

# Connecting Cultures Through Music

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## Abstract:

### **"Refugees Living in Malmö: Connecting Cultures through Music"**

*Seeing the inherent hybridity of music as an example of the intersections of culture and performance, and as an artistic research resident at the Inter Arts Center in Malmö, Sweden, I create music able to bridge disparate communication regarding the current 'refugee crisis.' Malmö has the largest refugee population in Sweden, and Sweden has granted asylum to more refugees per capita than any other European country the last 3 years. "As the final resistance to the acculturation and commodification of everything" (Said), I use musical performance in this context as an effort to provide solidarity for refugee communities. Collaborating with Swedish folk ensemble Åkervinda and Palestinian/Jordanian singer Nemat Battah, I shift the focus from performing to finding inclusion and collaboration through the generative, creative process of musicking. Through the inclusion of live-processed electronics, we not only ignite productive conversation between people, but also demonstrate how public statements and perspectives are curated and performed, yet do not seem to address issues of refuge and migration in a productive manner. In this continuing composition-research project, where each performance is followed by a discussion and that discussion becomes incorporated into the next performance through further improvisation and technological exploration, the lines between culture and performance are blurred and often erased—enabling music to create spaces for productive civic conversation. In this presentation, I will not only discuss the generative methodology and theoretical foundations of this project, but, together with the audience, will also create music in a similar fashion.*

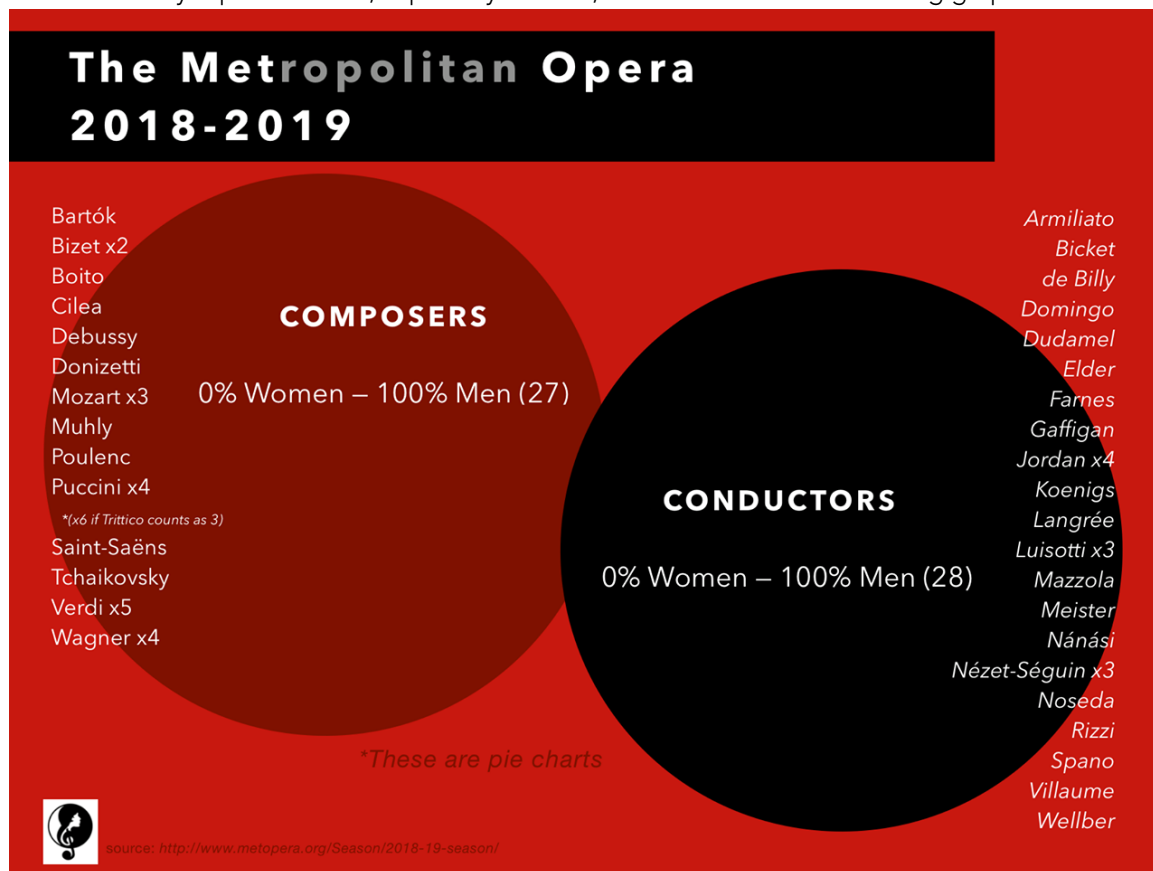
## **Presentation Transcript-March 9, 2018:**

This past August I began a residency at the Inter Arts Center in Malmö, Sweden to begin creating and researching *Refugees Living in Malmö: Connecting Cultures Through Music*. The aim of this project is to use music to bridge disparate perspectives regarding the refugee crisis.

I am a composer by training, both my bachelor and master's degrees are in music composition. Throughout my career as a student I have found the study of the history of western classical music integral to my own music making. This interest stems from a motivation to understand the history of my field, that is to say, I want to know where and when western classical music "got it right" as well as when it caused undo harm. Recently, in the wake of numerous humanitarian crises around the world, this type of study has become more and more pertinent.

Classical music currently has an extremely difficult time reaching out in meaningful ways to diverse groups of people. For example, in the cases of both the Metropolitan and Lyric Opera Chicago's 2018/19 season announcements where audiences expressed feeling ignored by the

lack of minority representation, especially women, as illustrated in the following graphic.



It also seems that when classical music does try to reach out it doesn't quite deliver the message it was intending, as in the case of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra's *Music Beyond Borders* concert that featured music from the 7 majority Muslim countries in the wake of Donald Trump's unprecedented US travel bans in early 2017. While this concert was a meaningful and important gesture, especially given the inclusion of free tickets, the artistic vision of the concert (music from non-western countries performed by a western orchestra) remained Eurocentric. Given the roots of orientalism in Trump's ideology and that of much of the western world, this concert remains problematic for me in terms of solving deep-seated cultural issues. And finally, the most upsetting are the artists who curate and deliver incredibly meaningful messages, but are overlooked for funding and have low attendance because they are not an enormous orchestra or performance entity. My favorite example is long-time collaborator Inlet Dance Theatre based in Cleveland, Ohio. Inlet has an immense amount of educational outreach programs, to the extent that the majority of their dancers were not trained outside of the company. Artistic Director Bill Wade does not see the educational programming as a source of additional funding, unlike many other arts organizations. Rather, he feels the education outreach programs are central to the artistry of the company. In this way the quality of their art is dependent on the individuals with whom he is working, more so than a company working with dancers trained within a specific institution. This, in turn, causes the company to have slower progress toward garnering wide recognition.

I personally find a lot of solace in musicking, and feel musical communication extends beyond the constraints of language. So it is peculiar to me that any musical tradition would

struggle so deeply to successfully communicate how people's needs around the world are not being met. In my project in Sweden I explore the possibility that this is the case because of the process by which western classical music has historically been and is currently being created.

The most egregious and outdated norm within the classical music tradition is the idea of composer ownership. Other fields seem to have caught on to Roland Barthes *Death of the Author* ("***the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the author***), but within music there are intense discussions about authenticity of music performance, and an only recently criticized norm of the perceived hierarchy within performance, where the performers are meant to deliver the voice of the composer to the audience (i.e. the agency of the performer and listener are limited).

In most of my work, I am not comfortable being the "sole author" of music, but especially for this project in Sweden as it is meant to bridge disparate communication regarding the refugee crisis. I am convinced the "sole-author" method of composing would inherently limit the communicative potential of this music. As Vera John-Steiner asserts:

*"Each individual realizes only a subset of the human potential that can be achieved at a particular historical period. Individual trajectories are facilitated and constrained by subtly varied genetic, familial, and cultural resources (40)."*

Vera John-Steiner

One potential response to the "sole-author" method is collaboration, which I believe is key toward creating impactful musical expression. This is found in many cases, including collaborations between Igor Stravinsky and George Balanchine within music, as well as outside of music with cases like Marie and Pierre Curie and the collaboration between Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Current collaborators for my project include Swedish folk ensemble Åkervinda and Palestinian/Jordanian singer Nemat Battah. Together, we are collaboratively composing music through improvisation. Improvisation allows us to side-step or at least recognize unnecessary cultural scaffolding set up through any of our own musical traditions. Such scaffolding, what many call institutions, can limit the communicative potential of the music we create. To strengthen our response to prescribed musical norms, we pair all of our improvisations with conversation. The idea is to find our disagreements as well as our commonalities, and talk through how we fit into the context of refugees, including our role as musicians in helping people, the constraints of our own musical traditions in achieving our goals, and our perception of the negative reactions toward refugees.

When we run out of words, are overcome with emotion, or find an interesting musical framework; we improvise. This music leads to discussion, and continues to generate new musical ideas, and so on and so forth.

An example of what I mean: in an early conversation with Nemat and the members of Åkervinda, we were discussing the idea of place. Someone asked the question, "Where do you come from." This immediately flooded our creativity with musical responses. This became the musical framework from which we developed countless ideas. Eventually, these conversations reached beyond our music sessions and into the cultural fabric of Malmö. I personally spoke with a number of refugees, several servers and bartenders, and acquaintances from around the city. Malmö is an important city in Sweden for refugees. Asylum seekers' first steps in Sweden are in Malmö. For this reason, the majority of refugees in Sweden live in and around Malmö. In the last three years, at the height of what the western world has coined the refugee "crisis," Sweden granted asylum to more refugees per capita than any other country in the world. This has

generated a polarizing environment where conversations regarding the Swedish people's role in aiding hundreds of thousands of refugees are moralized. I found a lot of these conversations center around the city of Malmö, and the general perception of Malmö throughout Sweden is that it is violent and unsafe. In other parts of Sweden, I was told several times that Malmö is the "Chicago of Sweden" because of the violence. People living in Malmö obviously had a lot of opinions about the root(s) of these perceptions. It felt as though the city of Malmö was fueling our discussion and improvising through the walls of the Inter Arts Center.

At the end of the residency, Åkervinda, Nemat and myself presented our musical process to the public. This free "performance" ended with a long conversation, where the audience contributed meaningful ideas that have since translated into important improvisational frameworks. These include questions about whether art and music are really necessary for refugees given their life circumstances, the inclusion of nationalists in these sessions, and the clarity the audience felt in voicing difficult opinions after having experienced the music.

So, music improvisation is good at providing a more objective environment compared to only talking through problems or learning and performing music composed by a single person or entity. But deeper than all of this, I have found that improvisation is a useful tool toward inspiring compassion and moral imagination. This is essential for music meant to bridge disparate perspectives around a complex issue like the refugee crisis. The best way to explain this is to demonstrate:

### **IMPROVISATION DEMONSTRATION**

**(I provided a framework from the plenary keynote earlier, and invited the audience to hum and sing)**

Now imagine the framework of our improvisation was not given to you, but instead devised. And the technique was open, there was no technical expectation. And it was devised around an emotionally compelling problem, and it was preceded and followed by intensely difficult conversation. The emotional mathematics of that scenario really start to add up.

So far, I have explained how this music is being generated through a combination of collaboration and improvisation. The final element of this process I would like to discuss is the intentional incorporation of electroacoustic music technology. I record every discussion and improvisation session. This is not only for archival purposes, but most importantly to keep track of engaging musical material to possibly bring to a future session. It also allows me to live process recordings, and contribute an electronic music element to the musical soundscape. So imagine in our short improvisation that you suddenly started to hear your own affected musicking through the speaker system. This, what I call regenerative composition, allows for a wider breadth of emotional signification. For example, at the Inter Arts Center one of the members of Åkervinda expressed that she would sing a musical idea, and suddenly start to hear it through the speaker system. When this happened she felt comfortable letting go of that emotion, and moving on to a new idea that happened simultaneously. In this way, she was not only revealing a part of herself to us, but her opacity was revealed to herself in a way that allowed deeper musical and emotional exploration.

The creative tools afforded through electronic musicking open communicative potential of the music. This is no accident; composer and music historian Peter Rothbart explains how electroacoustic music has historically been defined by technology and not "cultural or geographic characteristics" in his article *Ethno-Electro: A Framework for Examining Influences in Electroacoustic Music*. He points out that this, in turn, opens the parameters of musical construction within electroacoustic music. In this way, the improvisation is yet again freed from

cultural scaffolding that could influence its positive and connective impact, as in the case I outlined before. The recordings also offer an opportunity for me to create fixed media pieces that elicit similar emotional responses of connectivity amongst listeners.

Something about the opacity, the sameness, and the connection through the improvisation translates to an electronic medium even when it is removed from the physical environment. I have to be honest with you, I don't quite have the words to explain why this is the case, and how this translation happens. Hopefully our discussion(s) help me solidify some ideas!

I want to end with two ideas that are related. The first is simpler. I have spent a lot of time today skirting around the issue of institutions. There has been a large movement recently to look at latent structures within cultural institutions that lead to systematic marginalization and oppression. This is great, and art helps reveal unnecessary baggage within our cultures. But it feels as though a majority of people take this too far and seek for institutions to be completely destroyed. This brings me to my second closing idea: I like to imagine that culture, and the broader places we inhabit both physically and mentally are created similarly to how the Universe is maintained as outlined in Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The cultural fabric of our world is imprinted with institutions, much like the formation of stars, planets, and solar systems. These imprints, through the response and inevitability of gravity, attract and provide space for schools of thought, ideas, and expression. As Steven Pinker points out, cultural institutions provide space for good and important contribution. I want to encourage conversation about changing latent "scaffolding" structure, but not demolishing foundations entirely. Something about the cultural infrastructure allows us to have difference, sameness, opacity, identity, and subjectivity.

*"Here the frailest leaves of me and yet my strongest,  
Here I shade and hide my thoughts, I myself do not expose them,  
And yet they expose me more than all my other poems."*

Walt Whitman

This idea that what we shade and hide; what is opaque within us individually and collectively, is in some sense the most revealing part of identity, brings me back to physics. Humans have studied approximately 4% percent of the Universe, and a little more than 4% of matter is comprised of atoms that we can actually sense. Perhaps, as humans we mimic this phenomenon. Our institutions currently allow us to sense 4% of what comprises those around us. In a culture of difference, maybe our opacities, our shaded and hidden parts, are what we have most in common. And to unlock the mysteries within us we need art, music, dance, theatre, and process orientated creativity, and I argue improvisation and regenerative composition to connect people and in turn reveal unnecessary latent structures within our cultural institutions.