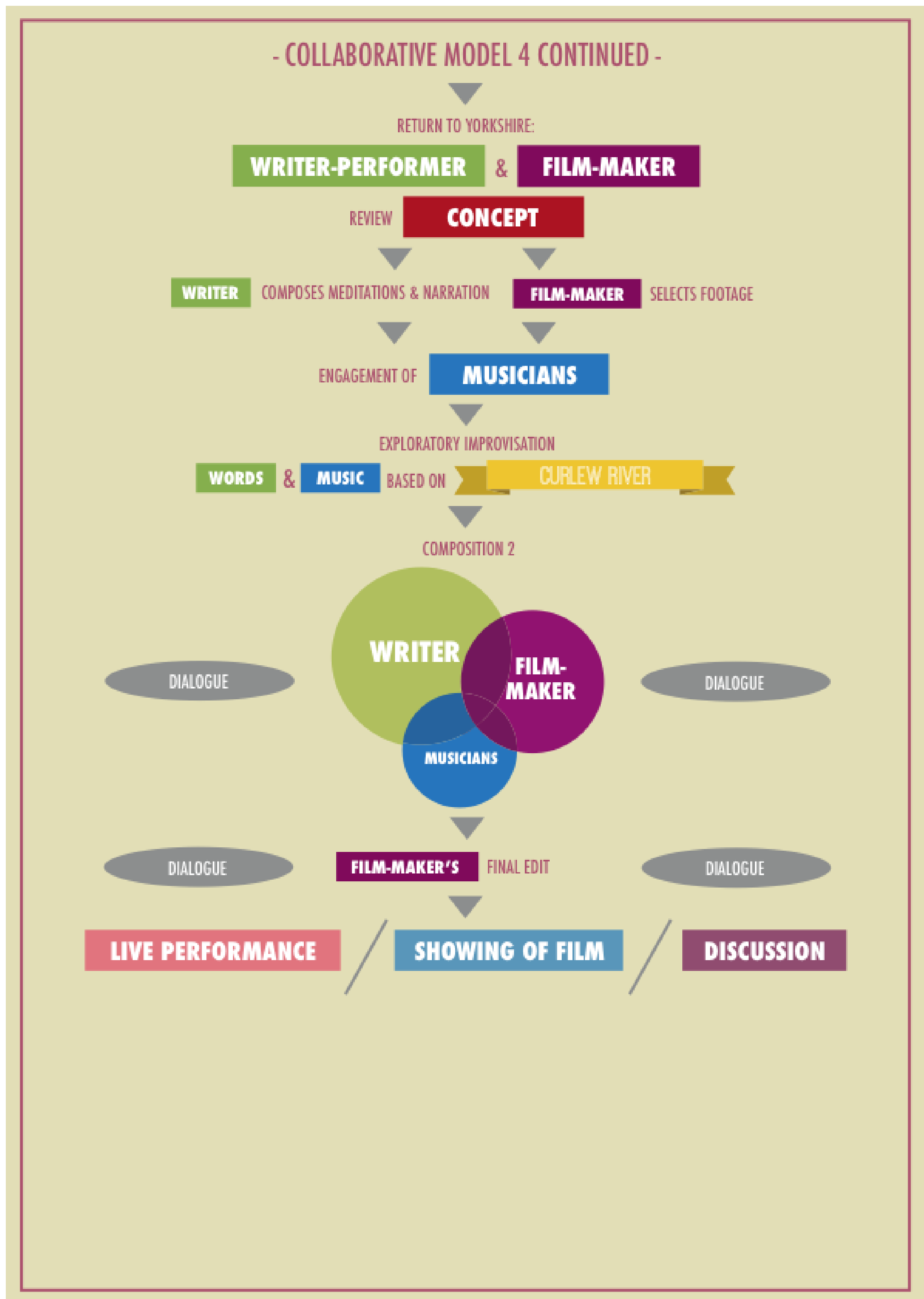
[2] This model has been inserted at the beginning of this chapter, rather than at the conclusion, in order to clarify the nature of the collaboration in advance for the reader, since I adopt a fragmentary, experimental type of critical discourse when considering the poems and the film of *I am the ferryman*.

The model

The writer approaches a film-maker, with whom he has collaborated closely before, with the idea of a personal film about his relationship to music and words through an exploration of *Curlew River* in the landscape where it is set. He provides the film-maker with a recording of the opera, and some background reading, introducing the transcultural ground for the project. He sketches a very loose structure for the film, which will involve telling the story of the opera in the landscape, and poetic reflections. For three days, the writer explores *Curlew River* through original documents, especially libretto drafts and scores, at the Red House in Aldeburgh and tours the Suffolk countryside by foot and by car, finding locations that relate to the content. He writes a précis of the story to be used in the film and some notes towards the composition of a series of meditative poems about the writing of libretti, Britten, Plomer and *Curlew River*. The film-maker arrives and over a period of four days, they film and photograph objects and locations, an introductory section about the writer's relationship with Britten and Plomer's work at Orford Church, and the writer telling the story of the opera in the landscape. They constantly discuss ideas, creating a large 'bank' of images and footage available for the film edit. On their return to Yorkshire, they both, independently, decide that the story telling sequences will not be suitable since they are too 'theatrical' and therefore difficult to integrate within the film aesthetic. The writer composes and records a series of eleven poetic 'meditations', influenced by Japanese poetic form, for which the film-maker creates a montage of still and moving images. The writer approaches a jazz duo, 'Our Liberated Winter' (Simon Prince, flute and Robin Bowles, piano), to play music for each meditation. He provides copies of the score of *Curlew River* for the musicians and the three of them work on words and music together, creating relatively fixed 'improvisations' based on sections of the score. These improvisations become the musical content of each meditation and the introductory music for the film. The writer records the story of the opera in eleven sections, to preface and contextualise each meditation. Writer and musicians record the words and music of each meditation. Then the film-maker composes and edits the complete film, having detailed

discussions with the writer twice during this process. When the film is completed, it is prefaced – where possible – by a live performance of a selection from the music and words to capture the improvisatory feel of this aspect of the collaboration. The film-maker also talks about the film and answers questions, giving the audience an insight into her process.




- COLLABORATIVE MODEL 4 CONTINUED -
RETURN TO YORKSHIRE:
WRITER-PERFORMER
&
FILM-MAKER
REVIEW
CONCEPT
WRITER
COMPOSES MEDITATIONS & NARRATION
FILM-MAKER
SELECTS FOOTAGE
ENGAGEMENT OF
MUSICIANS
EXPLORATORY IMPROVISATION
WORDS
&
MUSIC
BASED ON
CURLEW RIVER
COMPOSITION 2
WRITER
FILM-MAKER
MUSICIANS
DIALOGUE
DIALOGUE
DIALOGUE
FILM-MAKER'S
FINAL EDIT
DIALOGUE
LIVE PERFORMANCE
SHOWING OF FILM
DISCUSSION

Towards a poetics of libretto for shaping the extreme

For the film, *I am the ferryman*, which explores the marriage between music and words in *Curlew River*, I wrote *Meditations*, a series of eleven poems written to be spoken with improvised but carefully prepared musical accompaniment from contemporary jazz duo 'Our Liberated Winter' based on musical phrases from the opera. Most of the work on the poems took place after my return to Yorkshire, with the necessary distance between experience and contemplation, and a quietness away from the busy exploration of the many locations and objects we drew on for the film. The poems were a deliberate shift of my critical thinking into a poetic mode, an attempt to find a different kind of critical discourse to explore the collaboration between Plomer and Britten and the process of constructing my own libretti (form and content) written under the influence of their exemplum. I have taken each poem as a stimulation for a prose discussion on approaches to the form and content of libretti, which may be taken as reflections towards a comparative poetics of the art of writing libretti addressing extreme experience, based on the influence of *Curlew River* on my own work. Like the poems, the prose commentaries are a series of 'meditations', each one suggested by the poem and by the thoughts it engenders, sometimes developing into a dialogue with a particular author: Britten's biographer Paul Kildea, the poets Charles Olson and Don Paterson, and the novelist and literary philosopher Hélène Cixous. The result is a connected 'diary' of thoughts that are an assay towards a poetics of writing libretti that address the extreme.

Meditation 1

Cries of wild birds

We travel through our own mud
to listen to birds.
We cross our own marsh
to get closer.

Because we have learned
not to listen to birds,
we re-find them
with plodding difficulty.

And when they rise up
right in front of us
we flinch at their differentness
though their cries are scored
deep inside us.

Birds in the sky, writers' words –
of this world, not of this world,
paradise, and vicious exile.

The *écriture* of the librettist includes a particular kind of learning to turn 'the windlass at the well of poetry' (Heaney, in Herbert and Hollis, 2000, p.158), with his or her attitude to craft, or 'technique' as Heaney prefers to call it, equally inseparable from the attitude to content. Heaney writes that the poet usually begins by 'dropping the bucket halfway down the shaft and winding up a taking of air (...) miming the real thing' (2000, p.158). Then one day the chain draws tight and you have dipped into deep water and your praties

(potatoes) will be 'fit for digging'. Technique defines not only a way with words but the 'management of metre, rhythm and verbal texture; it involves also [the poet's] definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality' (2000, p.159). Or, in my words, the poet must travel through his own 'mud' and 'marsh', to re-find the sound of birds, to arrive at their clarity. The mud is both the writer's unconscious and the intertextual ground he or she brings to the project, a literal muddiness of thinking on the way to flowing water. Mud is a complex signifier – dirt, fertility, wetness, the unknown layer beneath our feet, the primitive (mud-men), play (mud-pies), a container of minutely swarming life which must be strained or sifted out, a material for marking the holy (Hindu mud-shrines at a village wedding) or art (Richard Long's mud spirals on gallery walls), a drowning/covering, a disguise, a cleanser (mud-bath), the bank and edge of a river, and what is revealed during a drought. 'Mud' is an almost onomatopoeic word, what the poet Don Paterson calls a 'phonestheme', a sound-sense 'coincidence'. For example, he writes, we hear the roundness of 'moon', the hiss of 'sea' and the thinness of 'needle' (Paterson, 2007, p.68). The word 'mud' is introduced by the extended warmth of the 'm', inseparable from the 'primitive', pushed force of the 'u' vowel sound, before the sharp change in the movement of the tongue and throat in the drawing out of the foot from the suck of the mire in the consonant 'd'. The 'marsh', with the wind in the reeds (which bind the mud together) of the 'sh' sound is more stable, more possible to cross than the mud, though we must still step very carefully.

Sounds within words, and the sound of the words themselves, set up a vibration in the body and mind of speaker, singer or listener. These sounds begin from the need to name things, and the roots of language are in naming the things of nature. Words begin in natural sounds, shaped through the experience of living inside the process of nature, but at the same time aware of being cast out, inescapably different, the void between man and bird being where the librettist may discover the sound of the cry, and begin his or her attempt to translate this into word, and hence into a sensory suggestive narrative for the composer. The meeting of word and music in *Curlew River* is a physicalisation of Britten's immersion in the landscape of Suffolk, exemplified by his acute ear for the natural sounds around him developed

during his daily walks; he draws on these sounds, as well as Plomer's words, to bring the musical narrative to abundant life. As my film-maker collaborator, Lucy Bergman, said when we talked together about our work:

> It wasn't until [we got to] Suffolk that I started to get it. (...) You know as soon as you are listening to *Curlew River* and you are actually looking at the reeds and the rivers and you know the landscape, it feels like the landscape is singing.
>
> (Bergman and Strickson, 2012, 7 August).

But the words of the libretto should not sing, or be 'musical':

> When as a poetic dramatist I come to music-theatre, my words must *not* be 'musical'; but they must be such as to *generate* music. As language, they must be quite plain and primary.
>
> (Rudkin, 2007, no pagination, original italics).

When I am asked for advice about writing libretti my first words are, 'You must be a poet and then forget you are a poet'. The poet and librettist David Rudkin believes the language of libretto should not behave as poetry 'but internalises its poetry to an energy compressed within. It must be a language that does not itself do the singing, but that has in it the potential to lift from the earth and sing. It is for the composer to hear within it, and release, the beating of its wings' (Rudkin, 2007). But as the beating of the wings is released, for both writer and composer, there is a feeling of completion, of climax and, almost simultaneously, lack of interest, distance and inadequacy. We want to move on to our next project, estranged and 'exiled' from the finished work, needing to re-connect with the energy of nature through a new process of co-creation.

Meditation 2

Fenland

Dyke and marsh and mere:
black, bleak, infinite,
but not on these days of sun
when each *fenny detail*
is pointedly revealed —

Above, a sky-dance scrawl of marsh harriers
oblivious to the lope of a bittern.
Ankle-deep, a red deer feeds on spring shoots.
Fleeting reed-satori: a water rail's red beak.

It's in the details the *Curlew River* runs:
the f and l's *the fallen, the lost, the least*
the precise body-song of creatures and weed,
eddies of search and pain, a faint horizon
with *no gleam to show the way.*

The feeling of inadequacy, that constant loss of confidence many creative artists experience, is already present in the 'fleeting reed-satori' signified by the water-rail. In a hide at RSPB Minsmere, I saw a brief flash of red and then overheard someone say 'water rail'. What I actually saw was 'delicate bird/redness', so the linguistic signifier 'water rail's red beak', giving a stronger, more precise connection to the experience, did not exist in the moment of perception though I felt the need to name as the bird flew from the reeds, as Barthes would say, with 'visual uncertainty', or the satori of 'loss of meaning', into my world (Barthes, 1983, p.xi). In the poem, using

acquired knowledge, I name the bird. 'Naming', writes the gardener Robin Lane-Fox, 'deepens knowledge and encourages closer distinctions in what we see' (Lane-Fox, 2010, p.5). The naming of the bird progresses in the next stanza to a re-enactment of the details of sound in which 'the *Curlew River* runs', the f and the repeated l's of 'the fallen, the lost, the least' that the monks sing after the boy has returned to the tomb (Plomer, 1964, p.41), an alliterative cluster of phonestemes that has a dying fall at the end of each word, and at the end of the line, suggesting a progressive despair before the renewal of hope. In the non-adjectival plainness of the phrase, there is a kind of deflated flatness, like the sluggish progression of the Suffolk rivers through the fens and coastal plains. This is a landscape that invites Rudkin's 'plain and primary' language with, until you reach the margins of the river, everything clearly seen, even from a distance. Figures in this landscape have the loneliness of the short lines on the white page of the libretto, or the sparseness of the notes in some sections of the score, but the feeling is of an epic tale, in the sense of a long, tortuous journey as well as Brecht's understanding of 'epic'. In a very small space, with only small journeys by foot and prop boat, 'the impression you get is that the Madwoman had been travelling enormous distances. You get the impression that it's happening in a huge, flat world. When you are in the fens everywhere you look, unless you're looking down and across, is sky. Unless you've been there, you don't realise how much of the world is sky and how little of it is land. (...) you feel as if you are in an endless landscape' (Strickson, J., 2012,13 July).

Much has been written about Britten's relationship with the sea, less on his relationship with the flatness of the land, but surely both spaces offered him this possibility of the close focus on the emotional journey of the individual surrounded by an expanse of emptiness or 'void', whether the sea in Peter Grimes or the fens of *Curlew River*, both offering distant, 'faint horizons *with no gleam to show the way'* (Plomer, 1964, p.15). It is partly this sense of scale that allows him to combine 'passional (sic) violence with ritual stillness' (Mellers on *Curlew River*, 1964, p.26), which is an intended feature of *Red Angel* and *Green Angel*, the first set in a desert and the second in a clearing in a vast woodland on the edge of the city. Mellers describes a sense of 'savage antiquity' in *Curlew River* but perhaps the 'black, bleak, infinite'

landscape gives it the timeless quality of something that will go on and on, repeating itself in different generations, in different forms, forever. This is a poetics of content and why the opera is called a 'parable', 'that art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love' (Auden, quoted in Elliott, 2006, p.39). Britten, as Donald Mitchell wrote, ‘so often used parable as one of his prime working methods’ (Elliott, p.25). When I was working for Horse and Bamboo Theatre in the 1980s, the director, Bob Frith, sometimes described the performances as 'moral tales', and this ambition – to offer versions of wrestling with a complex morality while gently pointing the way forward – remains central to my practice, as it was to Britten's. *Green Angel* is, in this sense, also a 'parable', an indication of a possible healing process through a collaboration with nature, unlearning hatred while living with the consequences of man-made disaster.

Meditation 3

Mystery

The day after Ben’s funeral
Peter sang, and he stood with him
in the mystery   *a serenity*
of the most extraordinary order.

That first Christmas without him
he lit a candle within the beauty of Toledo
and contemplated   a mysterious God

In the death of the day plainchant
the triumphal dance of flames
the slow walk of monks   and drum beat
that thrums through the Latin.

In the death of the day   mystery.

Mystery will be the last word
and the first.

Peter Pears' words, 'a serenity of the most extraordinary order', are his description of the slow movement of Mozart's Clarinet Quintet, which he chose for *A Sympathy with Sounds*, a BBC Radio 4 programme in 1977 in which he was asked to choose and introduce three pieces of music (Headington, p.275). In *Curlew River*, an appalling story of child kidnap and cruelty is considered in an atmosphere of serenity and order, analogous to Mozart's music or the services conducted by the monks of San Giorgio

which Britten attended while working on the opera in Venice. Elliott writes that the plainsong symbolises ‘the spiritual sure ground towards which the parable beckons’ (Elliott, 2006, p.124). Kildea, in his recent biography of the composer, criticises Britten for the 'easy' ending of 'grace through belief' (Kildea, 2013, p.468), especially since the composer stated that he did not believe in the divinity of Christ (Britten, B. 1942. *Appeal to the Appellate Tribunal*, June, in Britten, 1991, ed. Mitchell and Reed, p.1058). Kildea prefers the 'stranger and more disturbing' (Kildea, p.468) ending of the Buddhist *Sumidagawa*, where the mother is left inconsolable after the child disappears forever, but he does not indicate an understanding of the serenity that Buddhist practice instils, even if the experience of grief in the moment seems all encompassing. This criticism also ignores the placing of the opera within a medieval context, when the sureties of faith were routinely presented to the people by priests and monks. In the action, the singer playing the Mother (given the dignity of this title at this point in the libretto, with the change from 'Madwoman') resumes a monk's habit at the conclusion of the story, firmly placing the performer back in the medieval practice of the sacred. The possibility of literal resurrection (the great mystery) has been offered but members of the audience may choose to reject this in their own time, as Britten did in his use of the bleakness of Wilfred Owen's words for the *War Requiem* and the irony of their juxtaposition with the Latin mass, or in the 'mass of contradictions' (Kildea, p.470) in his *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* of the same year. In the face of the extreme brutality of the twentieth century, Britten was not the only composer to wrestle with inherited 'Christian' forms. Michael Tippett was attempting to face the brutalities of World War II in his works, and experienced similar pressures in finding musical forms for his concerns, similarly finding some solutions in structural borrowing. *A Child of Our Time*, his 1941 pacifist oratorio dealing with the oppression of the Jews in Nazi Germany, while based on the structure of Handel's *Messiah*, made use of negro spirituals instead of chorales since Tippett did not feel the form and content of Christian hymns were able to embody the universal spirituality he felt the material demanded. Perhaps Britten, with his deep attachment to Anglicanism but uneasy relationship with Christianity, chose to embrace the

broader understanding of God creating resurrection in the resolution of difficult life journeys the theologian Harry Williams puts forward in his book *True Resurrection* (1972). The ability of the Mother in *Curlew River* to move forward, renewed and 'reborn', through her experience and the power of the collective prayer of the others on the boat, may be the more significant mystery. We have, as Williams writes, 'no concepts, no words, no linguistic forms, in which we can set out [resurrection] with anything approaching adequacy' (Williams, 1972, p.181).

'Mystery' (from the Greek 'muo', to close the eyes) has the connotations both of something beyond human comprehension and of a medieval drama which draws on events from sacred history. This sense of mystery, integral to the content, is emphasised by the deliberateness of the artificiality of the opera, reinforced by Colin Graham's direction in the first production: singers moving on certain notes and words with clearly defined gestures, robing and disrobing, the single set, the use of masks, instruments extending and commenting on the vocal lines, and Latin plainsong. According to Kildea, this resulted in a 'new style of theatre (...) [that] was half-cocked at best' (Kildea, 2013, p.499) without the vivid depiction of 'the ghastly, flawed behaviour of human beings' (Kildea, p.468) of *Budd* and *Grimes*. But if we consider *Curlew River* as an experiment in epic theatre, facilitated by the style of the music and presentation, then the 'participating spectators', to use a descriptive phrase from the Group Theatre Britten worked with in the 1930s (Kildea, p.155), are encouraged to be both emotionally engaged and critically detached, like the Japanese audience of *Sumidagawa* who follow the text of the play as the action progresses. They may also choose to enter into the mystery, an unknowing which is beyond words or actions. And this mystery, if we understand it in the terms of the anthropologist Mircea Eliade, is not specifically Christian, even if defined in Christian language, since we are 'taken out of mundane time when we participate in a myth', and into primordial time, timelessly 'reactualising a mystery' (Eliade, quoted in Richards, p.119).

Meditation 4

Between the Lands of East and West

A lyrical flute,
both bamboo and silver,
sings a confluence of rivers.
The Sumida meets the Curlew;
the belly growl of Japanese,
the pared back English.

To adapt, to understand the swirl
and reach of both rivers
is to make meaning for ourselves.

As the sun sets,
the wet corners of two writings
overlap in the middle of the waters
and their inks bleed
leaving wet, white paper
on which the spirit of a dead boy
is just visible.

William Plomer wrote a poem titled 'Japonaiserie' which includes the lines:

> The sacred Fuji, pale as pearl,
> Is ruled across with telegraph wires --
> *Moi mandarin, toi madarine,*

Nous irons, souriant un peu.

(Plomer, 1960, p.53).

The title of the poem is ironic, and in the second half of the stanza Plomer mocks some silly lines taken from a sentimental, French 'oriental' piece. Earl Miner wrote that Plomer was a pioneer in writing about the Japanese 'without exoticism and condescension' (Miner, 1958, p.52). However, for the most part Plomer's own poetry remains bound to traditional English metre and rhyme and, formally, the most 'Japanese' of his works is the libretto for *Curlew River*. The real meeting of East and West in form came through Pound and the Imagists, who remain a profound influence on my own writing, both of poetry and libretti. This is perhaps exemplified in the *Meditations,* where – as in my libretti writing – I have followed Pound's famous advice in *Don'ts for those beginning to write verses*:

> Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not mean something.

(From *Poetry*, March 1913, quoted in Miner, 1958, p.123).

Pound also stressed the importance of the concrete to express the abstract: 'the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol' (Miner, p.123, original italics). Concision, the short line, natural images expressing the abstract and the separation of the abstract statement from imagery are the qualities the influence of the haiku has had on English and French poetry, exemplified in the 'form of super-position' in Pound's haiku-like lines:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in a crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

(Jones, ed., 1972, p.95).

In *Green Angel*, I use a similar technique:

> she was my friend   best friend
> a moody dark weed   a weed who grew too tall

(*Green Angel*, 2010, p.13).

The spacing in this libretto (five spaces between phrases on the same line) is borrowed from the feel of the distinguished translator Royall Tyler's translations of the Nō. His translation of *Hagoromo* ('The Feather Mantle') looks like this:

Doer

In her plight now   the angel,   like a wingless bird,

Sideman

moving to rise,   has no mantle;

Doer

on earth, is caught   in the nether world.

(Tyler, 1978, p. 22).

This form offers an airy space between words, leaving them room to breathe, with each line having a haiku-like quality. It also leaves space for the writing of music, in the suggestion of time passing between each phrase, allowing each individual phrase to 'land' on the listener's ear before the next phrase. If we consider the words as objects and the spaces between them as 'nothingness', analogous to gestures and the stillness between them in the Nō, this 'nothingness' is actually 'a space, the shape of which is determined by those objects' (Richards, 1994, p.18). In this sense, there is never just nothing; a space or stillness allows the possibility of new, enlarged meaning, both in the musical narrative and in the extended time allowed for

the spectator to process the meaning of the words before a new 'word-object' arrives. And just as my father is still processing his experience of the original production of *Curlew River* more than forty years later, audience members of *Green Angel* have continued to enlarge their experience of the work beyond the duration of the performance:

> **What did you find rewarding about the experience of the opera?**
>
> The fact that I haven’t completely understood or pieced together all the dramatic aspects, and how they relate to the music. I find this rewarding because I am still thinking it over and making sense.
>
> (Audience comments, 2011, 1 April).

In *Between the Lands of East and West*, the 'swirl of the rivers' and 'the wet corners of two writings' that overlap are not only Japan and England, *Curlew River* and *Sumidagawa*, but Britten and Plomer, composer and librettist, music and words, and the forms of Japanese and of English poetry. The space to allow this meeting and collaboration to take place cannot be taken for granted. Here is an example of libretto writing from Mari Mezei for Peter Eötvös’s 2008 opera, *Lady Sarashina*, based on a Japanese story:

Sarashina

> When I awoke, the moon hung near the western ridge
> of the hills, and it seemed to me that its face was wet with
> tears. Sadly, I see the year is drawing to an end
> And the night is giving way to dawn,
> While moonbeams wanly shine upon my sleeves.
>
> (Eötvös, 2008, p.38).

In my notebook, having seen the first production of the work by Opéra de Lyon, and while working on *Green Angel*, I looked at this libretto and wrote:

> The lines seem long and clumsy – and also in an English that is slightly Edwardian, with long clauses taking us away from the images. There will still be much I have to cut out, even though I'm trying to write sparely. At the moment, I'm very much working with end rhymes, though not necessarily couplets, and internal vowel rhymes – sometimes as many as 11 in a short stanza. There are often two or three weak stresses before a strong stress in Plomer's libretto, as if he's allowing a time space for the stresses to emerge from.
>
> (Strickson, 2009 2, p.2).

As an exercise, I re-wrote Mezei's words in an obviously haiku-like style, using a more contemporary English:

> I woke up   and saw the moon's face   wet with tears.
> Night ends   and the year ends.
> Pale moonbeams   on my sleeves.

As Britten knew, the evocation of what is going on 'in the heart of the characters' (so obviously signalled by the word 'Sadly' in the extract from Mezei's libretto) can be portrayed perfectly adequately by the music, and the performer (Graham on Britten, 15 April 1991, cited in Carpenter, p.204). And do we need to know that the moon 'hung near the western ridge'? I have removed a great number of consonants, drawing more attention to extended vowel sounds and vowel echoes. The heightened plainness of the diction means that the words are no longer 'sung-talk'. The complexity of meaning is enhanced by the super-position and the two strong stresses at the beginning of the line in 'Pale moonbeams   on my sleeves', allowing the singer to express what the end of the year means for Sarashina through the emotion of her delivery. This is an indication of what the Japanese poetic model offers to the librettist working in English, though – while keeping the

spareness – I would avoid such an obvious haiku-like feel when adapting a work from a non-Japanese source, or when not using the *jo-ha-kyu* form.

The very short line (away from an imitation of the haiku form) is used strikingly to depict the tension of unspoken love in Sciarrino's libretto for his 1998 opera, *The Killing Flower (Luci Mie Traditrici*), inspired by the life of Renaissance composer Carlo Gesualdo:

> GUEST
> Speak, my eyes…
>
> LA MALASPINA
> My eyes, tell him…
>
> GUEST
> That I'm burning.
>
> LA MALASPINA
> That I adore…
>
> GUEST
> Be silent, my tongue.
>
> LA MALASPINA
> Close, my lips.
>
> GUEST
> Impudent tongue
>
> LA MALASPINA
> Bold mouth.
>
> GUEST
> I will speak no more, my Lady.
>
> LA MALASPINA
> Into silence will I lapse.
>
> Excerpt from Act 1, scene iii, translated into English by Paola Loreto (2013).

This use of short, 'jabbing' phrases to express hidden or painful thoughts is something I used in the opera *Red Angel*, as in this passage where Sophie has only managed to persuade Doctor Ben to give her antibiotics for a patient (Isaac, who raped Sophie) if she agrees to sleep with him that night. I use short, sometimes broken phrases, to express content replete with sub-

text, as in this passage where there is a strong mutual attraction between hero and heroine:

6. DOCTOR BEN.

The doctor's tent, set up in the midst of the metal beds. A low bed, with a mosquito net. The doctor is sitting up, drinking a beer. Sophie is outside the tent.

Sophie: Doctor. Doctor.

Ben: I didn't think you'd come.

Sophie: But Doctor you said –

Ben: Yes I said.

Sophie: I'll go away.

Ben: No stay…

(*Red Angel*, 2009, p.19).

Meditation 5

Write the howl as well as the word

Follow *Curlew River*
upstream, to its source –
a Japanese howl of grief,
a Nō actor's howl,
a howl scored six centuries ago,
a mother's heartbreak
clasped in a dance of weeping.

The ghost of her innocent child
lay at an Englishman's side
for three long years.

Then Ben packed away his kimono
and grasped the still, small Nō
in the whispers of Suffolk reeds.

He found the selflessness of the actor
in the cloistered steps of monks,
solemnity of sound
in the melisma of plainchant
and the rent-timber truth of the tale
in his own sans Tadzio aloneness.

Often deep emotion is beyond words, and emerges from the body as agonised or ecstatic sound. The world of *Red Angel* is full of howls and other sounds: the sounds of a field-hospital in the midst of a guerrilla war. The

hospital soundscape therefore reflects the cries and moans of the patients, the care of the nurses and their helpers, and the crude clangy mess of hospital activities. This is one attempt to 'write the howl as well as the word'.

A different kind of scored howl – if we take a howl to be an expanded, hyper-expressive vowel sound – is found where the Abbot and Monks sing ‘O pray for the souls of all that fall/By the wayside, all alone’ in *Curlew River* (Plomer, 1964, p.10). Perhaps the cluster of overlapping augmented fourths at figure 4 in the score is imitative of the resonance of an ancient church like Orford, where sounds echo from wall to wall, and die away in the heavens of the high roof. Elliott writes that the blurring effect of the resonance of the stone basilica at San Giorgio in Venice is similar to the ‘random alignment of vocal lines producing a random harmony which is one of the most novel features of Britten’s technique in the Church Parables' (Elliott, 2006, p.118). The large, public ‘O’ sound of the Abbot and Monks exhorting the congregation in this ‘O pray for’ phrase is an opening out of sound, reinforced by the long ‘a’ of pray, the open ‘o’ of ‘for’ and the rounded diphthong of ‘souls’.

The overlapping sounds of a libretto contain not only the semantics of the words, but the sound meaning and connotations of phonemes within words, cries and other non-verbal language, vowel and consonant pattern, rhythm and silence. Antonin Artaud wrote, 'Occidental psychology is expressed in dialogue and the obsession with the defined word which says everything ends with the withering of words' (Artaud, 1958, p.118). To capture life's tragedies and ecstasies, the librettist has to 'write the howl as well as the word' in the text and dramatic action, creating possibilities for the howl to exist within the sounds of words, beneath them and between them.

Meditation 6

River

On each white page the river runs through,
past banks of emptiness on either side.

We ride the ferry boat across the current
in this place of water, fish and gliding birds.

Before our eyes, they shape-change
into power, purity and devotion.

When we lean over the side
we do not see our own faces
but a full moon, a communion wafer,
a wax mask, melting snow.

We hear how the ferryman
once saw a cod mid-river
but when he tried to grasp it in his hands
it changed into a tern, a girl, a silver dog,
a tern, a girl, a glowing light, a girl –
and she slipped away from him.

This poem is concerned with the imaginative transformation of the object, which is essentially about a practice of theatre that posits the belief that the art of theatre, both musical and non-musical, needs a minimum of scene changes and props, and a maximum of imaginative action, encouraging a collaboration between performers and audience to construct meaning from

minimal gestures and the multiple use of 'simple' objects, like the stones and dust of *Green Angel*. Writing libretti is about colours and masses, and an understanding of how these work in the stage space, as much as it is about words and sounds. Like *Curlew River*, *Green Angel* uses only a very few props, and takes place in a single set. The set for *Green Angel* is decorated as an integral part of the performance, to indicate the different seasons. Librettist, composer, designer and performers allow the audience to read meaning into these objects, finding their own fluid symbolism, just as the composition allows this with the imagery of the text, and the musical narrative. 'Water, fish and gliding birds' can become 'power, purity and devotion' in any combination; the deciphering of such symbolic meaning – once we get beyond such closely defined systems as Anglican Christianity – is 'a matter for reading' by each individual member of the audience through their perception of the image, which Pound defines as 'an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' (*Poetry*, March 1913, quoted in Miner, p.125). Pound goes on to say that an image 'gives that sudden sense of liberation; that sense of freedom from time and space limits; that sense of sudden growth.' His language seems akin to that Barthes uses to define *satori*, almost as if the image exists in the 'void' between the performer and the audience, giving a transcending revelation in the moment it is experienced.

Pound deciphered a 'unity of image' in Nō plays, observing that all the better plays intensify a single image, like the mantle of feathers in *Hagoromo* or the burial mound in *Sumidagawa*. While the transforming hospital beds of *Red Angel* or the house and path in *Green Angel* may be perceived to be akin to this single image, I am more concerned with one 'family' of coherent and related images that weave through the text and the action, echoing and repeating. Like the cod, bird and light of *River*, I make use of images that are 'elemental' signifiers with many layers of meaning the audience co-creates with the performers, while a final meaning remains elusive: the thorns, seeds, feathers, stones, dust and broom of *Green Angel* allow an openness of interpretation.

Meditation 7

Pictures

At first all is clear but unclear too.
Perhaps it was a moment of grief:
the flat of a hand raised to the eyes.
Perhaps it began in Venice
with a Madonna, a burly child
and a palm leaf.
Perhaps there was a black mountain
and feet wandering.

Whatever begins, begins in the body
before it is laid out in the head
as a procession and recession of images,
each an icon of emotion
set in the gold of story.

Then we summon words,
those scratches arranged in series.

But life only comes with the first pencilled notes
for music gathers light, then scatters it out
like a sun-white marble façade
above the blue of the lagoon.
And all pictures become one.

Pictures concerns the progressive process of the collaboration between librettist and composer. Britten talked about 'blocking out' an opera with the librettist (Britten, quoted in White and Evans, 1983, p.90) in the way that an artist blocks out a picture. This is similar to the construction of a storyboard for a film, where each scene is drawn to show the action, before filming begins. This is particularly helpful in focusing attention on the progression of the narrative, making sure that each frame takes the story forward. In my own process, I naturally begin with the image:

Adam: I start from the image so actually in my head the image comes before the words, so it's something to do with refining that relationship which isn't actually words and music it's words, music and image and action.

Lucy: And emotion…

Adam: And emotion, and I think Britten was very aware of that.

(Bergman and Strickson, 7 August 2012, p.1).

Each image, rather like Pound's understanding of the overarching, unifying single image of the Nō, is a condensation of mood or emotion. Ronald Duncan, another of Britten's librettists, writes that 'the poet must drive his metaphor to the point of clarity' in each successive image (Duncan, Introduction to *The Rape of Lucretia*, quoted in White and Evans, 1983, p. 146). Before the fixing of words, 'those scratches arranged in series', necessary for the commencement of the musical composition that Britten was so much in favour of, there is the definition of a series of images, each one progressing the narrative and 'each an icon of emotion'.

Meditation 8

The howl sounds again

Someone had lost their child
and you felt you had lost your child.

But what was seen, and heard?
The black shadow of a pine;
that howl, echoed in clay pots
beneath cypress boards.

In due season, emotion
roars like the sea.

In due season, a primrose
And the wild ducks cry: “Kari! ... Kari!”

The Nō continues to be performed in Japan; it is often presented in the same form, on the same kind of stage, and using the same conventions as in the fourteenth century. *Curlew River* makes use of Latin plainsong and preparatory rituals from the medieval church to create a similarly 'antique' feel. The experience of the performance gives the illusion of age, just like Yugiri, the carefully designed Japanese garden in Malaya Tan Twan Eng describes in *A Garden of Evening Mists*:

> Stone lanterns, their eaves curtained with tattered spider web, squat among the curling ferns. Yugiri was designed to look old from the first stone Aritomo set down, and the illusion of age he had created had been transformed into reality.

(Eng, 2013, p.32).

Though *Green Angel* is an adaptation of a contemporary source based on a contemporary event, the experience for some of the audience had a certain timeless quality, and one member of the audience felt it was like watching something from another time:

> **What did you find rewarding about the experience of the opera?**
>
> The sinuousness of the words. The sparseness and crystalline architecture of the music. A sort of reprise, for me, of what I imagine some work from work from the mid 1520s–30s to have been like to experience. The focus of the work as if 'over there', presenting me with a field/screen that I did not feel compelled fully to know.
>
> (Audience comments, 2011,1 April).

A clue to this sense of strangeness is given in a comment from another member of the audience who said 'I enjoyed witnessing a distinctly non-Western storyline brought to life' (2011). The storyline is of course entirely Western but the way of telling the story derives from the compositional aesthetics of the Nō, and it is this that dislocates the audience's sense of time, together with the use of secondary text in medieval English and German as part of the texture of the performance. A similar feeling of present time and an older time living in one moment is found in Pound's line, *And the wild ducks cry: "Kari! ... Kari!"* (which I quote as the last line of *Meditation 8*) from his adaptation of the Nō play *Kakitsubata*. Just as it is part of the aesthetics of writing a Nō play, it is part of Pound's technique to borrow material from diverse literatures and times to illuminate the present.

Poignantly, in Canto LXXVII, based on his life imprisoned in the military stockade at Pisa during World War II, Pound describes the face of a prisoner in a vehicle suddenly illuminated as like the spirit-mask ('*hennia*') of the jealous Lady Rokujō in the Nō play *Awoi no Uye* and, to vivify the commotion, uses onomatopoeic words drawn from the actual sound of the flapping canvas of his tent and the rosary beads of the Buddhist priest who exorcises Rokujō's spirit:

and Awoi's *hennia* plays hob in the tent flaps

k-lakk . . . . . thuuuuuuu

making rain

uuuh.

(Pound, 1981, p. 465).

Miner writes that in this passage the different sources are brought together in the unifying image Pound saw in the Nō (Miner, 1958, p.142), and it is this technique Lauren Redhead, as composer, and myself as librettist, have used to layer and strengthen the importance of the moment beyond the contemporary in *Green Angel*. For instance, in the Jo (of KYU – Spring) the musicians speak the medieval lyric 'Lenten is come with love to toune' while Green simultaneously sings a free translation: 'Spring has arrived with love' (*Green Angel*, 2010, p.23). Redhead makes use of John Dowland's *Lachrymae* in the musical narrative of the piece, and in order to strengthen the emotion she 'use[s] or inhabit[s] the quotations rather than merely quoting from the works themselves' (Redhead, 2011, p.81), situating the piece in relationship to other pieces and other times while allowing 'an open space in which the listener can create the work' (Redhead, p.98), as the listener quoted was clearly doing. Our agreed, collaborative approach to form, leading to a slippery sense of time for performers and audience, defines our relationship to the wider world.

Meditation 9

The wild birds cry again

Cries of wild birds on the mere
dive into our ears.

Black-headed gulls, shelducks,
avocets, gadwalls, teal.

Squawks and caws,
bubbles and warbles.

Wild birds on the mere
shout in syllables.

Within each syllable,
catch the timbre of the vowel.
Set these vowels loose in flocks
flecked with consonants.
Then let each syllable
feel the drag of gravity.
Watch each syllable
define the flight
between earth and heaven.

The syllable is the single sound, and the poet starts by paying attention to vowel and consonant sounds within this 'smallest particle':

> Consonant is bounded form, non-durational, atemporal, like the static object; vowel is spatially free, durational, temporal, like the

> dynamic process. Consonant divides, as instance and boundary divide; vowel unites as space and time unite.
>
> (Paterson, 2007, p. 53).

The poet practises close attention to the sound-forms of vowels and consonants through registering 'both the acquisition of his ear *and* the pressures of his breath' (Olson, 1966, p.17, original italics). The poem is shaped by the 'pressured silence' (Paterson, p.9) of the breath. Paul Kildea draws attention to 'the slow, long-vowelled sentence' (Kildea, 2013, p.348) of Billy's monologue when he is in handcuffs in *Billy Budd*, 'I'm sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist', with the last word becoming the sound of a breathy whisper. It is the patterning of the sounds within the syllables that holds together a phrase, a line, a poem, and a libretto. It is the physicality of the syllable, what Olson in his manifesto essay 'Projective Verse' calls its 'swift currents' (Olson, 1966, p.19), together with the line, 'the threshing floor for the dance' (Olson, p.19), much more than rhyme and metre, that make the poem.

The composer, like the poet, works very directly with each syllable, and the singers' breath. Of course, the composer may allow the vowel as many notes or whatever time he or she wishes, like Britten's extended portamento for the last of the Madwoman's three syllables in the line 'Let me in'. This poetics is not simply a technical thing but an attitude to the world; once the projective purpose of verse is recognised, 'a stance towards the reality of the thing itself' (Olson, p.24) when 'the beginning and the end is breath', and the lyrical interference of the ego is removed, we have an attitude close to that Brecht promulgated in the quotation I inscribed on the first page of my copy of *Pericles*. However, Olson considered 'the contemporary substitution of society for the cosmos captive and deathly' (Olson, p.29), demanding that man as object stay inside nature, as a participating part of nature (like the birds of my poem), existing as an object in a larger field of objects, 'leading to dimensions larger than the man' (Olson, p.25). More vividly than watching the birds on Minsmere in Suffolk, as I am doing in the poem, the animalistic aspect of this experience is rather like John Aitchison inside a corral of oil

cans, surrounded by the blood and mud of slobbering, howling, fighting fur seals on Bird Island, South Georgia (*A View through a Lens*, *Fur Seals*. 2013. BBC Radio 4). The essential difference being that, unlike animals and birds, we have words that we shape in our mind-nature, words to express our experience and to communicate it beyond the moment. And this projective poetics implies that not only is the poet an object among objects but so is the poem, as Don Paterson concurs:

> I still like to think of a poem as kind of a man-made natural object, our 'best effort', that we quietly slip back into the world, and to which the world can make no serious objection.
>
> (Paterson, 2007, p.31).

It is this kinetic approach (language, caused by the pressure of the breath, as a moving object within a field of objects) that, according to Olson's poetics, leads to dynamic theatre works like Euripides' *The Trojan Women* 'able to stand, as its people do, by the Aegean' and causes 'the Fisherman and the Angel to stand clear in *Hagoromo*' (Olson, 1966, p.25). It is language, as Holland Cotter describes Emily Dickinson's, as 'a physical material, a substance so concentrated that you can all but hold it in your hands, turn it over, feel its textures' (Cotter, 2013, p.1).

Meditation 10

Ladder

This ladder ascends to the bell tower
and descends to a flagstone floor.

Though the rungs look delicate
they hold the strength of the tree
that allowed Jacob to climb to heaven.

This ladder is a thing of work,
each rung two or three stresses
in five or six syllables.

Notes ascend and descend,
leaning in, leaning out,
borne by the word-wood.

The composer Busoni preferred a minimal word text that would allow the music to expand; this type of libretto he calls the 'inner part of the text of an opera' (quoted in Calico, 2008, p.49). The ladder of *Meditation 10*, shown in *I am the ferryman* ascending and descending the bell tower of Blythburgh Church (this Suffolk church, with its fine acoustics, was used for performances of Britten's works during his lifetime and continues to be a venue for the Aldeburgh Festival), is nearly all space, just two verticals and brief horizontals at regular intervals, but it supports weight. The libretto is a ladder on a white page, with far more whiteness than black, but it allows the 'weight' of the music to exist in the whole space just as someone climbing the tower on the ladder may go firmly upwards, stop a while, lean perilously out, reach for the wall or even balance using just one foot and one hand to

hang on. Each line has an intricate structure, like the wood of the rung, that provides a holding strength for the music. Hélène Cixous, who uses the grammatical and pronunciation complexities of the ladder-letter **H** in French as a metaphor for writing, believes the ladder is already animated in its potential:

> the ladder is neither immobile nor empty. It is animated. It incorporates the movement it arouses and inscribes.
>
> (Cixous, 1993, p.44).

Or, to apply this to the art of libretto, the possibility of the music is already present in the ladder of the words since the ladder includes the spaces between the rungs and around the uprights.

Cixous then extends the metaphor into three journeys by ladder, the first to 'The School of the Dead'. In the collaboration between writers, performers and audience, both *Red Angel* and *Green Angel* are a thinking through of our relationship to the unknown dead. Entering the old church of Blythburgh brings the dead to the foreground of our thoughts, because of gravestones, a sense of past presences and the bell-tower ladder going down to the depths and up to the heavens. The dead come back to us in dreams and Cixous considers writing as a kind of active dreaming in which we talk with the dead and regenerate them:

> Writing is learning to die. It's learning not to be afraid, in other words to live at the extremity of life, which is what the dead, death, give us.
>
> (Cixous, p.10).

The second journey is therefore to 'The School of Dreams', exemplified by Jacob's 'dream of dreams' (Cixous, p.66), the ladder from earth to heaven on which the angels ascend and descend. Britten spoke of how dreams hung over him, like shadows 'which shape very darkly the next day' (Britten

speaking in *Nocturne*, Palmer, 2013). Cixous believes dreams happen without transition, with speed, they take us to lost mysteries and we find in them 'the pure element of fear' (Cixous, 1993, p. 90). In each dream, we find 'the magic word' (Cixous, p. 90), like the 'Curlew River' of that opera, or the 'Ash/ash' of *Green Angel*. Such words, intensely personal to the writer, already hold layers of physical meaning before they deliver semantic meaning, 'with a magic inherent in the sound itself' (Tsvetaeva, M., quoted in Cixous, p.90). To return to Paterson's phonesthemes, the two words 'Curlew River' sound like the winding, flowing, crying river of the Madwoman's journey and 'Ash/ash' like a breathy, sombre, easily diffused dust, something that is both the remains of life (dead) and something that gives new life. These 'magic words' are the writer's key to the known and the unknown, acting as guides of coherence for the journey. They are pathfinders in the space of writing that is both totally free and totally limited. And each writer has his or her 'dream of dreams', which for Britten might be the destruction of the innocence of childhood, and for me, the healing journey undertaken by a woman on her own, often accompanied by birds.

The third journey lets the dream ladder grow down, descending towards the depths, or roots, where 'birds, women and writing gather' (Cixous, p.113), and which is somewhere near the unconscious. Going down to the depths is to meet the 'abominable': the blood of her own body and the thorns of the garden that Ash uses as regenerators when she tattoos herself; the taboo sexual gifts that Sophie gives to the suicidal patient in *Red Angel*; the ridiculous, humiliating song of the Madwoman's grief as she wanders through the fen. Cixous writes that there is an 'uncleanness' (Cixous, p.116) inherent in the journey towards the depths, but also a joy in going out of the conscious world, travelling 'through our own mud' to 'the other country, the country below, the country underneath' (Cixous, p.131) where mystery steals into us in the earth of writing and we create something 'whose brilliance upsets the scribe' (Cixous, p.156). This is the writing the ladder descends to, a kind of joyful dying, a chthonic extreme.

Meditation 11

Mystery and silence

We end in the slow walk of monks
through the vastness of a wide, white nave.

As they step on the dead
beneath gaudy angels,
the flinty House of God
offers up the silence of the world.

In the death of the day,
the monks light candles.

To begin writing, we must have death
and feel her young, ferocious breath.

Once again, the poem is set in Blythburgh Church, one of Ronald Blythe's 'dream places' (Blythe, 2013, p.102), where the pinions of the gaudy angels looking down from the roof 'beat the wooden sky' (Blythe, p.103). The contemplative power the church breathes is more than the silence of a church. It is the silence of mystery that Judge Teoh feels when she first sees the Japanese garden of Yugiri in Tan Twan Eng's novel, *The Garden of Evening Mists*:

> The silence here has a different quality; I felt that I had been plumbed with weighted fishing line into a denser, deeper level of the ocean. I stood there, allowing the stillness to seep into me.
>
> (Eng, 2013, p.53).

It is the divinely 'useless' silence of mystery that we find in Coventry Cathedral, for the opening of which Britten's *War Requiem* was commissioned in 1962, twenty two years after the old cathedral had been destroyed by German bombs. The long delay in the build was at least partly due to the opposition of the city council who didn't see the value of a cathedral in a post World War II world, until David Eccles, the government Minister of Works in 1954, overruled them, writing to the Lord Mayor:

> The cathedral is not a building that concerns Coventry and Coventry alone (...) can we be sure that a cathedral would be so useless? Is it always right to prefer things seen to things unseen?
>
> (Foster, 2012, p.20).

Like Blythburgh, Coventry Cathedral contains 'the silence of the world' and it is this silence of things unseen, and not yet known, that Don Paterson posits as the poet's ground, asking that the first thing the poet in the act of composition should do is to observe the silence. This observation is almost in the religious sense; it is a matter of honouring the silence – of which the white page is both a symbol and a means of practical invocation – in which the poem can ultimately reverberate to its deepest reach. Into the silent space, the librettist and composer releases words and music, and space sings. Don Paterson, who is both a poet and a guitarist, writes that the ability of the space itself to sing 'is why the secret guild of guitarists used to place a horse’s skull in the corner of the room, as a sympathetic resonator' (Paterson, 2007, pp.15–16).

The horse's skull, as well as resonating, is a reminder that death is always in the room with us. We can surmise that World War I poet Wilfred Owen, Britten's 'librettist' for the *War Requiem*, felt the fear of 'young, present, ferocious, fresh death' (Cixous,1993, p.5) that Hélène Cixous believes is a necessity for the act of writing when he was in the trenches. Britten used these words, from a draft of Owen's preface to a collection of his war poems, on the title page of the work:

> Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity. (...) All a poet can do today is warn.
>
> (Owen, quoted in Stallworthy, 1974, p.266).

Both *Red Angel* and *Green Angel* are written with something of the pressure of 'young, present, ferocious, fresh death' since they are rooted in the barely reported conflict of the Sudanese Civil War, the cause of hundreds of thousands of deaths, and the nearly three thousand deaths of 9/11, the most commemorated and written about deaths since the end of World War II. Like Britten, I believe the subject of war, the victims of war and attitudes to war is THE subject, and that its urgency is no less than it was in 1918, 1939, 1962, 1992 (The Sudanese Civil War), 2001 (9/11) or 2007 (7/7), and that Olson's dictum (quoting a letter from the poet Robert Creeley) that 'form is never more than an extension of content' (Olson, 1966, p.16) has an ironic twist in the portrayal of the aftermath of a violent kidnap in *Curlew River*, or the horrors of war of the *War Requiem*, in that these are forms of great beauty, like the Nō *jo-ha-kyu* of *Green Angel* and the full length opera *Red Angel*. As Britten said, 'though the music is superb, of course, they'd say but that's neither here nor there to me. The message is what counts' (Britten, 1966, quoted in Foster, 2012, p.97). The message is one of beauty, a beauty of form in the face of terrible suffering. The mass (in the *War Requiem*) and the plainsong rituals of the medieval church (in *Curlew River*) are disrupted, disembodied by foreign borrowings and juxtapositions, a signification of their lost power. In a sense, both *Green Angel* and *Red Angel* are, with immodest ambition, 'war requiems' for the twenty-first century, their surface beauty of form continuously broken and fragmented, their spare texts 'all I can manage, more than I could' (Beckett on *Endgame*, to Alan Schneider, quoted in Reid, 1968, p.1). As the nature of the wars and conflicts around us changes, so does the necessity to keep inventing and reinventing forms to address this extreme material that allow us to juxtapose a formal beauty with a terrible, searing content.

In July 1945, Britten and Yehudi Menuhin toured Germany, seeing millions of the displaced and staying a night at the concentration camp at Belsen. Britten never talked about the visit until almost the end of his life when he said to Peter Pears that it had 'coloured everything [he had] written subsequently' (Pears to Tony Palmer, quoted in Kildea, 2013, p.255). When he returned from Germany, he went to bed for a week. Perhaps this experience created a void that, like those of Libeskind in the Jewish Museum in Berlin, was a silent space to contemplate suffering, defining the forms created around it, those 'beautiful shapes', exemplified in the marriage of libretto, music and aesthetic in *Curlew River* and the work that preceded it, the *War Requiem*:

> Not only has Britten chosen a great subject. He has treated it in such a way as to meet, head on, the main preoccupation of our lives. He has done what hardly seemed possible: given a beautiful shape to the dull, gnawing fears that surround the whole subject of modern war.
>
> (Desmond Shaw-Taylor, July 1963, *Gramophone*, review of the recording of the *War Requiem*, quoted in Foster, 2012, p.116).

The task, and joy, of the collaboration between librettist and composer, when creating work based on an extreme contemporary event, is to create a 'beautiful shape' that allows performers and audience to be moved to tears without being submerged in emotion, a shape to which they can return, again and again, for the rest of their lives, in order to contemplate suffering with a profoundly felt intelligence.

Conclusion

This investigation has been an eclectic journey, looking towards the Nō and a twentieth century Japanese film as well as the Western operatic traditon, and testing out poetic and dramatic forms that might be useful for a librettist who is concerned with finding new ways to process contemporary extremes of experience for performers and audiences. It has included a close look at the composition and performance of the only new operatic form Britten invented, the Church Parable of *Curlew River*, that spare hybrid of the Nō, medieval English drama and plainsong informed by his own sensibility. By attaching myself to Olson's credo, via Creeley, that 'form is never more than an extension of content' (Olson, 1966, p.16), I have been committed to a similar 'shuffling' of forms to Britten[3]. In the process of creating the opera *Red Angel*, this led to wide exploration and discarding of possibilities, before following an intuitive hunch – following my experience of Opera North's production of *Peter Grimes* – that a full-length opera informed by *Grimes*, and by Britten's and Plomer's work on *Curlew River*, might allow me to create a form that would allow both myself and the audience to contemplate the contemporary experience of extreme violence and suffering without being overwhelmed by it. In particular, in an age where the most traumatic experiences – especially war and its consequences – are constantly played before us on electronic media, often in real time, I have posited the idea that the not-showing of violence within violent stories, and the extended reflective time of Japanese Nō structure and aesthetics, allows a re-forming of the fragmentary mediatised experience of events into ordered 'meditations', that – like the practice of meditation itself – can re-connect us to considered action in the spaces beyond those of the performance itself.

In my shuffling of forms to process material drawn from contemporary traumatic experience, I took a Japanese film as a narrative and aesthetic

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[3] Comparing Britten to Mozart,'shuffling' is the word used to describe Britten's eclectic attitude to form by Hans Keller, when he quotes from Làng, P.H. 1942. *Music in Western Civilization*, p.636, in the essay 'The Musical Character'(Mitchell and Keller,1952, pp.319–351).

source, a film that I perceived to be influenced by the aesthetics of traditional Japanese theatre. The film also provided a series of framing tableaux or 'pictures' into which my material about the Sudanese Civil War could be fitted. While borrowing from the form of mainstream Western opera, *Red Angel* also uses arias and duets to allow the principal characters to reflect on the events they have experienced in a similar fashion to the *shite's* reflection on past trauma in the Nō, connecting their emotions to the landscape in which they are situated.

The reflective, meditative strand in opera has been with us since Holst's *Savitri* (1908), and has been a journey through different forms, with two outstanding examples in Philip Glass's and Constance De Jong's *Satyagraha* (1980), a highly stylised exploration of the non-violent struggle of Gandhi's non-violent campaign for racial equality in South Africa, and Jonathan Harvey's and Jean-Claude Carrière's 'Buddhist' opera, *Wagner Dream* (2007). In the formal shaping of the contemporary extreme, rather than seeking to show violence and relishing an extravagant portrayal of emotions, these models and the Japanese material on which I have drawn offer the possibility of processing the emotions in order that we can contemplate them and take appropriate action. Part of this process, as members of the audience of *Green Angel* demonstrated, may be to reflect on analogous personal experiences. Perhaps it is time (and I write this in July 2014 when hundreds of people are dying in Syria and Gaza every week), to let the meditative (structurally, in terms of writing, performance and production) work on the aggressive-active, creating new, hybrid dramatic forms. And maybe meditative, spare forms influenced by Japanese and Indian music and theatre correspond to what many audience members are searching for since *Satyagraha* 'broke box office records for contemporary opera on its UK premiere, making it the most popular contemporary work to be performed by ENO' (Parsons, 2013, no pagination). Though this piece is concerned with the vital subject of non-violent passive resistance to injustice, the audience experience the piece as trance more than story, with the Sanskrit text offering a series of repeated chant-like phrases. Glass refuses surtitles, asking the audience to experience the lengthened vowel sounds of the Sanskrit in their bodies as both a sensuous and spiritual experience. And *Wagner Dream*

compares and contrasts Romantic knowledge through emotional intensity with the kind of Zen-like detachment that I have written about at length.

Meditation returns the practitioner to the world, energised, focused and ready for action; it is a healing practice that has been used in schools to make children less aggressive. The two 'heroines', Sophie and Ash/Green, of *Red Angel* and *Green Angel* are healers, both of themselves and the people they encounter. Like most operatic heroines and the *shite* of the Nō, they suffer greatly. However, they do not die and they reach a new, outward- looking understanding of themselves and the events they have experienced through their physical and emotional journeys. In *Green Angel*, Ash/Green initially processes extreme trauma by disguising and re-defining her body to distance herself from her past identity, gradually re-discovering and renewing its form as she co-creates with the re-growing landscape in which she is situated. After losing her family in a great fire, she finds her body 'made strange' to her, almost in the sense of Brecht's defamilarisation, and only by living within nature (as the *shite* of the Nō does) can she process what has happened to her and take action to recover. In a similar way, the *shite* of the Nō (a form which explicitly places the healing of trauma within nature) typically arrives by the sea or in a forest as a spirit-performer who must re-enter her earthly body by re-living a traumatic past experience and reflecting on it in order to find peace; the unsettled, performing body as spirit a precarious metaphor for a fragmented, identity-seeking wholeness. In the era of the post-modern, it has been argued by Elizabeth Wright, citing Lyotard in *Postmodern Brecht*, that 'everything is subject to the V-effect and so the concept becomes redundant' (quoted in Shepherd and Wallis, 2004, p.189). My formal experiments with the Japanese Nō, haiku-mind and aesthetic distancing are a tentative strategy towards re-connecting writers, performers and audience to those extreme experiences in the contemporary world we habitually perceive as fragmented, sensationalised and mediatised events. The project has foregrounded an acceptance of the void, the emptiness that surrounds words and actions, which is a necessary perceptual condition if we are to perceive events with clarity and take apppropriate action. Thus my act of writing libretti is an *écriture* that defines words and the white space around them, singers

and the space between them, the space between performers and audience, and the space between practice and theory.

A practice-based PhD can be be seen as a divided project but if we consider the practice as the space between the critical words, without which the words have no meaning, then the project is itself a meditation, embedded in my body as I write, preparing me for future action. This unification of theory and practice in 'works as spiritual exercise' (Glass/De Jong, 1980, p.64), one of the principles of Gandhi's *Satyagraha* (Truth-force), is beautifully expressed in the Sanskrit of Glass's opera by the character of Mr. Kallenbach, the German-born Jewish South African architect who was Gandhi's 'soul-mate' in his campaign of passive-resistance against racial discrimination:

MR. KALLENBACH	MR. KALLENBACH
sam-khyu-yo-gau pri-thug ba-lah pru- vu-dun-te nu pun-de-ta.	Between theory and practice some talk as they were two – making a separation and difference between them.
ā-kum u-py a- stih-tuh sum-yug oo- bhu-yor vin-du- tā fa-lam	Yet wise men know that both can be gained in applying oneself whole-heartedly to one.
	(For the high estate attained by men of contemplative theory, that same state achieve men of action. So act as the ancients of days old, performing works as spiritual exercise.)

(Glass/De Jong, 1980, p.64)

Other documentation included in pockets of bound thesis, and as separate documents.

In pockets

1. CD-ROM recording of scenes 1, 2, 9 and 10 from *Red Angel.*
2. DVD recording of *Green Angel* performance.
3. DVD: *I am the ferryman.*

Separate documents

1. Score of *Green Angel.*
2. Programme for performance of *Green Angel.*
3. Score of scenes 1, 2, 9 and 10 from *Red Angel.*

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Appendix

I am the ferryman: script and notes for the film-maker

Film: silence: bird scarecrow in cabbage field waving wildly.

Film: title sequence - the reeds and birds of Snape fen; flute music.

I am the ferryman

The winged and perfect marriage of

words and music in Curlew River,

a parable for church performance

composed by Benjamin Britten

to a libretto by William Plomer.

A film by Adam Strickson and Lucy Bergman

Film: Bird sculpture in Orford Church, gradually moving up to my face, then walking out of the church to churchyard. This is as Adam without hat or stick.

Stop 1: This is Orford Church, where the first performance of *Curlew River* by Benjamin Britten and William Plomer, took place in summer 1964. It's the opera that has taught me how words and music exist in the same outward breath, diving into the ears of the listener like the cries of the wild birds on the Eastern fens.

The flautist, Richard Adeney, played in the first performance of *Curlew River* in this church, in my lifetime, when mobile phones, iPods and digital cameras were unknown. In his book, *Time and Concord,* he wrote, '*Curlew River* had more rehearsal time than any other new work I have ever played…I would walk around Orford church to the ruined Norman arches in the courtyard and stand by myself with an empty

mind, feeling relaxed and happy. The eerie quality of the music, the singing of plainchant, and the repetitive rehearsals, tranquillised me into an unusually quiet place'.

Words begin in silence, music begins in silence. Writing words for music begins with a deep understanding of silence.

Stop 2: I'll tell you a story about a gentle, quiet boy, twelve years old maybe, and a Christian though he couldn't make sense of the crucifixion. This boy listened to his father playing Bach on a spinet, his brother wrestling with the French horn and tried out his first breathy notes on a flute held together with elastic bands. He sang the Latin of Thomas Tallis and William Byrd, all flesh is as grass and 'Lord for thy tender mercy's sake' in the red cassock and white surplice of the choir of Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon. Later he sang a fool's song, 'When that I was and a little tiny boy, with a hey ho the wi-ind and the rain' on the banks of the river for a TV programme, and already he knew how the banal sound of 'heigh ho' contained all the sadness of the world. He'd learned his first lesson about writing words for music.

Stop 3: Now that little boy is standing here and he's looking towards the foothills of old age, so it's right that he should return to a church where Britten's music and Plomer's words were joined together in a winged and perfect marriage. For a long time, the boy's words lay on their own, without music, though he always heard melodies in his head.

And then, after many years, he began to write words for opera and joyfully discovered the magic lengthening and bending of meaning, the stretched sensuousness of vowels, the precise punctuation of consonants; words like cries, words like breath, words singing out loud, ascending and descending the broken ladder of writing. Words climbing and soaring, words that fly like angels, words migrating to silence.

Film: birds, then two banks of the river and the river between them (Snape, Walberswick)

Film: I put on a hat and pick up a stick to be the 'ferryman'; words; 'I am the ferryman' from score and/or libretto.

…Use the shadow of the ferryman on the grass (overlap the words 'I am the ferryman of Curlew River' with this image)? This could merge into the wide river showing both banks for the first words. I wonder if it's worth melding the image of my shadow as the ferryman into the beginning of each of these pieces? I wonder also if you can use the image of me as the ferryman on the pontoon as a background, 'ghostly' image in a few appropriate places? I think there's plenty of opportunity to use more footage from the Walberswick ferry and of the estuary where we were recording on the pontoon.

I feel the film needs to help us tell the story in these sections. I've begun each link with 'I am the ferryman' and I've tried to make each last line an explicit link with the Meditation that follows.

I am the ferryman of *Curlew River.* I travel between two banks. One I shall call the land of words and the other the land of music. What happens between them is one thing, not two. In the flow of the river, every word is music and every note unfolds a story.

I am the ferryman. The wild birds are always with me: birds of reed bed and sea, birds of river and estuary.

Film: water - birds – reeds (Snape)

Film: birds at Orford estuary & Minsmere; Japanese book cover: birds; suggestion of bird shapes in shell sculpture.

<u>Meditation 1: Cries of wild birds</u>

I am the ferryman. The story I shall tell is an ancient, modern story that happens in 'a waste and ownerless space'; the wide, watery landscape of the fens.

Film: fenland - reeds - heath – mud. Get the sense of distance and a huge landscape.

Meditation 2: Fenland

I am the ferryman. People are gathering to cross the river in my boat. They wish to pray before a grave on the eastern bank. They believe some special healing power is there.

I am the ferryman. I tell a story that begins in mystery, in candle-shine.

Film: ruined chapel, shapes – Leiston Abbey and candle flame. Te Lucis words from manuscript, steps walking, shadows.

Meditation 3: Mystery

I am the ferryman. A traveller arrives at the bank of the river. He wishes to travel from the Land of the West to the Land of the East.

Film: shapes from shell, meditative walking – grass, gravel, Japanese programme cover (gold & silver squares), 'Japanese' flowers, Japanese and English writing floating.

Film: a path to the river.

Meditation 4: Between the Lands of East and West

I am the ferryman. Just before the traveller gets on my boat, I hear a strange sound. Someone is coming along the path. Someone is howling. It is a madwoman from the Black Mountains who wants to cross the river. She is searching for her lost child.

Use image of the path near the pontoon here, the path lengthening and disappearing.

Film: a howling mouth; stone mouths from church sculptures, swirling water.

Meditation 5: Write the howl as well as the word.

I am the ferryman. The people in my boat mock the crazy singing of the madwoman who searches for her child. She tells us her son was seized as a slave by a tall stranger.

I tell this madwoman I will not take her on my boat unless she entertains us all with her singing. And she asks if I remember a famous traveller who once made a riddle on the banks of this river:

Birds of the Fenland, though you float or fly,

Wild birds, I cannot understand your cry,

Tell me, does the one I love

In this world still live.

I take this madwoman into my boat and steer my way across the current.

Meditation 6: River.

Film: boy sculpture from the Red House garden. Then ferry crossing at Walberswick, swirling currents, oars.

I am the ferryman. As we cross the river, I tell the madwoman a story, the story of a boy who arrived with a tall, cruel man one year ago. The child was ill, too weak to walk. He lay down on the grass by the chapel on the eastern bank and asked to be buried there. And as he died, he prayed. The woman sees every moment of this story as a picture she holds in her heart.

Meditation 7: Pictures.

I am the ferryman. I steer my boat across the river. When we arrive at the eastern bank, the woman knows that the boy of my

story is her son. She joins everyone to pray at his graveside. She sinks to her knees and weeps.

Meditation 8: The howl sounds again.

Film: reprise of images from 5.

I am the ferryman. I watch the woman claw at her son's grave. As she weeps, she prays and the wild birds cry 'like souls abandoned'.

Meditation 9: The wild birds cry again.

Film: reprise of images from 1.

I am the ferryman. I am there when we hear the voice of her son praying in his grave:

Go your way in peace, mother.

The dead shall rise again

And in that blessed day

We shall meet in heaven.

I know that one day the woman will follow her child up the long ladder to heaven.

Meditation 10: The Ladder.

Film: ascending and descending the ladder in Blythburgh Church, the 'ridges' of the shell sculpture, the ladder of words on the pages of the Faber libretto.

I am the ferryman of *Curlew River.* I travel between two banks. One I shall call the land of words and the other the land of music. What happens between them is one thing, not two. In the flow of the river, every word is music and every note unfolds a story.

This story ends in mystery. This story ends in silence.

Meditation 11: Mystery and silence.

Film: reprise of images from 3.

Film: take off hat and stick, sit in Orford churchyard. Sound of birds and flute, fading. Walking into the distance on the boards in Snape fen? Bird scarecrow in cabbage field waving wildly?

Sung words: 'When that I was and a little tiny boy with a heigh ho the wi-ind and the rain…'